

Revision exercise and sample essay

If you have the time, please feel free to respond to this essay question, taken from a previous assignment. Don't concern yourself with referencing or a bibliography, as it is preparation for the examinations. Rather, see how well you are able to respond to the question, as it should highlight any issues you might be having with the prose component of your syllabus.

A. Prose: Fiction Assignment

Write an essay of about 1200 words in which you perform a close reading of the following passage. As a starting point, you may address the following aspects of creative writing in your analysis: the introduction of theme in this passage; the use of poetic techniques and language to create meaning; and the creation of character through the manipulation of tone and diction.

It is essential that you refer to the techniques covered in both the literary and language sections of the course in order to examine how this writer creates meaning in this passage.

From *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie (1982: 9, Pan Books: London)

I was born in the city of Bombay ... once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August the 15th, 1947. And the time? The time matters, too. Well then: at night. No, it's important to be more ... On the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact. Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise moment of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps. And, outside the

window, fire-works and crowds. A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in that benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had mysteriously been hand-cuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. Soothsayers had prophesied me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicians ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without a say in the matter. I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha and even Piece-of-the-Moon, had become heavily embroiled in Fate – at the best of times a dangerous sort of involvement. And I couldn't even wipe my own nose at the time.

Here is a possible response to the above essay question. Feel free to go through it and take note of why it is a good response to the topic.

Sample Essay:

This extract from *Midnight's Children* tells us much about the novel itself. It relates the beginning of Saleem Sinai's life, born in India, and mainly deals with the events occurring during and after his birth. In fact, for a better comprehension of the passage, the writer classifies the events in chronological order - from birth to childhood. Despite being a fiction, the author transforms what could be lifeless into a living experience. This passage is indeed colourful and pleasing because of the use of language and other literary devices. Through only these 16 lines the reader is able to identify the various feelings and experiences of the character, which indeed move the reader. Having said so, briefly, the following will be further analyzed in the upcoming paragraphs.

First, let us consider the different ways the writer uses punctuation to create the informal and pessimistic tone of the passage. What we

primarily notice is the informal writing style where contractions and the use of punctuation like ellipsis are common. For example “No, that won’t do, there’s no getting away from the date...” “won’t and “there’s” are examples of contractions which are more typical of conversational and colloquial speech than of formal academic style. This conversational style better engages the protagonist in a conversation with the reader and makes the latter a close participant or witness of the events. The punctuation also has a great impact on how the reader will react towards the passage and the message the author wants to put forward. “And the time?” - The question mark is used here either as a stylistic device where a question is asked and is answered by the author himself or to elicit an answer from the reader. By doing so, the author demonstrates the emotional implications of the events to come and makes the reader a close participant and witness of the character’s trials. In this way, the readers do not only have their curiosity tickled but have their interest sustained. Moreover, we cannot ignore the use of ellipsis, even if they are few in number- “I was born in Bombay... once upon a time.” and “No, it’s important to be more...” Here, the purpose of ellipsis is to give the opportunity for the reader to end the statement the speaker started; this builds a kind of relationship between reader and protagonist and reduces the gap between them, which is indeed totally appropriate to communicate messages and feelings. By this use of question marks and ellipsis, the writer promotes an inquisitive tone. Commas are also used efficaciously - “I, Saleem Sinai, later variously called Snotnose...” The commas here help to emphasize the real name of the protagonist, by forcing the reader to pause, both before and after the declaration of Saleem's name. What is interesting is that the contractions and the punctuation are ideal to challenge the reader just from the beginning of the passage. This remarkable choice of doing so already entices the reader to know more about the rest of the story and to be more sensitive to the emotions and feelings that can radiate from the main character and

be captivated by the story behind this passage. It is interesting to note that the use of question marks and ellipsis remind us of aposiopesis, the sudden break in the narrative which reveals the agitated state of the author.

In addition to the above, the choice of words is of utmost importance. Throughout the passage, we see that, through the words, emotions arise, creating a harmony between the reader and the main character. The language is used artistically and at its best, so that the portrayed character may come alive. The writer uses sentences like "once upon a time", which is mainly used to tell memorable stories dated a long time ago, to tell us that the story of Saleem Sinai is indeed memorable, especially for him. We note powerful verbs like "tumbled", "befallen", "embroiled", "chained", and even "left" which add energy and movement to the passage. These verbs already provide the tempo of the story and add much information about the tumultuous and restless life of Saleem.

Through only a few lines, the author also makes perfect use of literary devices to provide vivid visualisation to make the reader able to peep into the depths of the mind of the protagonist. The use of personification and hyperbole is striking. "Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came." and "... the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks" These are beautiful and exaggerated images of the arrival of midnight and how the clock is attributed human characteristics; the clock comes alive to provide more emotional feeling to the reader and the story itself. Also, the image of the clock saluting Saleem particularly retains my attention because it highlights the cultural background of the author - it refers here to the "Namaste" gesture which is the act of placing the hands together when saluting someone. This means "I bow to the divine in you". Therefore we find that this image of the clock shows how important Saleem is at the time of his birth. This importance is also found by the use of the imperative tone, "Oh, spell it out, spell it

out:” This sentence expresses the irritation of Saleem and sarcastically makes us judge the time of his birth as being symbolic of pessimism.

In fact, as we go through the passage, we cannot ignore the evidence that this “respectful greeting” of the clock at midnight primarily symbolizes the passage from night to day, in this case, symbolizes the passage from comfort (in the womb of the mother) to ill-being in the new world. This is suggested later on in the passage, where Saleem declares ironically the results of being born at this particular time and on this particular day - “...because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously hand-cuffed to history...” History is personified here too. “hand-cuffed” is an intense expression which unequivocally represents imprisonment. The personification continues when he says, “...my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country.” The image of being chained to something evokes the cruel reality of slavery - the perpetual deprivation of freedom, “indissolubly chained...”

Through these words and images of captivity, the author expresses the contradiction between the constraints of Saleem and the freedom of his country. He was born just when India got its independence - India as a free country. We note further that the writer makes use of documentary evidence to support his ideas, in order to build the character of Saleem and to demonstrate the fatalism of his life. The words “my destinies” remind us of the unforgettable speech of Jawaharlal Nehru- Tryst with destiny. He made this speech specifically to the constituent assembly at the midnight hour of Indian independence. So the choice of using the vivid image of the clock at midnight is astonishing. That is why the author said that “The time matters, too.” and specified the time of birth of Saleem this way - “... on the stroke of midnight, as a matter of fact.” Furthermore, in this speech, Jawaharlal Nehru defined and captured the essence of the triumphant culmination of years of

freedom struggle against the British Empire. Here, in the passage, the writer uses the same aspect of struggle for freedom for Saleem, but inversely. India fought against the British Empire but Saleem struggles against his own country. When we consider the title of the speech, a 'tryst' means a secret meeting, especially for lovers, but it is far from a 'tryst with destiny' for Saleem; it was, on the contrary, an unwanted and sour meeting with destiny. The allusion to the displeasing arrival on earth of Saleem is made when the writer puts emphasis on what happened shortly after his birth - "A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe...", maybe we should consider that his birth was already a misfortune, because this incident could not be compared to Saleem's harsh future. "... but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me..." Despite being an expected child, "Soothsayers had prophesied me..." Saleem remains a victim of time, with no freedom to express himself about what was happening around and towards him - "I was left entirely without a say in the matter." Last but not least, the writer exploits the use of pathos to stir up the sympathy of the reader for Saleem. The various nicknames of the latter "Snotnose, Stainface, Baldy, Sniffer, Buddha..." are still only names, but offer eye-catching images. Their use incites the reader to think and to visualize the physical traits of the character. These not only provoke an emotional reaction in the reader, but stimulate sympathy, so that we better understand the situation of the character. This is at the end of the passage when that we can better understand the tone of the passage. With the list of nicknames and the final sentence - "And I couldn't even wipe my own nose at the time" we realise that the tone of the text is indisputably ironic, sarcastic and sorrowful.

To conclude, the introduction of theme, the use of poetic techniques, language and manipulation of tone and diction, makes the frustration of Saleem throughout the passage tangible and provokes a despairing tone. The reader can only be empathic

towards these waves of undesirable events and emotions experienced by the character. In addition, the effective use of imagery inspires and persuades the readers to think along the lines the writer wishes them to and develops the eagerness to know more about Saleem Sinai through the rest of the novel.