

## The opening lines of literary texts (HAVO)

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### Essential unit question:

How can you formulate your opinion of a (literary) text through reading extracts?

### Intended Learning Objective:

Students can explain in English and with examples from the texts how they experience reading different writing styles and genres in English.

### Lesson summary:

Students read several extracts which are all the first few lines of English literary works. By means of guiding questions and assignments they are eventually asked about their reading experience.

### CEFR:

#### Reading (B2)

- Can understand contemporary literary prose. (Council of Europe, 27)<sup>1</sup>
- Can read with a large degree of independence, adapting style and speed of reading to different texts and purposes, and using appropriate reference sources selectively. Has a broad active reading vocabulary, but may experience some difficulty with low frequency idioms. (Council of Europe, 69)

#### Writing (B1)

- Can write accounts of experiences, describing feelings and reactions in simple connected text. (Council of Europe, 62)

#### Listening (B1)

- Can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure etc., including short narratives. (Council of Europe, 66)

#### Speaking (B1)

- Can reasonably fluently sustain a straightforward description of one of a variety of subjects within his/her field of interest, presenting it as a linear sequence of points (Council of Europe, 58)
- Can give detailed accounts of experiences, describing feelings and reactions. (Council of Europe, 59)
- Can relate the plot of a book or film and describe his/her reactions. (Council of Europe, 59)
- Can summarise and give his or her opinion about a short story, article, talk, discussion, interview, or documentary and answer further questions of detail. (Council of Europe, 81)

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<sup>1</sup> Council of Europe. (2001). Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.

### Assignment 1

- a) Read the following two extracts and look up any unknown words. (**L**)<sup>2</sup>

#### Extract A

Excuse me, sir, but may I be of assistance? Ah, I see I have alarmed you. Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America. I noticed that you were looking for something; more than looking, in fact you seemed to be on a *mission*, and since I am both a native of this city and a speaker of your language, I thought I might offer you my services. How did I see you were American? No, not by the color of your skin; we have a range of complexions in this country, and yours occurs often among the people of our northwest frontier.

#### Extract B

All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really *did* threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I have changed all the names. I really *did* go back to Dresden with Guggenheim money (God love it) in 1967. It looked a lot like Dayton, Ohio, more open spaces than Dayton has. There must be tons of human bone meal in the ground.

- b) Where do you think extract A and B take place? Underline those parts of the text that led you to your answer. (**T**)
- c) Both narrators have put certain words in italics [schuingedrukt]. Why do you think they did this? (**T, R, L**)
- d) The way both narrators introduce their story to us is quite different if you look at the language they use, such as choice of words or the length of sentences. Based on the language these two narrators use, what kind of people do you think the narrators are? (**R, L**)
- e) Do you think we can trust both narrators? Explain your answer. (**T, R**)

### Assignment 2

- a) Read the following two extracts and look up any unknown words. (**L**)

#### Extract C

The newspaper did not say much. People all over the country must have glanced at the paragraph with its sensational heading and felt a little spurt of anger mingled with what was almost satisfaction, as if some belief had been confirmed, as if something had happened which could only have been expected. When natives steal, murder or rape, that is the feeling white people have. And then they turned the page to something else.

#### Extract D

Marais Van der Vyver shot one of his farm laborers, dead. An accident, there were accidents with guns every day of the week – children playing a fatal game with a father's revolver in the cities where guns are domestic objects, nowadays, hunting mishaps like this one, in the country – but these won't be reported all over the world. Van der Vyver knows his will be.

The two extracts are taken from the opening of two literary texts that are written by South African authors. Extract C was written in 1950 and is set in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Extract D was written in 1991 and is set in South Africa. In 1948 the National Party gained power in South Africa and the laws of Apartheid remained in effect for the better part of 50 years. (**C**)

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<sup>2</sup> **T** (text approach), **C** (context approach), **R** (reader approach), **L** (language approach)

- a) How do the openings of these texts inform you about the social situation? Underline those parts of the text that led you to your answer. (**T, C**)
- b) In every literary text, authors try to evoke [oproeppen] certain emotions and feelings in readers. In literature, mood is a literary element that is often referred to as the atmosphere of a literary text. How do you experience the mood of both extract C and D? (**T, R**)

### Assignment 3

- a) Below you will find the titles of the four extracts you have just read. Allocate the titles to the abstracts and explain how you came to your decision. (**T, R**)
  1. The Grass is Singing, Doris Lessing, 1950. {extract c}
  2. The Reluctant Fundamentalist, Mohsin Hamid, 2007. {extract a}
  3. The Moment before the Gun Went Off, Nadine Gordimer, 1991. {extract d}
  4. Slaughterhouse 5, Kurt Vonnegut, 1969. {extract b}
- b) Select one of the four extracts and continue writing the story. Try to copy the writing style of the extract (consider for example, sentence length and word choice). (**L**)
- c) Which of the four texts would you like to continue reading? Explain your choice. (**R**)

### Assignment 4

- a) Read the following extract and look up any unknown words. (**L**)

#### Extract E

Half a league, half a league,  
 Half a league onward,  
 All in the valley of Death  
 Rode the six hundred.  
 "Forward, the Light Brigade!  
 Charge for the guns!" he said.  
 Into the valley of Death  
 Rode the six hundred.

"Forward, the Light Brigade!"  
 Was there a man dismayed?  
 Not though the soldier knew  
 Someone had blundered.  
 Theirs not to make reply,  
 Theirs not to reason why,  
 Theirs but to do and die.  
 Into the valley of Death  
 Rode the six hundred.

These two stanzas are the opening of the poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' written by Alfred Lord Tennyson in 1854. In this poem, which was published only six weeks after the event, Tennyson describes a charge of the British cavalry against Russian forces in the Crimean War. (**C**)

- a) What story is Tennyson trying to tell us with this poem? (**T**)
- b) What is meant by “Theirs not to make reply. / Theirs not to reason why./ Theirs but o do and die”? (**T**)
- c) Both stanzas contain short lines and a lot of repetition. How does the way Tennyson wrote these two stanzas have an impact on your understanding of the story he is trying to tell? (**T, R, L**)
- d) Rewrite these two stanzas in ‘newspaper-style’. In other words, stick to the facts and make sure your sentences are grammatically correct. (**T, R, L**)
- e) Compare the original version with your own rewritten version. Which one do you prefer and why? (**R**)

### Assignment 5

- a) Read the following extract and look up any unknown words. (**L**)

#### Extract F

Beloved sweetheart bastard. Not a day since then  
I haven't wished him dead. Prayed for it  
so hard I've dark green pebbles for eyes,  
ropes on the back of my hands I could strangle with.

Spinster. I stink and remember. Whole days  
in bed cawing Noooooo at the wall; the dress  
yellowing, trembling if I open the wardrobe;  
the slewed mirror, full-length, her, myself, who did this

to me? Puce curses that are sounds not words.

These are the opening lines of the poem ‘Havisham’ written by Carol Ann Duffy. It tells the story of Miss Havisham, a character from the novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. In the novel Miss Havisham was left at the altar, never took off her wedding dress, and hates men as a result of having been left. In this poem Duffy gives Miss Havisham a voice and she tells the story in her own words. (**C**)

- b) Underline all the words in this poem that you think have a negative meaning. Use a different colour and underline all the words that have a positive meaning. (**L**)
- c) What is the effect of so many contrasting words in this poem with regard to your understanding of how Miss Havisham must feel? (**T, R, L**).
- d) How do you think the poem should end? Explain your answer. (**T, R**).

### Assignment 6

- a) Which of the six extracts do you find least interesting? Explain why? (**R**)
- b) Which of the six extracts do you find most interesting? Explain why? (**R**)

