

Prose commentary from the IB Higher-level November 2004 English A1 exam

In this prose piece we are presented with two middle aged characters, one named Starr and the other named Loyal. Although it is not clearly established what the relationship between these two people are, we do know that they miss the presence of Jack, someone who died quite a while ago. E. Annie Proulx in this excerpt uses the literary techniques of syntax and details to first create a sullen tone and by the end of the piece shift it to a hopeful one in order to demonstrate that although at the start Starr and Loyal do not connect, by the end of the piece both of them can finally communicate with one another and also finally achieve a real connection to each other.

Proulx uses details and syntax to first create a sullen tone. Details is used to present to us the characters of Starr and later Loyal. Starr is “middle-aged, in wrinkled whipcords and a sweatshirt but something of the old beauty persisted” (line 7-8) Already through details the image of Starr shown to us is one of a relatively old woman who seems dull and not particularly exciting. Loyal is presented to us as the image of a bitter elderly man, someone who “had to sit in the damn kitchen chair [and] couldn’t even hunch over a beer.” (line 12). The author through details establishes the sad state in which these two people are and also uses details to further establish their almost pathetic condition by making Starr listen to country music, a genre that many associate with as “cheap sadness” (line 10) Through details the author establishes who these characters are, and then uses simple and short syntax whenever there is a paragraph with them interacting with one another to show their lack of connection and communication.

She put a paper napkin near no hand. Jack’s chair was empty. Pickles. How many times had he sat here? This excerpt demonstrates the lack of coherence when it comes to Starr’s thoughts when she interacts with Loyal, as all she can think about is Jack who passed away so long ago, which reveals her lack of connection to Loyal who is alive and right in front of her. When Starr attempts conversation, the questions, just like the answers are short and quick; “So what do you think of my singing, Loyal?” [...] ‘It’s fine, I like it fine.’ Sour face.” This demonstrates a lack of communication between the two, adding to their already sad state. Proulx first uses details to create a sorry image of the Rose and Starr. From there, Proulx then establishes through syntax the lack of connection that these two people share although each other is all they have. This in turn helps to create a sullen tone towards the prose, and demonstrates their lack of connection.

Early on in the commentary, the student focuses on the author and her use of literary techniques.

Here the student clearly outlines the structure of his argument.

Unfortunately, the student mars his effort by making several spelling (particularly, each other) and grammar errors (missing periods). However, the writing is clear overall.

Here the student shows his clear analysis of how the breaks in language represent the lacks of connections between the two characters

For presentation, the final summarizing sentence and this

Although the author first creates a sullen tone towards the prose and the characters, Proulx also uses details and syntax to create a shift in tone from a sullen to a hopeful one in order to show that at the end of the prose, Starr and Loyal establish a connection to one another. Through details, although Starr is first presented as a almost pathetic middle aged woman, the author reveals through details that although she is “too old ... I don’t feel old. I feel like I’ve got the liveliest part of my life still ahead. I could stay at the ranch ... but not alone. A man is needed.” From these details, when Starr reveals that she needs a connection and that she needs Loyal, the shift in tone starts to become a hopeful one. From this point “the awkwardness is all gone,” and Starr and Loyal engage in conversation so deeply that by the end, “each longed for the relief of solitude” showing that they finally communicated so much, that instead of needing each other, they now needed a break, showing a connection between them. Through a change in syntax, from a simple to complicated one when interacting with one another, this reveals to us a normal flow of conversation. “He told her about cucumber drowning in the mine, midnight driving with Bullet over dangerous passes where headlights failed, the mountain lion.” The change in details and syntax reveals to us a change in their relationship in order to first create a sullen tone and then a hopeful one in order to establish that although they have a lack of communication and connection to one another, at the end, they have finally connected.

transition helps the reader follow the argument.

The discussion of how the shift in syntax parallels both the shift in tone and the change in the characters’ relationship is particularly effective in showing the effects of literary techniques.

Proulx uses details and syntax in order to first create a sullen tone and then shift it to a hopeful one in order to show a change in Loyal and Starr’s relationship. The details reveal to us that the characters have hope despite their sad condition, and syntax reveals that towards the end, they can have a normal coherent conversation establishing they have finally connected at the end of the prose.

The conclusion demonstrates the writer’s clear understanding of the text.

| Criterion | Mark /5 | Comments |
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| A: Understanding of the Text | 4 | The student demonstrates a clear understanding of both the tone shift and character development. |
| B: Interpretation of the Text | 4 | The analysis is well developed with relevant examples. All ideas are clearly relevant. |
| C: Appreciation of Literary Features | 4 | The student clearly appreciates the literary effects created with syntax and details. |
| D: Presentation | 4 | The shift in characters and tone is developed in two parts—establishing the first tone and then the shift. |

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| E: Formal Use of Language | 3 | The multiple errors detract from the paper—however, overall the language is adequately clear. |
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[**Note:** Although the actual IB exam allows the candidates 125 minutes, students complete the same assignment in class with only 80 minutes. During the real IB exam, students must flesh out ideas more fully than the above example.]

Note: Below is the prose extract on which this commentary is based.

1. (a)

- She put a record on the turntable. The record player was still on the sideboard where it had been for years. Loyal studied the album cover; five men in musician's chairs, a swirl of yellow color coming from their hands to the top of the cover and red letters bursting, "MUSIC TO SING ALONG WITH - Volume 7 - Country Ballads."
- 5 The record rotated, double-stop fiddle harmonies of a sentimental country song filled the room. Starr stood in front of the oven, feet side by side, hands folded in a knot of fingers, held in front of her crotch. Middle-aged, in wrinkled whipcords and a sweatshirt, but something of the old vulnerable beauty persisting. Perhaps she knew it.
- 10 She counted silently, then sang "He was just passing through, I was all alone and blue." The words forced themselves up into her nose, she reached for the cheap sadness. Loyal couldn't help it, felt the barroom tears jerking out of his eyes. That song always got to him, but here he had to sit in a damn kitchen chair, couldn't even hunch over a beer. So he closed his eyes and wished Jack had lived.
- The quiche was good, and they ate all of it. It was easier now, no talking, the food on the
15 plates, the forks spearing and lifting. She put a paper napkin near his hand. Jack's chair was empty. Pickles. The coffee perked. How many times had he sat here?
"So, what do you think of my singing, Loyal?"
That was the kind of question he couldn't answer.
"It's fine. I like it fine."
- 20 Sour face. She poured coffee while his fingers pinched up crumbs in the quiche dish. All of Jack's things were scattered around as if he'd just stepped out. Well, that's all he'd done, just stepped out. The rope he knotted while they watched television on a peg by the door, a pair of boots, stiff now from disuse. Bills still on the Victorian spindle. The grey rancher's hat, the band stained with Jack's sweat, on top of the side board where he always slung it when he came in for
25 dinner.
"Think you might go back to Wisconsin, see your kids? Must be all grewed up now."
"Them ties was cut too long ago. With blunt scissors." She said the milk was on the turn. He smelled it and said he'd take his coffee without.
"I know I'm not going to sing at any rodeo*, Loyal. My voice is weak, I'm too old. Old
30 ladies don't sing at rodeos. But you know, I don't feel old. I feel like I've got the liveliest part of my life still ahead. I could stay on the ranch, Loyal, but not alone. A man is needed." She couldn't say it much clearer.
The coffee. Its blackness in the familiar blue cups. He stirred in sugar. Her spoon clinked.
Then all at once the awkwardness was gone. Stories of things he had seen began to pour
35 out, the words firing from between his loosened and gapped teeth. He told her about Cucumber drowning in a mine, midnight driving with Bullet over dangerous passes where headlights failed, the mountain lion. He, who had talked little, talked much, swelled to a glowing huckster selling stories of his life. At two in the morning, Starr nodding off, wanting nothing but sleep and silence, he stopped. They were tired of each other, each longed for the relief of solitude. He said he would
40 sleep on the daybed beside the stove. The kitchen stank of cigarettes.
In the morning she gave him Jack's pearl gray cowboy hat.

E. Annie Proulx, *Postcards* (1992)

* rodeo: a contest and performance involving cattle and horses