**Commentary**

This passage is an effective opening to the novel, as the first sentence "It was the day my grandmother exploded" grabs the reader's attention instantly. This opening line also establishes the mood of the piece, a quite darkly humorous style – the various family members present at the crematorium are described in a lot of detail – the images created of them are expanded upon the narrator's mother is said to be wearing a hat that looks like a flying saucer – this is furthered when we are given the image of it "dipping" to the side when she talks. There is a very sarcastic tone to the passage in places, such as when the narrator tells us his father is probably annoyed that my grandmother had chosen religious music for her funeral ceremony", and the constant references to Uncle Hamish snoring in the background – this style of humor fits in quite well with the proceedings as it isn't (for want of a better term) "Har-de-har-har" humor – it is subtle, and certain points about it are written in such a way, that they could just be taken as extra description of the events (the flashback to the narrator getting dressed is a good example – with him rattling off precise descriptions of his clothes, and where they are from). The atmosphere, despite the humor, is retained: the formal mood is (kind of) still there, and there are references to the cold atmosphere to add to this (although this refers to the morning, it still has an effect on the scene at hand). Also, a lot of the comments from the narrator (who seems to be taking the event as a sort of "family reunion" – or a freak show, depending) are linked with death, even if in an obscure way such as referring to somebody as looking like candy floss stuck on a hearse – which in itself, is mixing something associated with fun & something associated with death – much like the whole passage.

PS – is the "smell of cooking bacon & burned toast" line a really sick reference to the cremation taking place?

**Activity**

Now read carefully the following extract from *The Dragon Can't Dance*, written by Earl Lovelace in 1979. Make notes on the key elements of the passage that you would wish to include in a commentary. Use whatever approach you think suitable.

**The Dragon Can't Dance**

Up on the Hill Carnival Monday morning breaks upon the backs of these thin shacks with no cock's crow, and before the mist clears, little boys, costumed in old dresses, their heads tied, holding brooms made from the ribs of coconut palm leaves, blowing whistles and beating kerosene tins for drums, move across the face of the awakening Hill, sweeping yards in a ritual, heralding the masqueraders' coming, that goes back centuries for its beginnings, back across the Middle Passage, back to Mali and to Guinea and Dahomey and Congo, back to Africa when Maskers were sacred and revered, the keepers of the poisons and heads of secret societies, and such children went before them, clearing the ground, announcing their coming to the huts before which they would dance and make their terrible cries, affirming for the village, the tribe, warriorhood and femininity, linking the villagers to their ancestors, their Gods, remembered even now, so
long after the Crossing, if not in the brain, certainly in the blood; so that every
Carnival Monday morning, Aldrick Prospect, with only the memory burning in
his blood, a memory that had endured the three hundred odd years to Calvary
Hill felt, as he put on his dragon costume, a sense of entering a sacred mask that
invested him with an ancestral authority to uphold before the people of this Hill,
this tribe marooned so far from the homeland that never was their home, the
warriorhood that had not died in them, their humanness that was determined
not by their possession of things. He had a desire, a mission, to let them see
their beauty, to uphold the unending rebellion they waged, huddled here on this
stone and dirt hill hanging over the city like the open claws on a dragon’s hand,
threatening destruction if they were not recognized as human beings.

But this Carnival, putting on his costume now at dawn, Aldrick had a feeling
of being the last one, the last symbol of rebellion and threat to confront Port of
Spain.* Fish eye was under orders not to misbehave, Philo had given up on his
own calypso of rebellion to sing now about the Axe Man. Once upon a time the
entire Carnival was expressions of rebellion. Once there were stickfighters who
assembled each year to keep alive in battles between themselves the practice of
a warriorhood born in them; and there were devils, black men who blackened
themselves further with black grease to make of their very blackness a menace,
a threat. They moved along the streets with horns on their heads and tridents in
hand. They threatened to press their blackened selves against the well dressed
spectators unless they were given money. And there were the jab jabs, men in
jester costumes, their caps and shoes filled with tinkling bells, cracking long whips
in the streets, with which they lashed each other with full force, proclaiming
in this display that they could receive the hardest blow without flinching at
its coming, without feeling what, at its landing, must have been burning pain.
Suddenly they were all gone, outlawed from the city or just died, gone, and he felt
alone. The dragon alone was left to carry the message. He felt that now, alone,
with even Philo and Fish eye gone, it was too great to carry. It would be lost now
among the clowns, among the fancy robbers and the fantasy presentations that
were steadily entering Carnival; drowned amidst the satin and silks and the beads
and feathers and rhinestones. But bothering him even more than this was the
thought that maybe he didn’t believe in the dragon any more.

*The capital of the Caribbean island of Trinidad

Earl Lovelace

**Activity**

Here are notes made by one student about the text. Read them carefully
and compare them with your own comments, noting key similarities and
differences in your analysis.

**Commentary**

**1 Content:** This extract from "The Dragon Can't Dance" describes what the
Carnival is like in Trinidad from the view of Aldrick Prospect who wears a
dragon costume on Carnival Monday. He not only describes the present-day
carnival but also what it used to be like in times when the Carnival was a
the bag, tried one Nike on and one boot (unlaced); I'd stood in front of the tilted full-length mirror, shivering, my breath going out in clouds, while the floorboards creaked and a smell of cooking bacon and burned toast insinuated its way up from the kitchen.

The trainers, I'd decided.

So I peered down at them in the crematorium; they looked crumpled and tea-stained on the severe black granite of the chapel floor. Oh-oh; one black sock, one white. I wriggled in my seat, pulled my jeans down to cover my oddly-packaged ankles. 'Hell's teeth,' I whispered. 'Sorry, Aunt Tone.'

My Aunt Antonia - a ball of pink-rinse hair above the bulk of her black coat, like candy floss stuck upon a hearse - patted my leather jacket. 'Never mind, dear,' she sighed. 'I doubt old Margot would have minded.'

'No,' I nodded. My gaze fell back to the trainers. It struck me that on the toe of the right one there was still discernible the tyre mark from Grandma Margot's wheelchair. I lifted the left trainer onto the right, and rubbed without enthusiasm at the black herring-bone pattern the oily wheel had left. I remembered the day, six months earlier, when I had pushed old Margot out of the house and through the courtyard, past the outhouses and down the drive under the trees towards the loch and the sea.

Iain Banks

Activity

Read this student's response to this extract from The Crow Road and then read the comments on its strengths and weaknesses which follow.

Commentary

The extract from the novel "The Crow Road" by Iain Banks is rather unusual. The passage describes his family at his grandmother's cremation in his hometown of Gallanach. The piece is unusual as it is written in a jocular style which is not often connected with death except in black comedy. However, this is not a comedy so it is unusual. The opening sentence, "It was the day my grandmother exploded" is so surprising when put in context with the rest of the passage.

The narrator does not dwell on the grief of losing a member of his family, but more so on his isolation from his parents. In a movement his mother makes to his father he feels "a pang of loss that did not entirely belong to my recently departed grandmother".

The fact he has had to stay at his aunt and uncle's house and is sitting with them shows his isolation from his parents. The narrator does not seem to "fit in" with the rest of his family. His clothes are different and his whole attitude towards the funeral is distracted.

This distraction of the narrator is shown in his digressions from the funeral. He notices his father's ears move, as he grinds his teeth, like "John Wayne's shoulders when he walks". He notices his brother James is not wearing
his Walkman for the first time in years and that his mother’s dramatic hat is shaped like a UFO. There do not seem to be many emotions shown by the narrator, nor any of the other characters. He remarks how his father is probably angry his grandmother had chosen religious music for her funeral ceremony instead of secular, as he would have wanted. His Uncle Hamish has fallen asleep and is snoring “in harmony to Bach’s Mass in B Minor”; he is obviously oblivious or uncaring of the situation around him.

The narrator tries to create a cold atmosphere, one traditionally associated with death. They are sitting in the cold “echoing chapel” which emulates a feeling of emptiness and loss. The cold temperature of his bedroom, however, which the author embellishes upon, seems to be more related to his isolation from his family. The fact he is not in his parents’ home shows how they have excluded him from their lives. Also that they do not sit with him at the chapel. The atmosphere is not maintained as the author makes comical asides which are more light-hearted, for example the references to John Wayne and the UFO and the fact his boots didn’t look right because they had a matt finish. Also, how he has odd socks on and his description of his Aunt Antonia being like “candy floss stuck upon a hearse”.

From this passage, the narrator shows himself to be a young man who has moved away from his home town, possibly without his parents’ blessing as they have become disassociated. The narrator shows that he did love his grandmother Margot as he describes a fond memory of her at the end of the passage, yet shows no real signs of grief.

This passage is quite effective as the opening of a novel as it makes me want to read on. It provides details of what are, presumably, the main characters (his family) and it would be interesting to find out what happens next. His jovial style is easy to read and understand, being quite light-hearted.

Examiner’s comments

The student provides a clear introductory paragraph, giving enough information to put the passage in context without wasting time on paraphrasing.

She describes the style as “jovial”. This may be a good way to describe it, but she will need to clarify what she means by explaining fully later in the essay. Perhaps a more accurate word to express what she means would be “humorous”. The reference to black comedy is very useful. Again she needs to pick out examples of this later, even though she has stated that the passage as a whole is not comedy.

She comments on the surprising first sentence in relation to the rest of the passage. A fuller analysis would improve this. For example, she could point out the strangely matter-of-fact tone of the sentence and the shocking effect of the word “exploded” when applied to a “grandmother”.

Her point in paragraph 3 about the narrator seeming isolated from his parents is a good one. We have to be careful, though, not to speculate too far. From this extract, we do not know that the whole family were not staying with the aunt and uncle! It’s best to keep to points for which you can find evidence in the passage. However, within the extract, there is a sense of his distance from his parents.

The student has pointed out that the narrator’s clothes are different, but could expand on this. What do the details of his clothes tell us about him? They could suggest an image or stereotype: “Nine-eye Docs, 501s and the black biker’s jacket”.

She makes a good point about the narrator’s “digressions” in paragraph 4, giving examples of how his attention wanders to dwell on the people around him. Again, she could comment more analytically about these, on what they tell
The student begins to explore the narrator's reference to his grandmother at the end; however, we are not given any evidence in the extract that the memory is a "fond" one, as she claims.

The passage has obviously captured the student's interest, and her final paragraph provides a fair summing up of her response, but overall the paragraphing and general organization of the commentary could have been improved.

However, there is more to notice about the young man in relation to his family and the scene at the crematorium. Here are some suggestions:

- His outward "style" and image, which suggest rebellious youth, could lead to his being labelled uncaring. It contrasts with the conventional dress of his older relatives. As the student's commentary above points out, he does not overtly declare his emotions or much sense of loss, although we do not detect much emotion in the other characters either.

- In opposition to this is his painful preoccupation with "getting it right". He is very concerned that his dress should be appropriate, so he does care. In a strange sense, what seemed inappropriate is in fact fitting: the white trainers carry the mark of his grandmother's wheelchair, and serve as a record of their last meeting, and of his having shown his care of her. The adults, on the other hand, may be dressed more conventionally, but seem, if anything, to be less involved in the proceedings.
Analysing prose

Objectives
- To establish a strategy for approaching unseen prose texts
- To practise close reading of prose texts
- To look at examples of commentaries on prose texts

Analysing prose is not so very different from analysing poetry. In both you have to look at literary techniques, at choice of language, imagery, structure and so on, but these may be used in different ways to achieve different effects in prose. You may have to read even more carefully, when studying prose passages as the techniques used may not be so readily detected.

Most of the prose passages you will be asked to analyse will be extracts from longer pieces of work, rather than complete texts, although occasionally very short essays or stories are set which are complete.

When writing your commentary on a prose text you will need to examine closely the writer's style in order to analyse the way the language is used. You will need to be aware of the features to look for and the ways in which the author's choice of style can influence meaning and effect.

Examining writers' styles
Throughout this book you are being asked to think not only about what writers are saying - the content of their work - but also about how they write. This means examining the particular combination of literary devices, structures, and vocabulary which a writer uses and which go together to form that writer's individual "style".

From your own reading you will know that some writers' work is easy to recognize immediately because they have a distinctive "style". However, it can be more difficult to explain exactly which characteristics make a writer's style recognizable.

As a student of literature, you will need to develop the ability to analyse and write about style. One shortcoming noted by examiners is that students fail to take account of this and do not engage in enough detailed analysis of how texts are written. It is easier to concentrate on the writer's use of language when studying poetry, but it can be tempting, when writing about novels or other longer prose works, to focus on the content or the ideas and neglect to examine other features that make up the writer's style.

"A writer's personality is his manner of being in the world: his writing style is the unavoidable trace of that manner."
Zadie Smith
The following are aspects of prose that you need to examine:

**Theme:** General or specific? Banal or profound? Obvious or hidden?

**Point of view:** First or third person? Centred on one person?

**Syntax:** Short or long? Simple or complex? Varied or monotonous?

**Imagery:** Visual or other senses? Vivid or subtle? Original or conventional?

**Language:** Simple or complex? Poetic or everyday? Formal or informal? Emotional or objective?

**Sound:** Harsh or mellifluous? Rhythmic? Is there rhyme? Varied or monotonous?

**Style**

Thinking or feeling

"Style" can also be viewed as the expression of a writer's personality and preoccupations. The ways in which writers experience the world and the things which are most important to them are bound to affect how and what they write. Most writing involves thinking but it is not just a cerebral activity. Although all good writers "craft" their work carefully, even when they wish to convey emotional or sensual experiences, there can be unconscious influences, especially for writers who use more intuitive or free-ranging techniques, allowing their words to flow without controlling them too carefully.

**Activity**

D.H. Lawrence writes extensively about the emotional reactions of his characters but he does not always reveal their characters directly. Instead, he uses imagery and actions to suggest hidden aspects of personalities and relationships. In the following extract from *Sons and Lovers*, identify the images and try to find out what they tell us about the characters. Discuss with a partner how Lawrence uses these images.

In this extract, Paul Morel, the protagonist, is just getting to know Minah Levers. On the basis of their reactions in this extract, what do you think their relationship will be like?

**Sons and Lovers**

'It's a treat of a swing,' he said.

'Yes.'

He was swinging through the air, every bit of him swinging, like a bird that swoops for joy of movement. And he looked down at her. Her crimson cap hung