

Prose Study Assessment Guidance Materials: Candidate B

Evaluate the different ways fear is presented in McEwan's *Enduring Love* and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (extract)

Both novelists' first person narrators, McEwan's Joe and Hosseini's Amir, share an analogous desire to preserve themselves within their writing; yet it may be claimed that their fears are fully concentrated within the physical world in the sense that both protagonists are afraid of certain individuals. The fear of death, 'the taboo subject'¹, intertwines itself in both novels, and, to an extent, each one explores just how easy it can be to distort an image in order to create a monster of the mind, although perhaps what appears most remarkable to the reader is not what we fear but how we respond to that fear. The two texts explore the diverse reactions of both character and author yet both retain the same recurring theme – the '*primary importance of imagination to the functioning of the mind*'², or, in other words, the power of the mind to overcome adversity.

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...In a certain way it can be claimed that McEwan's and Hosseini's central characters both fear death, although perhaps Joe and Amir seem more concerned with the potential deaths of their loved ones rather than their own. Upon discovering Sohrab after his attempted suicide, Hosseini writes that Amir '*[screamed] until [he] thought [his] throat would rip out.*' Perhaps the shockingly violent metaphor mirrors the violence with which Sohrab self-harmed; the dynamic verb 'rip' can be easily seen to align the two deeds. The verb also retains animalistic connotations, perhaps again suggesting that our primitive instincts become more prominent when we face fear. A similar, animalistic reaction arises when McEwan's Joe '*might have crapped in [his] pants*' whilst in command of a weapon with the potential to kill – and perhaps, surprisingly, not when faced with the imminent possible murder of Clarissa. This may suggest that their relationship is not as profound as that of Amir and Sohrab, or perhaps simply that Joe fails to recognise at a subconscious level the precarious situation that Clarissa finds herself in. As Amir narrates the story from after the events have happened, it could be implied by Hosseini that Amir wishes to accentuate the desperation with which he reacts to Sohrab's

¹ <https://www.aviva.co.uk/media-centre/story/1236/dying-conversation-death-remains-a-taboo-subject-a/>

² Peter Childs: *Ian McEwan's Enduring Love* Routledge 2007

attempted suicide. If a similar evaluation were put to McEwan's novel, the reader might infer that, because he knows that the situation unfolds without further harm to Clarissa, Joe wishes to make his reaction appear less dramatic. McEwan claims that he likes his '*writing to have a visual quality*'³ and it has been critically claimed that there is '*something cinematic*'⁴ in his style of narrative. In using the coarse colloquialism '*crapp[ing] his pants*', McEwan seems to adopt an American register, as though Joe, at that pivotal moment, perhaps sees himself as an action hero. By
40 choosing these words, it is conceivable that McEwan wishes to alienate his protagonist from his readers, as Joe's reaction could appear immature and inappropriately overwritten. Alternatively, McEwan could be suggesting Joe's primitive way of expressing his fear of having the power to kill. Death evokes fear; be it Amir's fear of Sohrab's death or Joe's fear of killing, this profound phobia transcends location and culture.

Amelia Hill argued *The Kite Runner* '*charts Amir's attempts to escape culpability*'⁵ and it is possible to deduce from this that during the novel, Amir must face his greatest fear – his '*actual aspir[ation] to cowardice*'. The alliteration of the letter 'a' draws attention to the severity of Amir's emotions; in Afghanistan during the
50 1990s, '*all a man had ... was his honour*'. If seen to be a coward, Amir would have lost all respect and therefore we see just how difficult his decision was – and arguably just how powerfully his fear affected him. As one critic claimed, '*the significance of [the novel's] underlying message in the current geopolitical context cannot be ignored*'⁶. To run from a difficult situation, not from 'cowardice' as such perhaps but from deep fear, must have also been a decision many Afghans took during both the Soviet invasion and the initial massacre of the Hazara people – atrocities that '*continue to threaten them even today*.'⁷ It is conceivable that some – perhaps Amir or even Hosseini himself – still seek atonement from the deceased, which is not unlike Jean Logan in *Enduring Love*. Jean asks '*Who's going to forgive*
60 *me?*', '*angrily*' and '*with 'tears in her eyes*'. Her use of a rhetorical question may elevate the tension within the dialogue and it could be claimed that McEwan uses Jean's voice to question his readers about our own regrets, our own

³ <http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0398/mcewan/interview.html>

⁴ Geoff Dyer: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/sept/22/fiction.ianmcewan>

⁵ Amelia Hill: 'An Afghan hounded by his past' *The Guardian* September, 2003

⁶ Matthew Thomas Miller: www.commondreams.org/views/2008/01/05/kite-runner-critiqued-new-orientalism-goes-big-screen

⁷ Edward Hower: New York Times review 2003

prejudgements. Jean Logan seeks redemption from a man who can no longer forgive her.

Perhaps more poignant for both writers than the discovery of individual fears is the exploration of reaction, how we act in response to fear. Hosseini's *'gutless'* Amir waits *'for the steel hands to loosen their grip'*. His patient nature is undermined by the personification of fear, a technique that allows the reader to think of this powerful emotion in a way that correlates to humanity and is therefore easily identifiable. It is plausible that Amir confronts fear by retreating into himself in a similar way to McEwan's protagonist as Clarissa *'forced [Joe's] isolation'*, and the *'feeling'* was *'shrinking'* and *'isolated'*. The repetition of the idea that Joe's loneliness is not self-inflicted is laced throughout the novel and suggests that *'Joe's unease about the past is mingled with...his apprehension over Jed'*⁸ and perhaps also his deteriorating relationship with Clarissa. He blames her for the way in which he reacts to fear, which is of course ironic, in that his response is so internal that it can only plausibly be self-constructed. To the reader the word *'shrinking'* is vital; this dynamic verb emphasises the increasingly constrictive emotions that Joe creates for himself.

⁸ Peter Childs, *ibid*