

## ***emagazine* Close Reading Competition 2018**

**Professor John Mullan, judge of the competition, said of the shortlisted entries:**

The best responses managed to do justice to a lengthy passage in a short space by recognising its pattern of contrasts and parallels. It was a pleasure to find young critics who understood that narrative prose, like poetry, can have rhythms and echoes. Several also managed to remember that this was a passage from a novel, setting up tensions and uncertainties in the reader's mind that will later have to be resolved. One small observation: no one commented on the fact that this narrative is written in the present tense. Perhaps present tense novels are becoming the norm?

**Barbara Bleiman, one of the editors of *emagazine*, said of the whole collection of entries:**

We were delighted to see so many high quality entries, engaging with the extract with enthusiasm and energy and aiming for an authentic personal reading. The best of the entries had a clear sense of how the text worked as narrative. They tried to make sense of the contrasts and parallels set up by the writer in presenting a world and a set of characters to the reader at a very early stage in the novel. These students did this without trying to skate around complexities, over-simplify, or avoid pinning down what they thought the writer might be trying to achieve.

As in previous years, the judges were not impressed by the use of technical literary vocabulary used incorrectly, for its own sake, or as an alternative to having really clear, interesting ideas about the text. Words like connotes, infers, juxtaposes, parataxis, pathetic fallacy, semantic field were all widely used but not always to good effect. It was a great relief when students used the word 'juxtapose' to genuinely reveal something about the contrasts and oppositions set up between the two main characters and their worlds.

The best responses explored the 'big picture' ways in which the text worked – its structure, voice and fluctuating points of view, its setting up of characters and their worlds and the reasons for 'juxtaposing' these in the way that the author does, moving back and forth between them. Less successful were the attempts to mine the text for individual words which were then defined, explained and analysed in detail but without contributing to any significant point about the text and how the words contributed to that.

In general, as with writing critically for exams, we were most impressed by writing that didn't seek to impress, but did make really interesting points, and make them directly and clearly. There were plenty of occasions when a student's insights made us think freshly about the text and see something we hadn't seen before – an idea they'd had about the text that was valid and justifiable but quite original. That was a huge pleasure!

## **Alia Derriey, Bromsgrove School**

This extract is a play on contrasts: between the abstract and the specific, the two protagonists, and the inside and outside.

In the opening, Kunzru introduces the theme of contrasts through abstract ruminations on opposite elements – ‘Fire and water. Earth and air’ – and ‘the great unity of things whose name is God’. The origin and context of these ideas is unclear until they are grounded in a character, Amrita, when they are revealed as her thoughts; this contrast between abstract and physical descriptions makes for a jarring opening.

Another key contrast in this extract is between the two protagonists and their circumstances. Amrita travels in a ‘palanquin’, a sign of wealth, yet feels restricted by the air inside, ‘hot and close’ and smelling of ‘stale sweat’. She ‘reaches out for the...box of pills’ for ‘another opium pellet’, evidence of her anxiety at not being able to ‘carry on thinking for ever’. She sardonically rejoices when the vehicle stops, as she’s glad for the delay in her ‘last journey’ – once she is ‘delivered to her uncle’, this ‘will be an end’, and she will get married. The old women had told her to be thankful for her circumstances; as ‘only a woman’, her narrow prospects were the best she could hope for in their patriarchal society. But she resents their ‘advice’, recalling the conversation in brief sentences: ‘she will arrive with a good dowry. So much better off than other girls. She should thank God.’ Evidently, she dreads her impending marriage and the restrictions it will bring – on her travel, and even on her thinking.

In contrast, Englishman Forrester doesn’t travel in luxury but rather is stuck with the ‘grubby Brahmin’ and his ‘chit chat’. Although he is similarly restricted by this man who irritates him – referred to as a ‘bloody fool’ – he is undeniably freer than Amrita, with no prospect of impending restriction or an end to the freedoms he enjoys. This comparison is exaggerated by the writing preceding each character’s description. Before introducing Amrita, Kunzru describes the world inside her head; before he introduces Forrester, he illustrates the chaotic desert landscape and the striking changes happening in nature: ‘the wind has blown steadily...to slap hard against the mountains.’; ‘the rain rolls over foothills, dousing fires’. Forrester is introduced amidst a war of opposing elements, as if he is part of its violent phenomenon. For better or for worse, this is certainly a more dramatic context into which to be introduced than the inside of your own mind.

These contrasts draw the protagonists together; tension mounts as a link, or rather its potential, forms between them. This increases after Forrester learns that she is a young woman rather than ‘ill, or very old’ as he’d presumed. Whilst erecting his tent, he can’t help but think about her until eventually, he can’t stand it any longer. He asks the man, ‘So who exactly is your mistress?’ and receives a telling response.

## Ellen Waters, Altrincham Girls' Grammar School

The passage concerns the journey of a young woman, Amrita, to an arranged marriage, and her associated sense of alienation and lost identity. Of a wealthy family – Amrita travels in a 'palanquin' with an 'embroidered curtain' accompanied by servants – her marriage is solely in the gift of her uncle and her body will become her husband's property. There is a sense of community and familial influence, controlled by elders – the 'old women' discuss her dowry. For Amrita, this is 'her last journey', the end of her former life; she views the bondage of impending marriage not as a new life, but as a loss of physical and mental freedom comparable to death. At its core, the extract studies separation and division where there should be unity. For Amrita, this is the detachment of body and mind – for Forrester, this is unsuitability to an unfamiliar country which he cannot understand or connect with.

Amrita's transition to womanhood and marriage causes her to question her own selfhood. Anticipating ownership of her body passing to a stranger, she has lost touch with her physicality and experiences it as something grotesque and animalistic: she sees her hand move as if independent of her will, 'a snake sliding across a flagstone floor', a 'crab-like object'. It is almost an out-of-body experience: her body and mind no longer coincide to give a coherent identity.

The sense of expiration is ironic. Amrita is nineteen and conventionally at her physical peak, about to blossom into womanhood. This pervades the extract; 'the hanging gardens [...] ripened' and the 'swollen droplets' give an impression of growth and fertility, whilst the 'darkening red silk in her lap' connotes the loss of virginity. This reflects societal position as a woman newly of marriageable age, and therefore an asset based on wealth and physical appeal. However, Amrita sees her body as something disgusting, indicating her reluctance to sacrifice her mind and her placing of thoughts over material attributes.

The recent loss of her parents increases her isolation: the emotional ties of childhood have been cut and to those around her she is a mere object for transportation, symbolised by her abandonment in the rain when 'no one has come for her'. The shared imagery of the curtain (Forrester stands behind 'grey, solid curtains of water', Amrita is hidden behind the 'soaked curtains' of the palanquin) links Amrita and Forrester in this theme of alienation and duality.

The extract also gives an insight into British-occupied India. Moti Lal and Forrester meeting in the desert reflects how the two cultures have blended whilst maintaining a clear distance. Forrester, although civil, is uncomfortable with Moti Lal, who 'keeps up a steady stream of conversation' which the Englishman struggles to engage with. The rain separates 'Forrester's army tent from the Indians' contraptions of tarpaulin and bamboo' – this gives a sense of a modern, military society and a more ad hoc culture based on native understanding of the land, forced to combine and co-operate whilst never entirely integrating.

## Laura Wilson, Keswick School

There is a resounding sense of conflict in this extract: the battle of nature's forces in 'opposition'; the clash between various societal groups; and the psychological turmoil experienced by an orphaned woman of the Indian aristocracy. It is a perilous expedition; fraught with danger and foreboding as rain droplets splash 'into the dust like little bombs'.

We are 'struck' with the immense omnipotence of the monsoon, which threatens to devastate the landscape as 'the forked lightning divides the sky into fleeting segments', bringing down an 'unimaginable shock of water' upon the somewhat insignificant sprawl of people on earth below. These sovereign elements appear to be attributed to a divine-like force: they are 'mere aspects of the great unity of things whose name is God'. This acute sense of nature's domination is evoked through the violent, forceful vocabulary; the 'burning' air and 'battering' wind establish a shockingly raw and turbulent atmosphere as the protagonist, Amrita, is escorted to her 'uncle's house in Agra'.

A clear shift of focus sets Amrita apart from the 'trusted family retainers', as she seems to be not only socially distinguished by virtue of the 'palanquin'; but also physically isolated, since she has not even 'ventured a peek' to assess her surroundings. Once inside the palanquin, the third person narrative exhibits her 'bitter' tumult due to being 'only a woman': she swallows 'opium pellets' as a means of escaping her fate in a patriarchal society where even the fundamental authority over her own body is compromised. Indeed, Amrita experiences a spiritual disembodiment when she watches her hand 'as she would a snake sliding across a flagstone floor'; she appears to be disgusted with this 'crab-like object' that does not belong to her. This tone of repulsion continues towards the end of the excerpt, when Kunzru suggests with sarcasm that Amrita should 'thank God' for having a 'good dowry' to present to her designated husband when she is 'delivered' to him. Such is the destiny of an eligible young woman in India, whose 'energy' deficit renders her incapable of overcoming her docile acquiescence.

The distinction between the Indian culture and foreigners such as Forrester is indicated through the contrast in the direct speech of the characters and Kunzru's use of free indirect discourse, which allows us access to their innermost thoughts. Despite Moti Lal's 'steady stream' of inconsequential prattle concerning these 'extenuating circumstances', Forrester simply fails to comprehend what the 'bloody fool [is] on about'. The discrepancies between the characters evince an almost hostile rift between the 'Englishman' and the 'Indians': a rupture which is further accentuated by the 'trickle of muddy water' which separates Forrester's 'army tent' from the Indian 'contraptions of tarpaulin and bamboo'.

The culmination of the volatile atmosphere is marked by Moti Lal's ominous reaction to Forrester's enquiry about his 'mistress'. As his face 'darkens', we are left with an ultimate impression of uncertainty while the congregation are 'huddled together forlornly' in anticipation of the trials and tribulations of their imminent journey.