

Instruction

Answer one essay question only. You must base your answer on at least two of the Part 3 works you have studied and compare and contrast these works in response to the question. Answers which are not based on a discussion of at least two Part 3 works will not score high marks.

Question 1

Writers of fiction do not always relate events in the order in which they seem to occur in the worlds of their novels or short stories. Choosing two works by writers you have studied, show how variations of chronological order can be seen to serve the purposes of the stories.

The works used in the essay were chosen from the following.

- *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen
- *Disgrace* by JM Coetzee
- *Heart of darkness* by Joseph Conrad
- *Remembering Babylon* by David Malouf

Remembering Babylon by David Malouf and *Heart of darkness* by Joseph Conrad are two works that use variations of chronological order to create a variety of effects. Although almost a hundred years separates the writing of these two works, there are some similarities in the issues they deal with, and the historical setting of both works is roughly the same time, the mid to the end of the nineteenth century. In *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf explores ideas about identity and the clash of cultures: on the one hand the Australian aboriginal culture and on the other white settlers who have travelled from Britain to make their lives in Australia. The Belgium colony of the Congo is the setting for the story within the story in *Heart of darkness* as Marlowe tells a story of his reactions to the Belgium colonizers, whom he despises, and the indigenous people whom he sees as being victims of the colonizers, but who also represent some sort of absolute evil of which we may all be capable. Neither work follows a strict chronological order, but the ways in which this is done and the effect of using the technique, contrasts markedly.

Remembering Babylon is a short novel arranged in twenty chapters that span a period of around seventy years. The chronological shifts are linked to the chapters, allowing for the same incident to be shown from different points of view, and furthering our understanding of some of the significant characters. In the last chapter there is also a variation in the way time is handled when the story leaps fifty years into the future, tying up some loose ends in the plot for the reader and showing more clearly the significance of the central relationship between Gemmy, Lachlan and Janet. Also a short novel, *Heart of darkness* uses a different technique. On the whole, the story Marlow tells of his experience as captain of a steamer that travels up the Congo river to the inner station of an ivory trading company managed by a man called Kurtz, is related in the order in which the events occur. However, Conrad makes occasional breaks in the chronology of the story telling, during which Marlow interacts with his listeners. The effect of this is to add authenticity to Marlow's story and to highlight comparisons between the quiet, orderly setting in the Thames and the dramatic steamy events in the steam tropics of the Congo.

Perhaps the most significant reason for using variations in the chronology in *Remembering Babylon* is to gradually reveal Gemmy's background as he feels his way towards understanding his identity and allegiances. The plot of the novel is driven by a surprising incident, related in the present (which is 'one day in the middle of the nineteenth century'). Lachlan, a twelve year old boy, is leading his cousins Janet and Meg in a game of make believe when a figure, taken at first for an aborigine, leaps on to the railing of a fence and declares itself to be a 'British object.' The object is Gemmy, who was thrown off a ship when he was thirteen, washed ashore on the coast of Queensland and taken in by an aboriginal community. The subject matter could be dramatic and sensational, but Malouf treats it with understatement and it is only gradually that we learn more about Gemmy so that we can understand his decision to return to his aboriginal people and the land. Our understanding of the tensions between the white and aboriginal cultures is partially developed through Gemmy's unfolding memories of his English life and these are introduced to him, and us, as he forms relationships with various members of the settlement. One technique that Malouf uses to take the reader into increasingly complex issues of language and culture is to move back and forth in time, showing the same incident through different perspectives.

To illustrate this technique, I will use a central incident that occurs midway through the book and has far reaching effects on Gemmy, Lachlan and Janet. Through this incident Malouf directs our sympathies to the aborigines and prepares us for Gemmy's eventual return to them. One Thursday afternoon, when Gemmy was working outside, two members of his aboriginal family come silently to sit with him for a short time. The meeting is seen by Andy, an intolerant white settler, who is fearful of what lies outside the town's boundaries and of the unknown aborigines. It is from Andy's point of view that we first see the implications of the incident; he is excited about having his suspicions confirmed, and keen to be the centre of attention as he tells some of the other men what he saw, embellishing it to include the handing over of a rock to Gemmy and presenting it as a threatening encounter, the beginning of something dangerous. Successive chapters go back to around the time of the visit from the blacks, first showing us Jock's intuitive support for Gemmy that makes him more aware of the distance that is growing between him and other men in the community. We are then taken forward slightly to the small incidents that are noticed, and the disgusting shit smeared shed, threatening Gemmy. It is only in the next chapter that we are taken back again to the visit from the aborigines and we are shown the real interaction between them, which is presented as civilized and gentle, compared with the suspicious and brutal responses of some of the white community. It is this encounter that shows Gemmy who his only mother is – the land – and which brings back his energy, leading to his final departure from the settlement to join his black family.

The fifty years leap forward in the last chapter of *Remembering Babylon* is another variation in the chronology of narration. It is through Janet's thoughts of Lachlan that we learn third hand that Gemmy has been murdered by white men in what they refer to disturbingly as a 'dispersal'. In giving us the perspective from fifty years after the central incident, Malouf brings our focus on things we may have missed, for example the effect on Lachlan and his regret at keeping Gemmy at a distance once he realized he had to choose between his standing with the other boys and Gemmy. It also shows more of Janet, her frustrations of being an Australian born girl, without the authority of Lachlan, the boy, brought out to Australia as a nine year old and thus having had the 'real' experiences of the European world.

Although his technique and ideas are different from those of Malouf, Conrad also uses chronological variations in different ways. An example of the way in which the order of Marlow's narrative is interrupted is when the steamer is nearing Kurtz's station and is attacked by natives (an attack that we later discover has been ordered by Kurtz himself). In his first telling of the incident, Marlow describes briefly how the unnamed helmsman, an African, grabs a gun, opens the shutter and starts shooting, repelling a native who is trying to board the boat. As a result, the helmsman is killed and as he bleeds to death, his blood seeps into Marlow's shoes, whose revulsion to which is described at some length in the first telling of the incident. In this first account, Marlow also dwells on the idea of Kurtz, and how much he regrets that he won't (as he imagines) get the opportunity to meet this extraordinary man. However, Conrad takes us back to the telling of the same incident a little later, thus varying the chronological order. In this second account of the same incident of the attack, Marlow focuses more on his feeling towards the helmsman. This is a clever device that Conrad uses to show Marlow as capable of reflecting on his experience, and of seeing the helmsman as a person, with whom he might have "some distant sort of kinship".

Conrad also occasionally uses the technique of taking the reader into the future. An example in *Heart of darkness* is where Marlow is relating the increasingly threatening nature of the trip up the Congo in the steamer and is finally learning more about the mysterious Kurtz, who is constantly being mentioned, but about whom we know very little. As he tries to explain his feelings towards Kurtz, both attraction and revulsion, he speaks excitedly to the listeners, breaking off, finding himself unable to tell the story in a way that makes them understand the situation. When Marlow begins his story again, he is still struggling to explain his fascination with Kurtz's words (the horror, the horror) and he takes his listeners forward in time, mentioning Kurtz's Intended – the girl - without any context. At this point we also hear that Kurtz has died, although it's not until later that we learn the circumstances. The effect of using these chronological breaks in the narrative seems to highlight Marlow's struggle within himself to come to terms with the experience, and the difficulty he has in conveying his thoughts and feelings.

Another effect of the time shifts in *Heart of darkness* is to emphasise the difference between the calm atmosphere on the Nellie compared with the heat and confusion of the Congo. Conrad seems to be suggesting that it is only the influences of European culture - the houses, shops, work routines and so on - that saves man from falling into depravity. It is through the voice of Marlow that the idea is introduced and it is through the short interludes that bring us back to the listeners on the Nellie that he challenges them with the idea of what they would do if they didn't have the security of an established, orderly life, or if they had to cope with the extremes of the tropics.

Malouf and Conrad both vary the chronological order of their stories although their techniques, and the effect of these, are different. The *Heart of darkness* is an intense, compelling story, compared with *Remembering Babylon*, which seems more objective. Perhaps this is because Malouf has historical distance between the events that form the background to his story, whereas Conrad was living through the events, and it is commonly assumed that the story has some foundation in his own experiences in the Congo. However, the difference could also be partly because of the techniques used by the two writers, and the occasional variations in the order of events in the *Heart of darkness* seems particularly suited to the first person narrative style used by Conrad.