

1999 ENGLISH LITERATURE

Question 2

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

2. In the following passage from Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Crossing* (1994), the narrator describes a dramatic experience. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, show how McCarthy's techniques convey the impact of the experience on the main character.

By the time he reached the first talus¹ slides under the tall escarpments² of the Pilares the dawn was not far to come. He reined the horse in a grassy swale and stood down and dropped the reins. His trousers were stiff with blood. He cradled the wolf in his arms and lowered her to the ground and unfolded the sheet. She was stiff and cold and her fur was bristly with the blood dried upon it. He walked the horse back to the creek and left it standing to water and scouted the banks for wood with which to make a fire. Coyotes were yapping along the hills to the south and they were calling from the dark shapes of the rimlands above him where their cries seemed to have no origin other than the night itself.

He got the fire going and lifted the wolf from the sheet and took the sheet to the creek and crouched in the dark and washed the blood out of it and brought it back and he cut forked sticks from a mountain hackberry and drove them into the ground with a rock and hung the sheet on a trestlepole where it steamed in the firelight like a burning scrim standing in a wilder-ness where celebrants of some sacred passion had been carried off by rival sects or perhaps had simply fled in the night at the fear of their own doing. He pulled the blanket about his shoulders and sat shivering in the cold and waiting for the dawn that he could find the place where he would bury the wolf. After a while the horse came up from the creek trailing the wet reins through the leaves and stood at the edge of the fire.

He fell asleep with his hands palm up before him like some dozing penitent. When he woke it was still dark. The fire had died to a few low flames seething over the coals. He took off his hat and fanned the fire

with it and coaxed it back and fed the wood he'd gathered. He looked for the horse but could not see it. The coyotes were still calling all along the stone ramparts of the Pilares and it was graying faintly in the east. He squatted over the wolf and touched her fur. He touched the cold and perfect teeth. The eye turned to the fire gave back no light and he closed it with his thumb and sat by her and put his hand upon her bloodied forehead and closed his own eyes that he could see her running in the mountains, running in the starlight where the grass was wet and the sun's coming as yet had not undone the rich matrix of creatures passed in the night before her. Deer and hare and dove and groundvole all richly empaneled on the air for her delight, all nations of the possible world ordained by God of which she was one among and not separate from. Where she ran the cries of the coyotes clapped shut as if a door had closed upon them and all was fear and marvel. He took up her stiff head out of the leaves and held it or he reached to hold what cannot be held, what already ran among the mountains at once terrible and of a great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh. What blood and bone are made of but can themselves not make on any altar nor by any wound of war. What we may well believe has power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world surely if wind can, if rain can. But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it.

¹ A sloping mass of rock debris at the base of a cliff

² Steep slopes

GO ON TO THE NEXT PAGE 

Sample Student Responses for Question 2

A

Student Response

The passage from The Crossing conveys a sense of awe and mystery, and in doing so, imparts the depths of the man's emotions towards the wolf. The mourning for the wolf is raised to an elegiac level, ~~and~~ ^{as} the man reflects upon the wolf, "at once terrible and of a great beauty." ~~The~~ Several devices are employed to effectively enhance the tone of reverence and loss, ~~and~~ including figurative language, diction, sentence structure, rhythm, and repetition.

The pace of the passage fluctuates, alternating from short, detached sentences, such as "He squatted over the wolf and touched her fur. He touched the cold and perfect teeth," to unusually long sentences which are connected by conjunctions (mostly "and") and which serve to reflect the outpouring of emotions and the blurred response the man is experiencing, as in lines 41-47 ("The eye... before her"). This dichotomy in sentence structure ~~only~~ ^{underline} emphasizes the periods where the man is overcome by remembrances and extrapolations.

The figurative language interspersed within the passage is also highly effective, causing an air of mystery, ~~and~~ wonder, and respect. This mood is set when the cries of the coyotes are described, "seemingly to have no origin other than the night itself." The analogy of the sheet steaming ^(lines 21-24) enhances the aura of power and sacredness by diction such as "celebrants of some sacred passion" and "burning scrim." This sense of ~~awe~~ ^a religiousness ~~and~~ power is again

Student Response 1, continued

by his comparison to a "dozing penitent." A sense of the awing mixture of terror and beauty is evidenced when the narrator compares the wolf's soul to "flowers that feed on flesh," introducing an element of ~~the almost horrifying, yet overall~~ ~~to wonder inspiring into the depiction of the wolf.~~ how "all was fear and marvel" regarding the wolf.

The repetition of certain phrases and words emphasized the ideas behind them.

For example, "What we may well believe has power to cut and shape and hollow out of the dark form of the world surely, if wind can, if rain can," ~~the~~

The repetition contained within this sentence really clarifies the point that our beliefs shape our perception. Also, the repetition of "and" throughout the passage, as in lines 15-21, brings a rhythm to the passage while providing a sense of the man not really realizing what he is doing, only going through the motions.

The unspecific pronoun "He" actually provides a contrast where the grief of the man becomes more poignant. The passage ~~slowly~~ metamorphoses from a more detached account about man's treatment of the body to a touching scene where the man reflects upon the wolf and her spirit.

The final ~~paragraph~~ ^{thoughts}, and especially ~~to~~ the last line, is made more important by the reflections of the man. The last line is particularly emphasized by the complete lack of punctuation, ~~and~~ which

Student Response 1, continued

Conveys the magnitude of the man's loss. His utter grief over losing the wolf is fully revealed to the reader in it, ^{especially the last 4 words,} ~~the~~ in stating, "But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it."

The importance of the wolf's hole in "the possible word ordained by God of which she was one among and not separate from" is made known to the reader by the man's thoughts and actions. In doing so, and in the setting (with the sun beginning to "faintly gray" the east), a mood of respectful reverence and wonderful power is created. The ~~the~~ man is shown to be deeply impacted by his experience.

(B)

Student Response

The techniques employed by McCarthy here create an increasingly panicked and thoughtful recollection of the main character's remorse. The first lines give no indication of any problem until it bluntly says, "his trousers were stiff with blood." This introduces, in a startling way, the main character's dilemma. There are only hints of guilt thus far however. This is hinted at by the explicit attention to the state of the wolf, for instance, "She was stiff and cold and her fur was bristly..." Also, later there are coyotes howling in a haunting way because "their cries seemed to have no origin other than the night itself."

The second paragraph gets more definite about half-way through it. The sheet was washed of the wolf's blood and then set by the fire on a freestone pole. This is still unconvincing until the work talks about how this scene resembled "a burning scrim standing in a wilderness... some sacred passion... fled in the night at the fear of their own doing." This account seems severely tinted by an attitude of guilt and self-incrimination equal to that of Poe's beating heart and that of Crime and Punishment. However, this is over a wolf, not a human being.

The third paragraph leaves absolutely no room for doubt. It starts with, "he fell asleep... like some dozing penitent." When he awoke he sat by her "and closed his own eyes that he could see her running in the mountains..." Next, there was a virtual role-call of her prey "ordained by God of which she was one among and not separate from"

Student Response ~~continued~~

This is a further statement of his guilt. Then he "reached to hold what cannot be held," which is the spirit of the wolf. What is left of the passage is mostly spent on elaborating on the concept of that spirit. It was "terrible and of great beauty, like flowers that feed on flesh." As the emotion gets higher, punctuation lessens and what comes out is a Hemingway-like burst of thought. It can shape rock "surely if wind can, if rain can." "But which cannot be held ~~to~~ never held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress and the wind itself is in terror of it and the world cannot lose it." This demonstrates how McCarthy thinks of that spirit, and how the main character realizes these things through his guilt and remorse. The main character gets increasingly emotional and philosophical as the author relates, ~~without mentioning that~~. Although there are no quotation marks, any tags on the thoughts stating that they are those of the main character, it is obvious through McCarthy's style.

(C)

Student Response

In the dark of the night, it runs swiftly along the mountains, up the slopes, past the creek, faster than the winds. What is this "it" that runs so freely after the body is dead, and decaying? It is surely the soul that escapes after death and returns to its home. In the passage from McCarthy's "The Crossing" the soul of the dying wolf leaves the body and the man carrying him, to return to his homeland. McCarthy uses imagery and the description of the complete narrative experience to recount the philosophical revelation that the protagonist encounters as he caresses ~~the~~ death in the tranquility of nature.

An outstanding quality about this narrative is the care with which each imagery is told. One imagery's repetitive image is that of dark and light. The narrative begins in the dark, though close to dawn. The coyotes call from the "dark shapes of the rimlands", the image giving a clear picture of the grandeur of nature in which the narrator now sits. There is also the image of the weak fire lit in the cold darkness, a symbol ^{perhaps,} for some hope after death. The fire at first dies; the main character must fan it and relight it, until the ~~dawn~~ sky begins to gray.

What the main character experiences at dawn can be called mysticism, a philosophical epiphany, and a new window of understanding. Such a tone of mystery and enigma is created in the final paragraph (lines 40-65) through the change in the style of writing. The narrative here uses long sentences that run continuous as a stream. The sentences begin to lose the ordinary grammatical form that the narrative followed earlier; "what blood and bone are made of but can themselves not make on any altar nor by any wound of war." The narrative ~~stops~~ leaves its narrative flow, and begins to build on the image ~~of what~~ that is passing by the main character's closed eyes, as the limited or omniscient third person narrator can do. The passage has religious allusions, "ordained by God," as well as personification that breathes life into the mountain "the flowers feed on flesh", the wind and rain "cut and shape" the sand, and the soul runs wildly through this nation.

The experience teaches illuminates the power of nature and the strength of the soul to the main character. He, in reaching out "to hold what cannot be held," grasped in the moment the mystery of death and eternity, the enigma that is conveyed through the powerful images in this narrative.