

The short, rather laconically matter-of-fact sentence, "I was walking by the Thames" seems an unlikely beginning for a novel. However, a few sentences into the opening extract of *The Horse's Mouth* quickly dispels this view. The passage continues in the unusual vein of the first sentence, both linguistically and thematically, juxtaposing slang with literary quotations, mundane city-bred images with bizarre similes, and an artistic, erudite man with a criminal record. This extract, marked by its startling diction and language, is also notable for the method of character delineation used. The first person narrative prevents the use of direct description to elucidate the protagonist's personality. Instead, through the speaker's use of language and his uncommon attitude towards the world in general and Coker in particular, we gather much about him. Coker too is described in such a way that the simple fact she is a woman comes as a surprise. The image of a tough public bar keeper carrying her knitting shows a keen understanding of the irony of city life as well as describing Coker vividly. This piece is rife with irony and surreal juxtapositions that together combine to create a vibrant picture of the protagonist, his 'friend' Coker and their environment, thus setting the scene for the novel's action.

The passage describes the situation of a man who has just been released from prison. We find him admiring the river Thames in autumn, reflecting on the beauty of the outside world after his period of incarceration. He then returns to more practical considerations, running through his list of friends to find one who would be willing to lend him money. With some guidance from a stray ray of sunlight, which he interprets as a sign, he decides on Coker, the public house keeper, who is rumoured to be in trouble herself. When he does go to see her, she fiercely demands that he repay his debt to her, and the narrator, instead of resenting this, seems to like her all the more for her aggression.

The first person narrative is almost confessional, and reads much like a personal diary. The fragmented sentences and uneven paragraph lengths and spacing further add to this impression. The short phrases have an immediacy that draws the reader in without the preliminary niceties of scene setting. Very quickly, almost like a sketch, the narrator gives the time and place of the story and then adds the powerful image of the "sun in a mist. Like an orange in a fried-fish shop" which forms the focus of the scene being described. The simile is peculiarly apt because of the way it immediately evokes the city of London. The speaker then piles on image upon image of the river Thames using short, staccato sentences that add to the cinematic surreal quality of the language. There is a strong correlation between the diction used and the thematic purpose of the writer. The speaker is reflecting on the sensual pleasure of sight after his long deprivation of it while in prison. The strongly visual language and the well-chosen quotation from Blake's 'Europe and Prophecy' support this. He then rouses himself from his reflections, realizing that he "hadn't time to waste on pleasure". Similarly, when the speaker breaks out of his trance and returns to more practical matters, he uses everyday language and even slang to signal his change of mood: "the wind began to... bring me back to myself, as they say. Meaning my liver and lights".

The use of literary, mythological and religious allusions serves not only to enrich the fanciful, descriptive language but also to demonstrate the speaker's erudition. His easy familiarity with Blake, himself an artist and poet, may lead one to surmise that perhaps Blake is an inspiration for and influence on him. Such tidbits of knowledge help in creating a composite, credible picture of the speaker as a real character with personal role models and heroes. The image of the speaker grinning like the mythical gargoyle, while humorous, is also unusual, in keeping with the linguistic theme of odd similes and metaphors. The rather cryptic non-sequitur "Gold is the metal of the intellect" may also be a mythological allusion, perhaps referring to the alchemist's search for the philosopher's stone that would turn ordinary metals to gold.

Religious allusions are used liberally, including the recurring image of the snake, "symbol of love and nature" and also of temptation (relevant perhaps for a man just coming out of prison). The so-called sign that leads the speaker to Coker also seems religious, resonating with the idea of burning bushes and similar revelation-inducing guides. It is reminiscent of Raskolnikov's superstitious interpretation of the events leading up to the murder in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov believes that the chance event which allows him to learn of the most opportune time of committing the murder, after he had decided not to go ahead with it, is a sign of fate. Though this speaker lacks Raskolnikov's morbidity, one wonders whether the religious allusions may not signal a future moral dilemma in the speaker's life, or if it may be symptomatic of his own grappling with religion. In this light, the fact that he quotes Blake, who was known as a mystic and created his own religious myths, becomes even more significant and allows further speculation about the narrator's personality.

The last part of the passage is more dynamic than the first. Dialogue, action and the first element of tension emerges through the interaction of Coker and the narrator. The idea of Coker and the narrator flocking together as people in trouble is an endearingly optimistic one on the part of the speaker. The early description of Coker as a tough pub-keeper combined with the use of a surname to refer to her created the impression that she was male. When we realize she is female (with the ridiculous introduction of a knitting bag) it is almost as if the author has played a joke on us by allowing us to jump to strictly gendered conclusions. Another feature which stands out in the description of Coker is that of her eyes. The narrator uses the single word "Methylated" to evoke the clarity and purity of colour of her eyes. Coker's speech, rough and colloquial, completes the picture of the city-bred survivor, a fighter who should be respected for her spirit, as the speaker has the wit to realize. The idea of the narrator liking Coker even after she curses him and threatens police action against him seems somehow contradictory. However, it shows his sensitivity in recognising strength in another when he sees it. It also softens Coker, making her seem a more sympathetic character than her actions seem to justify.

Thus, in conclusion, this piece relies on the juxtaposition of contradictory attitudes and qualities to create real, quirky and somehow likeable characters, and to build a surreal picture of London. The author achieves this, however, without hiding the facts of the poverty and dirt of city life, and the flaws and rough edges of characters created in part by the hardships of this life.