

# *PASSAGE ANALYSIS:*

## *THE SHARK NET*

**See *Literature for Senior Students*, Chapter 3, Close Analysis, p.110**

*Notes and annotations by Sue Sherman*

This article maps out the kinds of observations and thought processes you need in order to write a close analysis of one key passage from a text. It has three main parts:

- Part 1 includes a passage from Robert Drewe's 2000 memoir *The Shark Net*. Detailed annotations are placed beside the passage.
- Part 2 comprises a sample close analysis of this passage.
- Part 3 contains assessor comments about the analysis. These comments indicate how an experienced marker would evaluate and grade this response.

For a detailed explanation of the techniques and essential elements of close analysis, see Chapter 3 of *Literature for Senior Students* (Insight, 2006).

### *Acknowledgment*

Insight Publications thanks Penguin Books (Australia) for permission to publish an excerpt from the 2000 edition of *The Shark Net*.

### **Part 1: the annotated passage**

Firstly, we consider the passage in detail.

- The annotations alongside the passage draw attention to features of the writing that can be discussed in the response.
- These are the kinds of observations that you should be making as you read through a passage for close analysis.

Carefully read both the passage and the annotations to learn how to analyse and interpret a passage.

Roy called going into pubs 'doing business'. He'd say, 'Just going to see a man about a dog. I'll only be a minute.' He meant an hour or two. He brought out glasses of raspberry lemonade. It wasn't too bad – he parked me in the shade.

We still had to watch ourselves, and were careful not to disagree with him, but it was usually all right when he was Roy. The one to look out for was Royce. Royce was Roy when agitated.

Royce came home late and brittle. ('Oh no!' we'd whisper. 'Whisky!') The Dewar's made him glittery and cool. Royce waited for an affront – but not for long – so he could let loose. Usually he found one in her silence. Then, with relief, it seemed, he took offence and huffed and stamped around the house while Billy and I lay low.

His specialty was indignantly departing rooms, then returning and leaving again, and slamming doors so hard that sand ran down the walls. The area of his agitated comings-and-goings would quickly expand, first the room, then the house, and eventually the district, as he leapt into the Customline in high dudgeon and sped off with tyres squealing for a circuit of the suburb, thinking up new grievances for his return – and departure again.

I didn't block my ears. I strained to hear the Royce voice in the night. It made me more unsettled than scared, like a bad dream. I quickly recognised the pattern: his late and jovial homecoming, her silence, his reaction, the stray word that became an argument, the bitter fight and the second, more savage, silence – the pause after some ultimate insult to his dignity. In this vacuum, while I tried to listen, my breaths became shallow sips of air. There! The slap, the running feet, the slamming bedroom door. I could go to sleep.

She looked both Dorothy and Dot to me – a Dorothy indoors, outdoors very much a Dot. Dorothy was the woman, the wife, the suburban mother, the Mrs Dunlop at the business functions. At breakfast, the silent one at the stove. Two thousand miles from home. Cooking but not eating. Who'd been crying.

In Dorothy mood she murmured to a friend on the telephone: '... Yet he's never let a night go past when he hasn't put his arm around me when we go to sleep.' Overhearing this surprised me, considering the row the night before, but it made me feel better to hear it.

I don't know why she favoured Dorothy to Dot. Dorothy was the unsettled woman; Dot was the girl. Small, dark-haired, very tanned now, Dot ran everywhere. (Sprinting along the shore, she could easily catch me.) Dot made many friends; West Australians were fond of her and Dot loved Perth. Dot swam. Dot cartwheeled on the beach and did handstands. Dot had decided not to fear the sun; she was brown year-round. In the sandy landscape she was a busy little speck.

Does Robert feel resentment towards his father? How might his tone here be described?

Alcohol is a recurring image in the passage. Where is it leading in terms of 'bigger' ideas?

Many references to Robert's mother as 'she/her'. What is the effect of this? Comment on family relationships and the role of women. Can elements of a feminist reading be incorporated here?

Another interesting word – makes Royce's actions seem like a performance. Is Robert's tone a little mocking here? If so, why?

Image of sand recur in this text – links to sand people? Does the sandy mortar in the house suggest other kinds of instability?

Domestic violence – reduced to 'the slap'; interestingly, the focus is on Robert's need to sleep.

Like Royce/Roy, Dorothy is divided in two – the maternal/domestic role and the fun-loving 'girl'.

Why does Dorothy think that this makes up for Roy's drunken violence?

Irony? Link with wider text?

Link with wider text? Dual personality of Eric?

Interesting words – are they effective in suggesting danger? How? How might the tone be described here? (Drewe continues the alliteration of the 'l' in 'late and brittle'.) Rather elegant language to describe someone who's inebriated and aggressive?

Comment on the choice of words: 'lay low' sounds like the excessively dramatic language of a Western or adventure story.

Downplaying (making fun of?) Royce's 'rages'? Why?

Does this add to Robert's quiet mockery of his father's 'theatrical' displays of anger? Does he also recognise the damage to family relationships?

Does the idea of a 'pattern' of behaviour make Royce less threatening? Does it link him with Eric (who really is threatening)? Is there irony in the fact that the apparently harmless Eric is the more dangerous threat, while the belligerent Royce is entirely predictable and thus not really so dangerous? Link to the idea of a shark attack?

What is being shown here about the relationship between Robert and Dot?

Comment on the 'listing' of Dot's 'achievements' here – and the constant repetition of her name.

## Part 2: sample close analysis

This section includes a high-level close analysis of the above passage. The annotations show how the response is working with the given material to develop an interpretation.

Look closely at the annotations and note that:

- Almost all of the response is doing something important and purposeful – at no point is the story simply being retold (unless it's to briefly connect other important elements of analysis or discussion).
- There is no place for explaining in your own words what the author means by particular sentences or phrases.
- The annotations point out how the analysis is showing what the author wants us to know about the characters and the ideas they embody.
- Some annotations refer to 'why' questions – these are questions you should be asking yourself as you read and analyse a passage. For more on these and other kinds of analytical questions, see pp.105–7 of *Literature for Senior Students*.

Study the response and the annotations to learn how to incorporate your observations of a passage *and* your knowledge of the whole text into a fluent, coherent analysis.

Quotes from the passage.

Roy's euphemistic descriptions of his drinking as 'doing business' and 'going to see a man about a dog' highlight a divide between the gentility of the suburbs and the slightly disreputable atmosphere of pubs in the conservative 1950s. Roy's jocular tone conveys his willingness to challenge conservative suburban values, but he maintains a facade of respectability - however transparent. Roy also adopts a puritanical attitude to sex. He carefully removes pictures of bare-breasted women from the 'National Geographic', enjoying them himself while taking the moral high ground with his sons. Robert's adult reflections on his father's behaviour show his childhood awareness of an external world in which alcohol and sex push the boundaries of suburban respectability. The young Robert thinks it is not 'too bad' being left in the car for 'an hour or two', where he is appeased with 'glasses of raspberry lemonade', and Royce's transgressions are thus diminished. However, when alcohol results in domestic violence, Drewe draws our attention to the dangers of ignoring social restraints. As an adolescent, Robert also pushes the boundaries, experimenting with sex, and paying the price. Yet he is very aware of the high cost of conformity as he observes Dorothy 'Cooking but not eating. Who'd been crying'. The truncated sentences here subtly reflect the quality of Dorothy's confined, domestic life.

The opening sentence deals immediately with the language near the beginning of the passage - there is no general introduction to the response.

Reference to effects of language use.

Reference to wider text or another passage.

Brief mention of the narrative voice in the memoir.

Why does Drewe want us to think about Roy pushing the boundaries with his drinking? One of the 'bigger' ideas in the text concerns what happens when boundaries are crossed - it can be liberating but also dangerous. What other boundaries are crossed? Move briefly outside the passage to the wider text.

Moves back into the passage after a brief reference to the wider text.

Awareness of language style and what it shows about character.

Both Roy and Dorothy are 'split' into two distinct personalities, defined by separate names - and Robert knows that Royce is 'the one to look out for'. When 'Royce' returns home 'agitated', Dorothy's 'silence' and Royce's aggressiveness become part of a 'pattern'. However, despite a need to lie 'low', young Robert is not completely terrified by the aftermath of these 'jovial homecomings'. Royce is described as 'late and brittle ... glittery and cool'. The language here is almost elegant - with its alliterative 'l' sounds. The adult writer's linguistic control shows the boy's attempt to defuse the domestic tension by reducing it to behavioural and linguistic patterns. Protected by his adult status, Drewe subtly mocks his father's fury - reducing it to 'huff[ing] and stamp[ing] around', 'agitated comings-and-goings' and 'leap[ing] into the Customline in high dudgeon'. Drewe's language is almost humorous as he describes Royce's 'specialty' as 'indignantly departing rooms' and 'thinking up new grievances for his return - and

Inclusion of plot details and direct quotes to set up discussion of language.

Awareness of adult perspective - the writer's control of language. What can be made of this in terms of what's happening in the passage?

Awareness of tone here - shows how the character is feeling, and highlights a difference between what's said and what's implied.

Use of direct quotes from the passage.

Reference to an aspect of language use (tone).

departure again'. Yet despite his dismissive tone, Drewe clearly remembers his childhood anxiety, his breaths becoming 'shallow sips of air' as he waited for the inevitable 'slap'. The recurring violence in the Drewe household is part of a disturbing pattern of hidden violence in the text, symbolised by the 'man-eating sharks', buried 'deep in [Robert's] collective unconscious'. This violence is terrifyingly unleashed in the rampage of the serial killer - Eric Cooke.

Reference to language use.

Reference and link to another part of the text; shows awareness of how the man-eating shark works on a metaphorical level.

Important link made to the main narrative focus of the text.

Moves back into passage after reference to wider text.

Roy's drinking and his occasional marital infidelities are contrasted with Dorothy's stern moral values. In Dorothy's world, references to sex are not tolerated, as Robert discovers when he innocently sings a mildly raunchy version of 'Lady of Spain'. Dorothy embraces Perth's conservative morality, burying herself in the role of 'the wife, the suburban mother' and gradually suppressing the vivacious 'Dot' - the 'busy little speck' who 'cartwheeled on the beach and did handstands'. The division of the 'indoors' Dorothy and the 'outdoors' Dot highlights the pressures on women to conform to socially defined gender roles in the 1950s, and finally the 'tanned' athletic 'Jantzen girl' is literally 'buried' as 'Mrs Dunlop'.

Another 'quick grab' at a detail from 'outside' the passage which strengthens the point being made, and shows knowledge of the *whole* text.

Discussion of passage details using many direct quotes, and a comparison between Royce and Dorothy. This makes the discussion more coherent by linking with earlier passage details. The comparison also touches on one of the book's main ideas - that of a divided or hidden self, the public and the private person - and the 'need' to maintain the appearance of social respectability.

Views and values comments here - answers a 'why' question about the double personality of Dorothy/Dot. There is also evidence here of a feminist reading.

Through the portrayals of his unhappy parents, Drewe suggests that rigid adherence can be as destructive as careless disregard for society's rules. He implies that a repressive, conservative society forces the individual to make uncomfortable choices between conformity and challenge - often with catastrophic consequences.

Develops the idea of Dorothy's unhappiness and the suppression of her individuality. What is being revealed about human nature and the values of the society?

Moving from wider text back into the passage.

Links back to earlier details in the passage - gives a sense of control and coherence.

After he has 'let loose', Roy's conciliatory 'arm' around Dorothy not only appeases her (just as the raspberry lemonade appeases Robert), but also enables Robert to 'feel better'; thus the cycle of violence and appeasement is perpetuated. The adult Drewe condemns Royce's behaviour through the parallel between his outwardly respectable father and Eric Cooke, who is also both a violent man and a loving father. Drewe's criticism, however, is also directed at society, which implicitly condones the use of violence to enforce its values. Interestingly, Dorothy is an 'outsider' who is accepted because she adapts and conforms: 'West Australians were fond of her and Dot loved Perth'. Respectable Royce is 'exonerated' because of his social status and his capacity

A 'views and values' comment here - noting the text's condemnation of domestic violence.

Brief link to a key character in the wider text to strengthen the point about Royce.

Another 'why' question - why does Drewe want to draw a parallel between Royce and Eric? This will lead to another views and values comment about society.

Ask yourself a 'why' question here - what point is being made in terms of the 'bigger' ideas? The idea being discussed here is hidden violence.

for 'appeasement', whereas Eric, the despised social outcast, is brutally punished. Through both Eric and Royce, Drewe suggests that the greatest danger often comes from within. The hidden violence of the insider (either the outcast or the oppressor) poses more of a threat than external dangers, to a community blinded by complacency and sheltered by isolation.

It is a good idea, as you approach the conclusion, to answer a 'why' question. Why does Drewe want us to think about a society which cannot recognise hidden dangers? There is a useful views and values comment to be made here.

Refers to the significance of the title.

The text's central metaphor, the shark net, effectively conveys Drewe's concerns about hidden dangers in a patriarchal society which encourages fear and loathing of 'the outsider', and there are some unsettling parallels to be drawn between Perth in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

'Summing up' statement, focusing on an image that ties the passages together.

Taking the idea a bit further and thinking about some of the broader implications of the idea of 'the outsider'.

### **Part 3: assessor comments**

The interpretation is relevant and plausible – it discusses the relationships between the characters, and comments on the values of the society in a way that is consistent with textual details elsewhere in the text (referring briefly to the wider text to support the interpretation). This also demonstrates understanding of the text.

A thoughtful analysis and close reading of textual details is evident in the selection of appropriate textual detail (direct quotes), and discussion of how these details reveal character, explore relationships, suggest the notion of concealment and expose the writer's views and values. These ideas are developed in interesting ways, which go beyond the obvious and impart a degree of complexity to the response. One of the most effective ways of analysing the features of a text is to discuss the effects of the language features, such as tone and sentence structure, explaining how they contribute to the interpretation.

The response is coherently structured as it moves through, out of and back into the set passage, developing ideas about hidden danger, rejection of the outsider and the pressures on individuals in a conservative, patriarchal society. The language is expressive, the vocabulary sophisticated and the style is fluent, connecting ideas through words such as 'however', 'yet', 'thus', 'despite' and 'also'. These connecting and qualifying words also suggest that a 'point of view' about the passage and its relationship to the text is being developed, which adds greatly to the coherency of the response.

The response develops ideas in sufficient depth and detail to be of a substantial length; it would score in the A to A+ range.

***About the author***

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