

Example 2: creative response to short stories

The second example is a response to a collection of short stories. It includes:

- comments on the original text and the process of responding creatively to it
- an original short story
- a reflective commentary
- assessor comments.

Go to www.insightpublications.com.au for two other sample creative responses: one to Anna Funder's *Stasiland* and one to Thea Astley's *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*.

A new short story for Peter Carey's *Collected Stories*

The following creative response is based on a story from Peter Carey's *Collected Stories*. It uses the template available from www.insightpublications.com.au to set out ideas about both Carey's story and the creative response. The template has two pages: 'Analysis of original text' and 'Features of the response'. The reflective commentary follows the story. Assessor comments are included as annotations throughout, and as overall remarks following the reflective commentary.

Analysis of original text

Title: *Collected Stories*

Form: short story collection

Author: Peter Carey

Major concerns and point of view on these:

- Anti-colonialism
- Need for communication
- Entrapment.

Context: 1970s Australia

Literary features and effects of these:

- Settings: In all Carey's stories, the setting is important in some way to the story and its theme. For example, in 'The Fat Man in History', the 'revolution' which has occurred in the city where the characters live reflects the revolution which takes place amongst the fat men themselves. The isolation of the pavilion in 'Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion' reflects the isolation of the main character and emphasises the hopelessness and entrapment of his situation.

Narrative structure: Not always a linear narrative as Carey often uses reminiscence/flashback to fill in background details about the story. Many of the stories in the collection are divided up into numbered sections.

Characterisation:

- emphasises characters by giving lots of detail about how they look, move, behave and think
- de-emphasises characters, usually women, by omitting detail about them.

Tone and style: Cynical, despairing or challenging tone. Surreal style.

- Key images: Unicorns = Innocence; Flying = Freedom

Shows knowledge and close reading of the stories.

Demonstrates awareness of techniques Carey uses in characterisation.

The student later incorporates unicorn image in own response.

Features of the response

Task: an original composition, similar in style/concerns.

Form: short story.

Aim: To create a story based on Plato's theory of ideas. It would be an extra story to include in the collection.

Relationship to original text: Similar style to 'The Fat Man in History'. Some phrases are used from the original text.

Point of view: Frank's.

Plot: Four people are in a room watching a film. They have been doing this ever since they can remember. Their different personalities create conflict amongst the group, which eventually results in the murder of Plato and H.

Setting: A small movie theatre.

Narrator: Third-person omniscient.

Main characters:

- Frank – sort of an observer and mediator.
- Plato – interested in finding out where the film comes from.
- H – enthusiastic about the film itself. Good friends with Frank.
- George – also enthusiastic about the film but in a single-minded, analytical way.

Images: Silhouettes/shadows. Comfy old slippers.

List of changes made while writing and reasons for change:

- 1 I changed the story so that only Plato would be murdered; I thought this made the point clearer that Plato was being killed because of his ideas.
- 2 I decided to include unicorns as another image in my story as I thought it would help link my story to the original text. I also thought it would be helpful to have some sort of symbol for the innocence of the character of H.

A challenging task requiring close reading of the collection as well as sophisticated knowledge and skills.

Plausible relationship to original text.

Changes demonstrate close reading and an understanding of how writers use features such as imagery to shape meaning.

The creative response: a short story

Shadows

1.

Frank does not understand. He's not sure that he wants to. Plato has been explaining his idea for some time.

"It's simple, Frank," says Plato.

Frank focuses on Plato's hands, which are waving round and round. Like beating an egg, Frank thinks. Plato is explaining something about the screen. He is very smart. Frank would like to be smart like Plato, but he is comfortable in his chair and he is not sure he wants to think too hard today.

Frank looks down at his slippers. He likes his slippers. They are brown velvet, and worn in just the right amount.

"You're not listening," says Plato.

Title focuses the reader on the central allegory, just as Carey's titles focus on his central image.

Descriptive detail and third-person narration – features of Carey's writing.

Dialogue captures the phrasing and tone of characters in the original, conveying the personalities, traits and attitudes of Frank and Plato.

The voices of the characters echo the voices of characters in the house in 'The Fat Man in History'.

The use of numbered sections allows for changes of time, place and point of view. See student's reflective commentary for further explanation.

"Yes I am."
Frank still does not understand what Plato is talking about; perhaps he will get H to explain it to him later.

2.

George is writing. He has been writing ever since Frank can remember.

"What are you writing, George?" says Frank.

"Don't ask stupid questions."

George is making records. Occasionally he looks up at the screen, and then his face is bathed in blue light. Frank is unsure what the records are for but George has assured him that they are essential. George is very tall and skinny, and his back is curved from hunching over his writing. He is very smart, like Plato, but he doesn't like Plato at all.

H is very excited. A unicorn has just appeared on screen. H likes unicorns.

George is annoyed. "It's childish, all this excitement over unicorns," he says.

Frank finds H's excitement comforting.

Plato is standing very close to the screen. He looks as if he is concentrating hard. Perhaps he likes unicorns too.

3.

Frank is curled up in his chair, like a cat. He wiggles his toes in his slippers, and strokes the worn velvet.

Plato strides quickly back and forth across the room. It is a small room, completely dark aside from the glow that comes from the screen. It is full of comfy velvet chairs. They do not know where the chairs came from, although George says they were always there, just like the screen. Occasionally Plato will jump and pull at the wood carving which covers the walls, or leap onto a chair and look around the room. He is making a lot of noise.

"Stop it!" yells George. He says Plato is distracting him from his work.

Plato is angry. "Your documentation is useless," he says. "You should all be helping me look for the source."

Later, Frank asks Plato about the 'source'.

"It's where the whole room comes from, I think," says Plato. "Or at least the film."

Frank doesn't understand.

Plato says, "The film isn't real, Frank. It's a copy of something else."

Frank laughs. "We've all walked round the room hundreds of times," he says. "There's nothing else."

4.

Plato has been sitting in the corner for some time. He has his head in his hands. Frank holds his hand in front of his face and peers through his outspread fingers. He likes the way the light shines through them.

Silhouettes dance across the screen. The room is silent apart from the scratching of George's pen.

"Where do you get all the paper, George?" asks Frank.

Suddenly a mountain appears on screen. The sun sparkles on the snow.

H is very excited. He jumps up on his chair and points, laughing.

George is angry. "Will you shut up!" he shouts.

An echo of the unicorns in Carey's story, 'Conversations with Unicorns'.

Characters' actions build on earlier characterisation. Descriptive detail conveys setting.

Successfully adopts style and tone of 'The Fat Man in History'.

The images in this section are beautiful and haunting. The writing is coherent, highly complex and sophisticated despite its apparent simplicity.

They sit in silence once more. The mountain is replaced by shadows on a cave wall.

Later, Frank leans over and whispers to H. “I thought the mountain was beautiful,” he says.

5.

In the middle of the night Frank wakes. George is still writing.

“When do you sleep, George?” Frank asks.

After a while George says, “I think Plato may be mad.”

“Mmmm,” Frank agrees. He is sleepy.

“All this talk about a ‘source’,” says George. “If Plato gets in the way of my work, we may have to do something about him.”

Frank says, “Do what?”

6.

Plato is pacing again. He is very upset.

“What’s the matter?” asks Frank.

“I have to find the source,” says Plato. He rubs his hands back and forth through his hair.

“You’re not thinking about that again, are you?”

George tells Plato to sit down and stop distracting him. He looks meaningfully at Frank, who avoids his eyes. Plato still looks upset.

Frank patiently explains that maybe they can find the source later.

“Wait till the film is over,” he says.

7.

Frank feels sick. He sits in the silence and listens to the scratching of George’s pen. It makes Frank feel sick. George is writing very fast now, though.

The stench hangs heavily over the room. It oozes out from the black cavity under the screen where they stored the body. It swirls and fills Frank’s lungs until Frank feels that he may choke.

Eventually George looks up. “It had to be done,” he says.

“Yes,” says Frank, “it had to be done.”

“He was mad,” says George.

“Yes,” says Frank, “and the documentation is important.”

H sits straight and silent. George smiles and returns to his work.

Narrative is constructed as in ‘The Fat Man in History’.

Narrative style adopts Carey’s pared-back manner; the narrative positions the reader to think ahead.

Sophisticated use of imagery to foreshadow change, and then to reveal to the reader what has happened.

A very Careyesque ending!

The reflective commentary

I was inspired to write my story by the story ‘The Fat Man in History’. I was interested by the idea of depicting a group of characters that are thrown together in a certain situation, and how they relate to each other.

My story is based on the allegory of the cave – a story about a group of people who have been sitting in a cave for their entire lives, watching shadows on the cave wall. They believe that the cave is all there is. One day one of the people gets up and leaves the cave, and discovers the world outside. But when he returns to the cave to tell the others of his discovery, they are so confronted by the new idea, the thought that everything they have come to accept is wrong, that they end up killing the person rather

his fingers and, Finch has noticed, on his large roundel back. He is the only original tenant. ☆

The choice of this allegory shows the student's sophisticated understanding of Carey's style and the ability to use figurative language in their own writing.

than accept what he has to say. This allegory was used by the philosopher Plato to explain his theory of the 'idea world' – the concept that our world is only a 'shadow world', and everything in it is in fact a reflection of a perfect 'idea world', the place to which our spirits return when we die.

- I am not necessarily concerned with this particular idea; however, I am interested in the unwillingness of the people in the cave to consider the new idea, and their extreme response to the confronting new concept. To me it is very important that we should be open to new ideas. In writing my story I tried to reconstruct the basic elements of the allegory of the cave in a slightly different context, and in doing so explore the closed-mindedness of the characters.

This choice shows awareness of Carey's context, the student's own context and originality.

- The theme that I chose is not one of Carey's own themes. The reason that I chose to do this is because I decided it would be easier to write

Evidence of revision and editing during the writing process, close reading of Carey's short stories and appropriate stylistic choices.

- about a theme that I personally am interested in, rather than try to explore somebody else's. I did, however, attempt to capture Carey's tone and style in my writing. I originally set out to write my story in the style of 'The Fat Man in History'. However, when it came to writing I found this style very difficult to imitate. I therefore changed the style to make more use of dialogue, as Carey does in sections of 'Life & Death in the South Side Pavilion'. Like 'The Fat Man in History', my story is written in the present tense and narrated in third person.

Student comments perceptively on Carey's characterisation and construction.

- Carey often divides his stories into numbered sections. I found this worked well in my piece as it helped give a sense that the story is progressing in stages. This in turn helps to give out small pieces of information, slowly introducing the readers to the characters' situation, as Carey often does himself.

Illumination of the original text. Perhaps the story would fit into the collection of short stories quite seamlessly.

- To help make the story more clearly like a Carey story, I chose to use some of Carey's own phrases such as 'The stench hangs heavily over the room'. The title for my story, 'Shadows', was also chosen to help create a link to Carey's stories, as shadows are an image Carey himself uses. It also establishes a link to the original story of the shadows in the cave.

Shows insight into the process of creating an original imaginative text.

I found writing the story, trying to get my message across while trying to imitate Carey's style, very difficult. However, trying to capture the style really helped me to recognise the different elements in Carey's writing such as his choice of words, imagery, narration and use of dialogue, things I have tried to capture in my own writing. Overall I feel that although I did not achieve my purpose in writing as effectively as it could have been done, writing the story was positive as it helped me to achieve a greater understanding of the original text.

Further assessor comments

'Shadows' is an intriguing, haunting and beautiful short story. The student's proforma analysis, response and reflective commentary demonstrate the qualities of an A+ response (90–100%).

- The relationship between the response and the original text is highly convincing.
- The student shows a comprehensive understanding of characterisation, setting, narrative structure, tone and style.
- The writing is accomplished, coherent and complex – an apparent simplicity masks excellent control of structure and figurative language.
- The student displays evidence of a very perceptive reading of Carey's short stories.
- The reflective commentary is thorough, demonstrating a perceptive analysis of the features of Carey's short stories and in particular of the story 'The Fat Man in History'. It clearly articulates the ways in which the response illuminates the original text.
- The commentary provides a detailed insight into the process of producing a creative response.