

Writing on short stories

 A comprehensive response on a short story collection will show awareness of where each story sits in the collection as a whole, and how it is representative of a writer's body of work.



Go to www.insightpublications.com.au for sample responses on short stories by Katherine Mansfield and Raymond Carver.

Sample response on Annie Proulx's short stories

The following sample response is based on passages from three stories in Annie Proulx's *Close Range: Brokeback Mountain and other stories*:

- in 'The Half-Skinned Steer', from 'The snow roared through the broken window' to 'watching for him all this time' (Passage 1)
- in 'People in Hell Just Want a Drink of Water', from 'By the time he was twelve the boy, Rasmussen' to 'Lake Superior licked the wild shore of Canada' (Passage 2)
- in 'The Bunchgrass Edge of the World', from 'Aladdin wore boots and a big hat' to 'damn important' (Passage 3).

Note that **paragraph commentaries** precede each paragraph of this essay. These comments outline the writer's approach so that the generic qualities of the answer are identified. This provides general guidelines for you to use with any short story collection that you might be studying.

Introduction

The introduction refers to key features and ideas in Proulx's stories, linking these to the set passages through the main character in each. The dominating presence of the landscape, both in the lives of the characters and in the stories, is clearly signalled as one that the discussion will take up. The characters' sense of alienation and the way in which Proulx re-works the figure of the cowboy are also identified as important points of connection between the passages and as central concerns for the discussion.

Proulx's characters, exiled, yearning and transplanted, seem to epitomise 'the cowboy' of our imaginations, but in Proulx's short stories they are secondary to the dominating and fateful Wyoming landscape. Proulx at once subverts and subsumes the fiction of the cowboy in the characters of Mero, Aladdin and Rasmussen, who battle to maintain significance in the larger context of Wyoming that Proulx creates.

A strong, concise beginning that sets out the main ideas to be developed in the discussion.

Paragraph 2

This paragraph takes up ideas from the introduction in a close reading of textual details in Passage 1. The character of Mero is the focus, with wider ideas introduced through the ideas of fate and the mythical resonances of Proulx's imagery. The writing is highly expressive (e.g. 'onrushing, elemental power', 'probes the relentlessness of the fate he felt he had dodged') and is based closely on features of the text, including short quotations smoothly incorporated into the discussion.

Links back to the introduction.

Demonstrates knowledge of the story as a whole; 'ersatz' links with the ideas of 'fiction' and 'exile' signalled in the introduction.

Continues to explore the idea of fate in a fluent, coherent discussion.

Good selection of textual evidence to support the interpretation.

The snow 'roared' through the broken window of Mero's Chevrolet (in Passage 1) – the window being the fragile membrane which is all that is left to protect him from the onrushing, elemental power of the country he returns to. Exiled from the land he was born on but fatefully tied to its narrative, Mero makes his final visit to Wyoming after a seemingly successful escape to a comfortable if ersatz life of treadmills and nut cutlets in his city apartment. Proulx probes the relentlessness of the fate he felt he had dodged as he is 'backing up an incline that had seemed level on the way in' to the farm he was brought up on. Unknowingly, but determinedly, Mero travels the path to death that had been foreshadowed in the story of the half-skinned steer, the 'red glare' of his taillights reminding the reader of the red-eyed stare of the steer, a harbinger of death. The potent mythical images such as the 'celestial fingernails' that were 'poised to nip his thread', 'the mythical Grand Hotel in the sagebrush' that may be his saviour, and the ominous 'black tangles of willow bunched like dead hair' foreshadow his fate. Proulx depicts Mero as being drawn closer to his destiny even as he tries to avoid it. His shadow becomes 'blurred' by snow as his life becomes insignificant, and the god-like 'violent country' reveals its awe-inspiring presence: the cliffs 'rearing at the moon' and the snow 'smoking' off the prairie.

Paragraph 3

The third paragraph continues the analysis of Passage 1, broadening the focus from the character of Mero to the wider ideas of fate and landscape. The discussion continues to provide a close reading of textual detail, in particular of the imagery depicting the place of humans in the natural world. The paragraph concludes the analysis of Passage 1 with a wider views and values comment that shows how the features of a text contribute to an interpretation.

Develops a reading of the character as part of a larger narrative of Wyoming stories.

Broadens to a wider views and values comment about the passage and the text as a whole.

Mero's perilous trek to his 'home' brings him into the hands of something much larger than himself. Proulx emphasises his transmutation from a man living comfortably in old age to, perhaps, just another character in the legends of Wyoming with the simile of his 'feeling as easy to tear as a man cut from paper'. His meeting with death happens at the culmination of Proulx's short story and at the moment that the story converges with the Wyoming narrative of the half-skinned steer which has been 'watching for him all this time'. In this conclusion Proulx suggests that the country itself may be what determines the characters' fates and writes their narratives. Characteristic of many of the stories in this collection, the descriptions of both Mero and the landscape he returns to foreshadow the fateful and mythical, the inescapable and repeated history that surrounds humans and which looms uncomfortably close in the Wyoming landscape.

Paragraph 4

The discussion moves on to consider Passage 3 and the character of Aladdin. It explores the idea of the ‘fiction of the cowboy’ flagged in the introduction, with terms such as ‘archetypal’ and ‘dissonance’ developing this idea in a way that is expressive and coherent. The discussion of intertextuality (through references to *One Thousand and One Nights* and the character of Polonius in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*) enables the writer to present an interpretation that is complex and perceptive.

Anaesthetised and alienated, ‘drugged and fallen’, Aladdin, too, has lost his way. Proulx’s sardonic depiction of Aladdin who (like the archetypal cowboy) ‘wore boots and a big hat’ but was ‘welded to the driver’s seat of his truck’, evokes once more the dissonance between the cowboy myth and the modern reality of the hardscrabble life in Wyoming. Aladdin, whose birth was accompanied by the purchase of a lamp from the Sears catalogue, is the target of Proulx’s ironic humour. His name, rich in the promise of exotic narratives and referencing *One Thousand and One Nights*, is undercut by his own pragmatic, blunt attitude. When his plane – which Aladdin thought, in a sly reference by Proulx to Polonius’ plodding wit (in *Hamlet*), was ‘very like a horse’ – is dismantled and stolen, he ‘suspected Mormons’. The comedy of Aladdin’s dense pragmatism is made apparent when he misunderstands his daughter’s desire to leave the farm and instead takes her to the bull sale. Proulx shifts the gears of comedy higher when, like Polonius, Aladdin gives unwanted advice to his daughter: ‘a pointer you don’t want a forget. Scrotal circumference is damn important.’ Despite the obvious comedy of Aladdin’s character, Proulx suggests that his life is short and he is vulnerable to the elementary forces that all humans face. By listing the collection of objects in Aladdin’s truck – ‘kindling, wrenches, bolts and nuts, several hundred loose fence staples, and a handleless hammer head’ – Proulx shows how meagre his defences are against the forces of nature.

Fluent link with the idea of ‘subverting and subsuming’ the cowboy myth.

Good comments on Proulx’s use of tone (humour) to convey a point of view on character and values.

Paragraph 5

This paragraph focuses on Passage 2, which is analysed in less detail than the other two passages but is nevertheless strongly linked to them. The way in which this passage contributes to an interpretation is established through the particular insights it provides into the character Rasmussen – a character who is alienated from the landscape in a slightly different way from the other characters discussed.

Brings the discussion back to the idea of landscape and the characters' sense of alienation from it.

'Portent' links with the idea of fate, generating coherence; the quotations and imagery reinforce the argument about the power of the natural world.

Another, more tangential, exploration of the exiles that founder in the harsh Wyoming landscape is the oddly named Rasmussen, the name an allusion to the scholar Erasmus. The 'awkward zaniness' of Rasmussen's bookishness signals this character's complete alienation from the landscape; he prefers his knowledge to be 'on paper' and circumscribed by narrative and convention, so he devotes himself to a 'study of the timetables'. Proulx again suggests the danger of living in the abstract, of ignoring the brooding physicality of the land that surrounds these struggling and alienated characters. Proulx pits Rasmussen's desire for the orderly through timetables and a desire for the cities, like the 'smoking mass' of Chicago, against the awesome power of the land which permits the cities to come 'shrugging out of the plains', like a portent of evil.

Paragraph 6: conclusion

This concise concluding paragraph flows logically from Paragraph 5 through the ideas of the dominating landscape and exiled/alienated characters, ideas that also link back to the introduction. This enables wider views and values comments to be made, presenting a relevant and plausible interpretation of the text and giving the response coherence.

The conclusion brings together the analysis of the three passages.

Each of the characters in Proulx's short stories attempts to make a stand against the ever-present snow storms, fierce winds and torrential rains, the watching mountains and the predatory animals that are the natural inhabitants of Wyoming. The displaced characters are at once diminished and made mythical by their struggle against the omnipotent landscape.
(902 words)

Assessor comments

This response is structured to lead the reader to an understanding of Proulx's stories that is based on the language of the passages. The fluent writing demonstrates a strong command of specialised and varied literary vocabulary. This vocabulary works particularly well in the discussion of Proulx's use of landscape as a major character in the text, as well as her use of imagery in constructing the varied characters that appear in the short stories. The writer's vocabulary is sophisticated and expressive, including effective terms such as 'elemental' and 'relentlessness' which enhance and focus the discussion.

The writer demonstrates an understanding of the short story form in which a number of characters are used, and in which foreshadowing both creates unity and presents central ideas. The writer builds a convincing interpretation and links the analyses of the three passages by exploring the notion of a fate which is tied fundamentally to landscape as well as the mythology that is at work in *Close Range*.

This is a plausible and coherent response that encompasses the views and values of Proulx's stories, as well as convincingly demonstrating a knowledge of how Proulx uses features such as setting, mood, humour, intertextuality and imagery.