

GCSE English Language

Paper 1 Explorations in creative reading and writing

This extract comes from the middle of the novel 'The Blind Assassin'. Iris has had a difficult relationship with her sister, who has lived with her and her husband since their parents' death when she was fourteen.

Ten days after the war ended, my sister Laura drove a car off a bridge. The bridge was being repaired: she went right through the Danger sign. The car fell a hundred feet into the ravine, smashing through the treetops feathery with new leaves, then burst into flames and rolled down into the shallow creek at the bottom. Chunks of the bridge fell on top of it. Nothing much was left of her but charred smithereens.

I was informed of the accident by a policeman: the car was mine, and they'd traced the licence. His tone was respectful: no doubt he recognized Richard's name. He said the tires may have caught on a streetcar track or the brakes may have failed, but he also felt bound to inform me that two witnesses - a retired lawyer and a bank teller, dependable people - had claimed to have seen the whole thing. They'd said Laura had turned the car sharply and deliberately, and had plunged off the bridge with no more fuss than stepping off a curb. They'd noticed her hands on the wheel because of the white gloves she'd been wearing.

It wasn't the brakes, I thought. She had her reasons. Not that they were ever the same as anybody else's reasons. She was completely ruthless in that way.

"I suppose you want someone to identify her," I said. "I'll come down as soon as I can." I could hear the calmness of my own voice, as if from a distance. In reality I could barely get the words out; my mouth was numb, my entire face was rigid with pain. I felt as if I'd been to the dentist. I was furious with Laura for what she'd done, but also with the policeman for implying that she'd done it. A hot wind was blowing around my head, the strands of my hair lifting and swirling in it, like ink spilled in water.

"I'm afraid there will be an inquest, Mrs. Griffen," he said. "Naturally," I said. "But it was an accident. My sister was never a good driver."

I could picture the smooth oval of Laura's face, her neatly pinned chignon, the dress she would have been wearing: a shirtwaist with a small rounded collar, in a sober colour - navy blue or steel grey or hospital-corridor green. Penitential colours - less like something she'd chosen to put on than like something she'd been locked up in. Her solemn half-smile; the amazed lift of her eyebrows, as if she were admiring the view.

The white gloves: a Pontius Pilate gesture. She was washing her hands of me. Of all of us. What had she been thinking of as the car sailed off the bridge, then hung suspended in the afternoon sunlight, glinting like a dragonfly for that one instant of held breath before the plummet? Of Alex, of Richard, of bad faith, of our father and his wreckage; of God, perhaps, and her fatal, triangular bargain. Or of the stack of cheap school exercise books that she must have hidden that very morning, in the bureau drawer where I kept my stockings, knowing I would be the one to find them.

Chignon: a type of pinned up hairstyle, similar to a bun

Pontius Pilate: the man who condemned Jesus to death and famously 'washed his hands' to show he didn't approve of the sentence he had to give.

Penitential: repentance- when you are sorry for what you have done

Section A: Reading

1. Read the first paragraph again.

List four things we learn about the way the car crashed.
(4 marks)

2. Look in detail at the fourth paragraph.

How does the writer use language here to describe Iris' reaction? You could include the writer's choice of:

- words and phrases
- language features and techniques
- sentence forms.

(8 marks)

3. You now need to think about the whole of the Source.

This text is from the middle of a novel.

How has the writer structured the text to interest you as a reader? You could write about:

- what the writer focuses your attention on at the beginning
- how and why the writer changes this focus as the Source develops
- any other structural features that interest you.

(8 marks)

4. Focus this part of your answer on the first half of the source.

A student said 'This part of the story, re-telling a devastating moment in Laura's life, reveals a distance between the two sisters.' To what extent do you agree?

In your response, you could:

- consider your own impressions of Iris
- evaluate how the writer shows that Iris feels distant from her sister
- support your response with references to the text

(20 marks)



Section B: Writing

5. A magazine has asked for contributions for their creative writing page.

Either:

Write a description of passengers boarding a train as suggested by this picture (picture of a passengers boarding a train).

Or

Write a story that begins with the sentence: 'The problem with putting on a mask to face the outside world, is that at some point there will come a point when you are unable to take it off.'

(24 marks for content and organisation and 16 marks for technical accuracy) [40 marks]