

Commentary on candidate evidence

Candidate 9

The candidate evidence has achieved the following marks for this piece of the Portfolio writing.

The candidate was awarded **15 marks**.

Genre: Creative – prose fiction. Title: Split Infinities

The punning title of this piece helps to immediately establish a humorous, almost scholarly tone and a relatively dispassionate stance to this story of passion and belief. The stance and tone are reminiscent of Stevenson's tales – an appropriate and sophisticated reference to a story of Scottish Independence and character.

The opening paragraph establishes a clearly distinctive authorial voice: "Of course, they never meant to do it." The narrative voice knows the outcome and presents the reader with a knowing, sophisticated perspective from the outset. This stance is maintained throughout, from the reference to famous drinking establishments, to the re-hashing of political slogans which are integrated into the plotting of the story: "Of course, it's our oil."

The use of structure is notable, particularly the signposting of the stages of the narrative: "It began – as you knew it would – in a pub."; "The story might have ended here before it had begun..."; "And there the story might have ended except that...". The genre of the shaggy dog story is being exploited here – in the setting, the pacing and the use of repeated patterns – that allows the writer to pull off surprising and unpredictable twists in the tale. The development of the quarrel between Dougie and James is the focus for much of the narrative, with the turning point being signalled by the use of the political slogan: "But the thin crease of a frown was dividing James' brow. 'Of course it's our oil.'

The writer contrives the climax of their split with skilful shaping which contributes significantly to impact:

"No one knew who threw the first punch....No-one knew what ended the fight either. But it is notable that most can recall Douglas McGillicuddy's final words as he was ejected through a near-side window. 'If ye hate the Lowlands so much, why d'ye no bloody leave then?'
And there the story might have ended,... Why d'ye no leave then?"

The coda to the story, emphasising the repeated schisms in Scottish history, uses repetition in a humorously appropriate way:

"And that might have been an end to it, except...
'Of course, said David, 'It's our tweed."

The characterisation of the two central characters is appropriate for the genre and purpose of the narrative. The characters are appropriately stereotypical - Dougie of the chippy Lowlander, picking quarrels which his stature means he cannot win: "Dougie glanced at his watch. It was, after all, Friday. But, Woman's Guild night or no, there are times a man must show he is master in his own house. 'Aye, he said. 'Why not?'"
"Nothing worth offering!' Dougie was off his stool and on his feet. But finding himself addressing the larger man's breast pocket, he hastily retook his seat."

James is characterised as slower to anger, steeped in the history of the Highlands and "steady" in the face of Dougie's volatility: "James watched this performance without comment. But when Dougie once more challenged his assertion, he answered calmly... We have given you history. We have given you wars and passion and tragedy."

These characters are developed and sustained throughout the story, demonstrating sustained thoughtfulness and imagination throughout. The language given to each character is distinctive: "Not a decent endeavour for a human person anywhere to be found." The lilt of Gaelic and the sense of expression translated from one language to another is identifiable here - and not overdone. The closeness of their initial understanding and sympathies for an independent Scotland are humorously and economically presented. A skilful use of style, technique and language, and a high degree of originality characterises the writer's achievement in these characters.

The writer's use of setting goes beyond providing a background for this quarrel between friends and establishes a thematic exploration of the Scottish character. This is established in the second paragraph where the idea of oppositions and contradictions to expectations and stereotypes becomes central to the depiction of Scotland and the conflicts that are to be found in the country:
"Not a famous pub... Not even a hard pub... No, it was one of those perfectly ordinary establishments..."

This description is supported by metaphors which imply the combative nature of the Scottish psyche, which is the thematic focus of this humorous tale:
"...the kind found skulking, mean as a street fighter, in some dark corner of the city..."

The population is also characterised in contradictory terms: "... those who have forgotten where they left their dreams, and have entered in the hope of forgetting what it is they have lost."

The writer further develops the contradictions in the description of the pub:
"...that strange confusion of beaten copper and the decapitations of woodland animals that is reminiscent of Scottish baronial only in the minds of foreigners. But to Douglas Archibald McGillicuddy (known as wee Dougie to his friends and Mr McGillicuddy to all others), this was home."

Scotland is being presented as others see it, with the multiple identities and attitudes of McGillicuddy – a deliberately clichéd surname – acting as a marker of the fable about Scotland which the writer is creating.

The writer again deploys the clichés of Scottish inventiveness and culture to humorous effect, as the traditional assumptions and judgements bring about the disintegration of Dougie, James and David – and Scotland?

This is a thoroughly conceived and stylish piece of writing.

Content

Treatment of central thematic concerns / ideas/ feelings which reveal sustained thoughtfulness, insight and imagination throughout.

Structure

Skilful shaping and sequencing which contributes significantly to impact.

Tone / Mood

A tone and mood which are skilfully created and rigorously sustained, revealing a committed and clearly distinctive authorial voice.

Expression

A skilful use of style, technique and language and a high degree of originality.

This is a very sophisticated piece of writing and fully meets the criteria for the range 15–13 and is therefore awarded a mark of 15.