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Semester: Autumn 2026

ALLAMA IQBAL OPEN UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD

Course: English Literature (1426) • Level: BA Renamed as Associate Degree

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Assignment No. 2

Total Marks: 100 • Pass Marks: 50

SOLVED ASSIGNMENT GUIDE

(For Study & Reference)

Note: This guide is prepared for study and reference purposes. Students are advised to read the relevant units of the course book, understand the concepts, and then write the assignment in their own words.

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Question 1: The Importance of Characterization in the Novel (20 Marks)

Discuss the importance of characterization in shaping the meaning and impact of a novel. How can an author reveal a character's personality and inner conflicts through actions, dialogue, relationships, and narrative techniques?

Introduction

Ask readers years later what they remember of a novel and they rarely begin with its plot summary. They begin with a person: Elizabeth Bennet's wit, Heathcliff's ferocity, Jane Eyre's quiet defiance, or Amir's shame in Khaled Hosseini's The Kite Runner. This common experience points to a critical truth. Characterization — the art by which a novelist creates credible persons and reveals their inner lives — is the chief means by which a novel acquires meaning and impact. Plot tells us what happens, but character tells us why it matters, because events acquire moral and emotional weight only when they happen to someone whose hopes, fears and conflicts we understand. A storm at sea is an incident; a storm faced by a character we know, whose courage or cowardice has been carefully prepared, becomes a revelation. This essay discusses why characterization is so important in shaping a novel's meaning, and

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examines the principal methods by which authors reveal personality and inner conflict: actions, dialogue, relationships and narrative techniques, together with description, naming and setting.

Why Characterization Shapes Meaning and Impact

Characterization matters first because novels argue through persons. A novelist who wishes to explore pride, ambition, colonialism or religious doubt rarely states a thesis; instead, the theme is embodied in a character who must live it. Macbeth's ambition in drama has its novelistic equivalents everywhere: in Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights, the destructive force of obsessive love is not discussed in the abstract but incarnated in Heathcliff, whose every act after Catherine's death tests the meaning of devotion turned to revenge. In Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol, the case against miserliness is made by transforming Ebenezer Scrooge before our eyes, so that the book's moral — that a human life is measured by generosity — is proved by a change in a man, not asserted by an essay. When characterization succeeds, theme and person become inseparable, and the reader remembers the idea because he has watched it cost somebody something.

Second, characterization creates emotional impact through identification and judgement. Readers follow novels by hoping and fearing for characters, approving of some, condemning others, and often — in the best fiction — doing both to the same person. E. M. Forster, in Aspects of the Novel, distinguished flat characters, built round a single idea, from round characters, who are capable of surprising us convincingly. Flat characters have their uses: Dickens's Mr Micawber, eternally expecting something to turn up, is unforgettable precisely because of his consistency. But it is round characters who sustain a long novel's impact, because their mixture of virtues and faults mirrors real human complexity and keeps the

reader's moral judgement awake. Amir in The Kite Runner is powerful because he is neither villain nor hero: a sensitive, intelligent boy who commits a cowardly betrayal and spends a lifetime atoning. Were he simply wicked, his story would not trouble us; because he is recognisably like ourselves, it does.

Third, characterization drives plot. In weak fiction, events are imposed on characters from outside; in strong fiction, events grow out of character, so that what happens feels both surprising and inevitable. Catherine Earnshaw's decision to marry Edgar Linton, taken for reasons of status that her own speeches expose as self-betrayal, generates two generations of suffering in Wuthering Heights. Elizabeth Bennet's prejudice and Darcy's pride generate the misunderstandings that constitute Pride and Prejudice; when the characters change, the plot can resolve, because its obstacles were inside the persons all along. Characterization and plot are therefore not rivals. Character is plot in its deepest sense: a sequence of choices made by particular people under pressure.

Revelation Through Actions

The oldest rule of fiction is that character is shown in action, especially in action under pressure, when habitual masks fall away. What a person does when frightened, tempted or offered power reveals more than any authorial description. Amir's character is defined less by his narration about himself than by two contrasted actions: his failure to intervene in the alley in 1975, and his return to Taliban-controlled Kabul decades later to rescue Sohrab, accepting a savage beating rather than abandoning another child. The second action does not erase the first, but it reveals growth that no statement of remorse could prove. Similarly, Jane Eyre's character is revealed when she refuses to become Rochester's mistress after the discovery of

his wife, although she loves him and has nowhere to go. The refusal costs her everything she wants, and precisely for that reason it establishes her integrity beyond argument. Even small actions work this way: Hassan's running of the last kite and his words "For you, a thousand times over" embody a loyalty that defines him in a sentence, while his slingshot raised against Assef shows that his loyalty is not weakness but courage disciplined by love.

Revelation Through Dialogue

Dialogue reveals character through what is said, how it is said, and what is conspicuously left unsaid. Speech has an individual fingerprint – vocabulary, rhythm, favourite phrases, degree of directness — so that a skilled novelist's characters can be identified with the names removed. In Pride and Prejudice, Elizabeth's quick, ironic replies reveal intelligence and independence in a society that expected female compliance, while Mr Collins's pompous, name-dropping speeches reveal servility and self-importance more completely than any description could. Dialogue also dramatises inner conflict when speech and situation pull in different directions. Catherine's famous declaration "I am Heathcliff", spoken to Nelly while she is preparing to marry Edgar, lays bare a self divided between social ambition and an identity fused with another person; the contradiction is her tragedy in miniature. In Hamlet-like confessional narration and in ordinary conversation alike, hesitation, evasion, jokes at painful moments and sudden silences are all data. The novelist who writes good dialogue trusts the reader to hear the person inside the words, including the things the person is trying not to say.

Revelation Through Relationships

No character exists alone, and novelists reveal personality by placing a person among others who draw out different sides of him. Foils — characters set in deliberate contrast — are the

classic device. In The Kite Runner, Hassan's courage and loyalty throw Amir's cowardice and envy into relief, while Baba's public strength contrasts with his private guilt. In Wuthering Heights, Edgar Linton's cultivated gentleness defines, by opposition, Heathcliff's wildness, and Catherine is revealed precisely by being torn between what each man represents. Relationships also reveal change over time, which is the novel form's special advantage over shorter forms. We watch Elizabeth and Darcy correct their first impressions through a series of meetings, letters and humiliations, so that the final relationship rests on knowledge rather than fantasy. A character's treatment of those weaker than himself is especially revealing: how a master treats a servant, a parent a child, or a victor a defeated enemy tells the reader where the moral centre of that person lies, a test that Baba, Amir and Assef each meet very differently.

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Method	How It Reveals Character	Example
Actions	Choices under pressure show true priorities	Jane Eyre refuses Rochester rather than compromise her principles
Dialogue	Vocabulary, tone and evasion expose mind and feeling	Mr Collins's pompous speech reveals servility in Pride and Prejudice
Relationships	Contrasts and conflicts draw out hidden sides	Hassan's loyalty exposes Amir's cowardice in The Kite Runner
Narrative technique	Viewpoint, interior monologue and free indirect style enter consciousness	Amir's retrospective first-person confession shapes our judgement of him

Revelation Through Narrative Techniques

Finally, novelists reveal character through the technical choices of narration itself. The choice of narrator is the first such decision. A first-person narrator such as Jane Eyre or Amir tells his own story, giving intimacy and immediacy but also inviting the reader to watch for self-deception,

since a narrator may excuse, omit or misread his own motives. An omniscient narrator, by contrast, can enter many minds and correct each character's view of the others, as George Eliot does in Middlemarch. Between these stand techniques such as interior monologue and free indirect discourse, in which third-person narration bends towards a character's own thoughts and idiom. Virginia Woolf and James Joyce developed stream of consciousness to show the mind's actual movement — memories, sensations and half-formed thoughts mingled together — so that inner conflict is not reported but enacted on the page.

Supporting techniques complete the portrait. Physical description and dress can signal inner states, as when Heathcliff's appearance darkens with his fortunes. Names themselves may carry meaning, and setting frequently functions as an extension of character: the stormy Heights belong to Heathcliff as the sheltered Grange belongs to the Lintons. Symbolism and repeated motifs — kites for Amir, windows and ghosts for Catherine — gather a character's history into images the reader learns to read. Even structure contributes: flashback, parallel episodes and delayed revelations, such as the late disclosure that Hassan was Baba's son, force readers to revise their understanding of a character, imitating the way our knowledge of real people deepens and changes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, characterization is the foundation on which a novel's meaning and impact rest, because themes become convincing only when embodied in persons, emotions engage only when we care about someone, and plots convince only when they grow out of character. Novelists reveal personality and inner conflict through actions that test a person under pressure, dialogue that lets us hear a mind at work, relationships that contrast, challenge and

change the individual, and narrative techniques — viewpoint, interior monologue, free indirect style, description, symbolism and structure — that admit us to consciousness itself. The great characters of fiction outlive their plots because they feel known from inside. To study characterization is therefore to study the novel's central art: the creation, out of words, of human beings we can believe in, judge, pity and remember.

Question 2: Appearance versus Reality in Hamlet (20 Marks)

Analyze the significance of appearance versus reality in Shakespeare's Hamlet. How do deception, secrecy and pretence influence the actions of Hamlet and the other major characters?

Introduction

"One may smile, and smile, and be a villain." Hamlet's bitter note to himself, made after the Ghost has revealed that his uncle Claudius murdered his father, states the central problem of Shakespeare's Hamlet (c. 1600–1601): in the court of Denmark, surfaces lie. The play opens in darkness, with a frightened watch challenging an unseen figure — "Who's there?" — and from that first line, nothing in Elsinore is securely what it seems. A king who appears a gracious ruler is a murderer; a prince who appears mad may be acting, and may also be genuinely unravelling; friends are spies, a beloved is a decoy, and a play, the most artificial thing in the world, becomes the instrument that exposes truth. Appearance versus reality is therefore not a decorative theme in Hamlet. It is the condition in which every character must act, and deception, secrecy and pretence shape the plot from the Ghost's first whisper to the pile of bodies in the final scene. This essay analyses the significance of the theme and traces how

pretence influences Hamlet, Claudius, Polonius, Gertrude, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

A Rotten State: Denmark's Fair Surface and Hidden Corruption

Shakespeare establishes the contrast first at the level of the state. Claudius presents his court as a model of continuity and measured grief: he has married his brother's widow "with mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage", balancing sorrow and celebration with statesmanlike reason. The public appearance is legitimacy, order and diplomatic success, capped by the handling of young Fortinbras of Norway. The reality, known to the audience from the Ghost, is that the throne rests on fratricide and an incestuous marriage, and Marcellus's judgement — "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" — proves prophetic. A kingdom built on a hidden crime must thereafter be governed by concealment, and Claudius's kingship becomes a performance that must never stop. Even the court's festivities carry the theme: Claudius celebrates with cannon and drinking while privately plotting, so that noise and ceremony function as camouflage. The gap between the Denmark that is displayed and the Denmark that exists is the space in which the tragedy develops.

Claudius: The Smiling Villain and the Limits of Pretence

Claudius is the play's master of appearance. His first speech is a masterpiece of public relations, in which balanced sentences arrange an unnatural situation into seeming propriety, and his avuncular kindness to Hamlet — "our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son" — is performed before the court precisely because it is not felt. His deception is systematic: he employs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to sound Hamlet's mind under the appearance of friendship, uses Ophelia as bait while he and Polonius spy, sends Hamlet to England with a sealed

commission for his execution disguised as a diplomatic mission, and finally arranges a friendly fencing match whose foils and cup are poisoned. Yet Shakespeare, characteristically, shows us the reality behind the performance. Alone in prayer in Act 3, Claudius confesses that his offence "is rank, it smells to heaven", admits he cannot truly repent while keeping the crown and queen he murdered for, and rises with the devastating summary: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below." Even his prayer is an appearance without a reality. The scene matters for the whole play: it proves the Ghost's story, it shows a conscience that pretence cannot silence, and it sets up the terrible irony that Hamlet, entering at that moment, spares him for fear of sending a praying man to heaven – misreading the appearance of prayer for the reality of repentance.

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Hamlet: The "Antic Disposition" and the Search for Truth

Hamlet's response to a false world is to adopt a falsehood of his own. After meeting the Ghost, he swears his companions to secrecy and warns them that he may "put an antic disposition on" — that is, feign madness. The pretence is strategic: it licenses him to speak dangerous truths as a madman's nonsense, to observe the court while appearing harmless, and to buy time while he tests the Ghost's tale, for Hamlet, unlike a simple revenger, is troubled by an epistemological problem. The Ghost may be "a devil" abusing him "to damn me"; its appearance may hide a damning reality. Hence the most famous consequence of the theme: Hamlet stages The Murder of Gonzago, the play within the play, declaring that "the play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." Fiction is used as an instrument of fact. When Claudius rises in disorder at the staged poisoning, appearance has at last yielded reality, and Hamlet has his proof.

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Yet Shakespeare refuses to keep Hamlet's madness neatly feigned. The pretence repeatedly blurs into genuine disturbance: his savage wit to Ophelia in the nunnery scene, his violent confrontation with Gertrude, his killing of the unseen Polonius behind the arras — an act performed on an appearance, since he believes, or hopes, the hidden listener is the King — and his bitter jesting over the corpse all suggest a mind damaged by the role it performs and by the secrecy it must keep. Hamlet himself insists on the distinction between seeming and being when he rebukes Gertrude: he does not merely "seem" to grieve, for he has "that within which passeth show". His black clothes, he argues, are only the "suits of woe", while Claudius's courtiers deal in show without substance. The irony is structural: the one character who despises pretence must live by it, and the effort contributes to his isolation, his cruelty to Ophelia, and the delay that critics have debated for centuries. Deception in this play is never free; it corrodes the deceiver.

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Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: The Court of Spies

Around the two principals, Shakespeare builds a whole society of pretence. Polonius, the lord chamberlain, is its comic and sinister embodiment. He sends his servant Reynaldo to Paris to spy on his own son Laertes by spreading false rumours — "by indirections find directions out" — a policy he applies everywhere. He preaches to Laertes, "to thine own self be true", while making a profession of falseness, reads Hamlet's love letter aloud to the King, hides behind the arras in the Queen's closet, and dies, fittingly, as an unseen presence mistaken for someone else: the spy destroyed by his own method. Ophelia is pretence's innocent victim. Obedient to her father, she returns Hamlet's letters and acts as decoy in a staged encounter while the men watch from hiding; her madness, when it comes, is real, and Shakespeare marks the difference

cruelly — in madness she distributes symbolic flowers and sings broken songs that tell the court's truths more plainly than its sanity ever did. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, finally, embody false friendship: summoned schoolfellows who protest affection while reporting to the King. Hamlet sees through them — "You would play upon me" like a recorder, he tells Guildenstern — and his rewriting of the commission that sends them to their deaths raises the play's hardest question about whether the detector of deception can use its methods without being stained by them.

Consequences: How Pretence Drives the Tragedy

The theme is significant, finally, because pretence is the plot's mechanism. Nearly every death in the play results from a gap between appearance and reality. Polonius dies because a voice behind a curtain is taken for the King. Ophelia drowns, mad, after being used as an instrument and losing both lover and father. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern die by a letter whose contents they never knew. Laertes returns demanding open vengeance and is persuaded into a treacherous plot whose dishonesty he himself momentarily regrets. The final scene is a pageant of false appearances — a friendly match, an unbated foil that is in fact poisoned, a celebratory cup that kills the Queen — in which every hidden reality surfaces at once and the court's accumulated deceptions annihilate it. Only Fortinbras, the outsider of straightforward action, survives to restore an order in which, perhaps, words and facts may again correspond. Shakespeare's point is political as well as psychological: a state that begins in a concealed crime must multiply concealments until concealment itself destroys it.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, appearance versus reality is the organising principle of Hamlet. Claudius rules by performance and is undone when performance — a play — exposes him; Hamlet, who hates show, is forced into an antic disposition that blurs into real disorder and delays and darkens his revenge; and a court of spies, decoys and false friends perishes by the very indirections it practised. Deception, secrecy and pretence are thus not incidental vices in the play but the medium in which every character acts and by which almost every character dies. The tragedy leaves its audience with Hamlet's own hard lesson: that where seeming is rewarded and being is dangerous, truth can survive only in disguises — in a madman's riddles, a madwoman's flowers, and a fiction staged to catch a king.

Question 3: Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange (20 Marks)

Examine the contrasting worlds represented by Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange in Emily Brontë's novel. How do these two settings contribute to the novel's exploration of love, social class, nature and conflict?

Introduction

Few novels are as completely identified with their settings as Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights (1847). The book takes its very title from one of its two great houses, and its story can be read as the history of the war, intermarriage and eventual reconciliation of the two worlds those houses represent. On a wind-scoured hilltop stands Wuthering Heights, home of the Earnshaws and of Heathcliff; in the sheltered valley below stands Thrushcross Grange, home of the Lintons. Between them lie the Yorkshire moors, crossed and recrossed by the characters in journeys that are also movements between ways of life: roughness and refinement, passion

and calm, nature and civilisation, master and servant. Brontë makes the contrast explicit in the novel's first chapters, where the narrator Lockwood, a conventional gentleman renting the Grange, visits the Heights and is bewildered by its savage weather, fierce dogs, rough manners and brooding master. This essay examines the two worlds in detail and shows how their opposition structures the novel's treatment of love, social class, nature and conflict, and how the second generation's story moves beyond opposition towards a hard-won union.

Wuthering Heights: Storm, Earth and Unrestrained Feeling

The Heights announces itself in its name: "wuthering", Lockwood is told, is a local word for the atmospheric tumult to which the house is exposed in stormy weather, and the building itself, with its narrow windows, grotesque carvings and stunted firs bent by the north wind, seems to have been shaped by resistance to the elements. Inside, the world of the Heights is elemental and unpolished. The Earnshaws are yeoman farmers, not gentry: meals are communal, manners direct, work physical, and emotions — affection, loyalty, rage, grief — are expressed without the softening filter of politeness. It is the world of Heathcliff and of the young Catherine, who runs wild on the moors, and of Joseph, whose harsh, narrow religion matches the harsh landscape. Violence is never far away: Hindley's tyranny, Heathcliff's brutality and the casual cruelty to animals all belong to a household where instinct rules and restraint is weakness. Yet Brontë does not present the Heights simply as barbarism. It is also the home of authenticity, endurance and a love so absolute that Catherine can say of Heathcliff, "I am Heathcliff", identifying another person with her own being. The Heights stands for the self in its natural, untamed state: powerful, truthful and dangerous.

Thrushcross Grange: Shelter, Refinement and Restraint

Thrushcross Grange is the Heights' exact counterpart. Set in a park in the valley, protected from the winds, it appears to the child Heathcliff and Catherine, peering through its windows, as a paradise of crimson carpets, crystal chandeliers, warmth and light — though the paradise contains, significantly, two spoiled children quarrelling over a lapdog and pulling it nearly in two. The Lintons are gentry: magistrates, cultivated, mannerly and conscious of rank. Edgar and Isabella Linton embody the Grange's virtues and its limits. Edgar is kind, gentle, faithful and civilised, capable of deep, patient love, but his world is one of books, drawing rooms and propriety, and its calm can look, from the Heights, like weakness and coldness. Catherine, convalescing at the Grange after being bitten by the Lintons' dog, returns home transformed into a lady, with fine clothes and careful manners, and from that visit the novel's central division opens inside her own person. The Grange therefore stands for civilisation and the social self: order, comfort, reputation and self-control, purchased at the price of vitality and emotional truth. As with the Heights, Brontë's judgement is double. The Grange civilises, but it also confines; its drawing room will become, for Catherine, a kind of beautiful prison.

Feature	Wuthering Heights	Thrushcross Grange
Position and weather	Hilltop, exposed to storms	Sheltered valley park
Family and class	Earnshaws: yeoman farmers, rough manners	Lintons: landed gentry, magistrates
Emotional style	Passionate, direct, violent, unrestrained	Calm, polite, restrained, bookish
Key figures	Heathcliff, Catherine, Hindley, Hareton	Edgar, Isabella, Linton Heathcliff, young Cathy
Symbolic meaning	Nature, instinct, the untamed self	Civilisation, society, the social self

Love Divided Between Two Worlds

The settings give the novel's love story its tragic geometry. Catherine loves Heathcliff with a love of identity — "whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same" — a love formed in childhood freedom on the moors and belonging wholly to the Heights. But she chooses to marry Edgar of the Grange, telling Nelly Dean that it would "degrade" her to marry Heathcliff, now degraded by Hindley's treatment, and imagining, fatally, that Edgar's wealth can be used to help Heathcliff rise. Her famous comparison distinguishes the two loves exactly as the houses differ: her love for Linton is "like the foliage in the woods: time will change it", while her love for Heathcliff "resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary". The tragedy is that she attempts to live in both worlds, and the attempt destroys her: married at the Grange, visited by Heathcliff, she tears herself apart between husband and soul-mate and dies longing for the moorland air at an open window. Heathcliff's love, denied the Grange's sanction, returns as revenge conducted, significantly, through the Grange's own instruments — property, marriage settlements and law — as he acquires both houses and degrades their heirs. Love in this novel is thus never merely private feeling; it is a choice between worlds, and a wrong choice poisons two generations.

Social Class: The Houses as a Class System

The contrast is also the novel's map of social class. The Grange represents inherited gentility, education and the law; the Heights represents the working landowner, one step above the servants; and below both stands Heathcliff, the foundling from Liverpool's streets, possibly of Romany or mixed origin, without name, money or family, whose treatment exposes the brutality of the hierarchy. Hindley reduces him to a servant and ends his education when the

boy threatens his own son's precedence; Catherine's refusal is explicitly a judgement about rank; Edgar's horror at his sister Isabella's marriage to Heathcliff is the horror of caste contamination. Heathcliff's revenge is therefore social as well as personal, and brilliantly ironic in method: the outsider masters the system that excluded him, using mortgages, gambling debts and forced marriage to seize both properties, reducing Hareton, the Heights' heir, to an illiterate servant in his own house, exactly as Heathcliff himself was reduced. Brontë's presentation is unsentimental in both directions. The Grange's refinement rests on exclusion, and the Heights' authenticity includes cruelty. Class, the novel shows, deforms every world it touches.

Nature, Conflict and the Second Generation

Nature presides over both houses and provides the novel's deepest symbolism. The moors belong to neither property; they are the free, dangerous, beautiful element in which Catherine and Heathcliff are most themselves, and to which Catherine's spirit is said to return, so that the neighbourhood reports the two ghosts walking together after Heathcliff's death. Storm and calm, the weather of the two houses, become a language for the soul: Catherine compares the worlds to stormy and settled weather, and Brontë's point is that a complete human life needs both. The novel's conflict is therefore not settled by the victory of one house. It is settled, in the second generation, by union. Young Cathy, a Linton of the Grange with her mother's spirit, and Hareton, the Heights' degraded heir, fall in love through an education she gives him, beginning with her mockery of his illiteracy and softening into respect and affection. Their marriage, planned as the novel ends, joins the houses, restores Hareton to his inheritance, and moves the

household, significantly, to live at the Grange — but a Grange now inhabited by a couple formed by both worlds. The ghosts, if they walk, walk the moors, where they always belonged.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange are far more than backgrounds. They are the novel's opposing principles made visible: storm and calm, nature and civilisation, passion and restraint, the farming Heights and the gentry's Grange. Through them Brontë explores a love divided between identity and ambition, a class system that corrupts oppressor and victim alike, a natural world that judges both houses, and a conflict so complete that it can be resolved only by a new generation that inherits and reconciles both. Lockwood, who begins the novel unable to read either house, leaves it having learned, as the reader has, that neither world alone is sufficient for a human life.

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Question 4: Prose as a Literary Form (20 Marks)

Discuss the major characteristics of prose as a literary form. How do elements such as narrative voice, characterization, plot, description and dialogue contribute to the effectiveness of prose fiction? Support your discussion with suitable examples.

Introduction

Prose is the ordinary language of written and spoken communication, arranged in sentences and paragraphs rather than in the lines and metres of verse, and it is the medium of the novel and the short story, the dominant literary forms of the last three centuries. Because prose looks like everyday language, its artistry is easy to overlook; readers notice a poem's form at once, while a novel's effects seem to arise naturally from its story. In reality, prose fiction is a highly artificial construction, and its effectiveness depends on a set of interlocking elements worked

out over centuries of experiment: a chosen narrative voice, characters who live on the page, a plot that turns events into meaning, description that builds a world the senses can inhabit, and dialogue that performs the drama of minds in contact. This essay first identifies the major characteristics of prose as a literary form, and then examines how narrative voice, characterization, plot, description and dialogue each contribute to the success of prose fiction, with examples from major writers in English.

Major Characteristics of Prose as a Literary Form

The first characteristic of prose is its apparent naturalness combined with complete freedom of scale and subject. Unbound by metre or rhyme, prose can pause for a page over a face, compress twenty years into a sentence, enter a character's thoughts, reproduce a street cry or discuss philosophy, economics and theology in passing. This flexibility explains the novel's rise: as Ian Watt argued in his study of the form, prose fiction developed a "formal realism" suited to a modern, individualist society, presenting particular people in particular places at particular times, with names, dates, occupations and incomes specified. Where epic and romance dealt in types and marvels, the prose novel of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding dealt in credible particulars, and that credibility remains prose fiction's foundation.

A second characteristic is prose's reliance on rhythm, selection and style rather than on metre. Good prose is not unshaped language; every serious novelist has a recognisable prose style. Jane Austen's balanced, ironic sentences enact the good sense she values; Charles Dickens's prose swells into catalogues, personifications and theatrical flourishes that match his crowded, energetic world; Virginia Woolf's sentences flow and dissolve as consciousness itself does. A third characteristic is prose's structural openness. Fiction is built from scenes and summaries,

chapters and parts, flashbacks and parallel strands, and unlike drama it is not confined to what can be shown on a stage in a few hours; the novelist commands all times and places and the inside of any mind. Finally, prose is a social form: it has historically been the literature of the middle classes and of private, silent reading, which is why it excels at domestic life, work, money, marriage and the slow change of individuals over time — the material epics and tragedies tended to leave out.

Narrative Voice: Who Tells, and Why It Matters

Every prose fiction answers, before anything else, the question of who is speaking. Narrative voice, or point of view, determines what the reader can know, whom the reader trusts, and how judgement is guided, and it is therefore the element on which all the others depend. A first-person narrator gives intimacy and a distinctive voice: Jane Eyre's "Reader, I married him" creates a direct contract between teller and reader, while Amir's retrospective confession in The Kite Runner makes the act of telling itself part of the moral story, since we judge the man partly by his honesty about the boy. First-person narration also creates unreliability as an artistic resource, most starkly in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart", where the narrator's insistence on his sanity convicts him. Third-person omniscient narration, by contrast, gives the flexibility of George Eliot in Middlemarch, who moves among minds and pauses to reflect on them all. The subtler modern instrument is free indirect discourse, developed by Austen and perfected by Woolf and James Joyce, in which narration borrows a character's own words and feelings without quotation marks, so that sympathy and irony operate at once. When narrative voice is wrongly chosen or carelessly handled, fiction feels flat; when it is right, the reader accepts the fictional world without resistance, which is the precondition of every other effect.

Characterization and Plot: Persons in Action

Characterization and plot, though often listed separately, work in prose fiction as a pair: plot is character tested by circumstance, and character is revealed by plot. E. M. Forster defined plot as a narrative of events with the emphasis on causality — not "the king died and then the queen died", which is mere story, but "the king died, and then the queen died of grief". Effective plots therefore grow from the desires and flaws of credible persons. In Pride and Prejudice, the plot's misunderstandings are generated by Elizabeth's prejudice and Darcy's pride, so the resolution, which is their correction, is simultaneously a plot ending and a moral education. In Wuthering Heights, Emily Brontë doubles the structure across two generations, so that plot itself becomes an argument about whether the past must repeat. Prose fiction's length is its advantage here: unlike a play, a novel can show character forming slowly, through education, work, disappointment and habit, making change believable. Flat characters serve plot as instruments and comic fixtures, but round characters — complex, developing, capable of surprising us convincingly — give fiction its characteristic impact, because the reader's interest shifts from what will happen to what a known person will do, and what it will cost him.

Description: Building a World the Reader Can Inhabit

Description in prose fiction is frequently mistaken for decoration, passages to be skimmed on the way to the action. In the hands of a serious novelist it performs at least four kinds of work. It establishes credibility, anchoring imagined events in a world of weather, rooms, clothes and tools that obeys familiar laws; the opening description of the storm-lashed house in Wuthering Heights convinces us of everything that follows inside it. It creates atmosphere and mood, as Dickens's fog at the opening of Bleak House — fog in the streets, in the courts, in the eyes of

the Lord Chancellor — makes a whole society's moral and legal confusion visible before a single character speaks. It works symbolically, so that the Grange and the Heights, or the kites over Kabul, carry meanings beyond themselves. And it controls pace, slowing the narrative over moments that matter and teaching the reader where significance lies. The modern masters refined description into psychology: Woolf's rendering of a London street or a lighthouse seen across a bay is less about the object than about the consciousness perceiving it. Description fails when it is inert inventory; it succeeds when every detail is selected, as Chekhov advised, so that nothing in the described world is wasted.

Dialogue: Drama Within the Novel

Dialogue is prose fiction's inheritance from drama, and it is the element that most directly performs character and conflict. Well-written dialogue does several jobs at once: it advances the plot, reveals the speakers' education, class, temperament and honesty, creates conflict or intimacy, and provides relief and rhythm after passages of narration. Austen is the supreme example in English. Her novels are built from conversation, and her dialogue carries the moral action: Elizabeth Bennet's fencing with Darcy reveals two intelligences testing each other towards respect, while Mr Collins's speeches convict him of servility without the narrator needing to say so. Dialogue also includes what is not said — interruptions, evasions, changes of subject, significant silences — and the spaces between speech and thought, where a character says one thing and thinks another, are among fiction's most truthful territories. In Dickens, dialogue becomes performance, each character announced by a verbal signature; in Hemingway, famously, laconic exchanges carry submerged emotion, the greater part of the

meaning lying, like an iceberg, below the surface. Ineffective dialogue merely exchanges information; effective dialogue is action conducted in words.

Element	Chief Contribution	Example
Narrative voice	Controls knowledge, trust and judgement	Amir's confession in The Kite Runner; Eliot's omniscience in Middlemarch
Characterization	Embodied theme; reader's emotional investment	Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy in Pride and Prejudice
Plot	Causality turns events into meaning	Two-generation structure of Wuthering Heights
Description	Credibility, atmosphere, symbolism, pace	Fog in Bleak House; the two houses in Wuthering Heights
Dialogue	Character and conflict performed in speech	Austen's conversations; Hemingway's understated exchanges

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Conclusion

To conclude, prose is a literary form distinguished by its flexible scale, its shaped but unmetred language, its structural openness and its special fitness for the particular, the domestic and the inward. Its effectiveness in fiction arises from the cooperation of its elements: narrative voice decides how the story reaches us and how far we trust it; characterization gives events a human centre; plot binds incidents into causality and meaning; description builds the credible, atmospheric and symbolic world; and dialogue lets that world speak and clash in its own voices. Remove any one element and the form limps — story without character is anecdote, character without voice is case history, world without dialogue is a museum. The great prose writers, from Austen and Dickens to Woolf, Hosseini and beyond, are those in whom all five work at once, so completely that the reader forgets the artistry and remembers only the life.

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Question 5: First-Person Narration and Psychological Tension in "The Tell-Tale Heart" (20 Marks)

Critically examine the use of first-person narration and psychological tension in Edgar Allan Poe's The Tell-Tale Heart. How does the narrator's account shape the reader's understanding of his guilt, fear, and increasingly unstable state of mind?

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart", first published in 1843, is a short story with almost no external machinery: an unnamed man murders an old man, hides the dismembered body beneath the floorboards, and, while police officers chat pleasantly in the very room, is driven by a sound only he can hear to confess the crime aloud. Nearly everything that makes the tale a masterpiece of horror lies not in these events but in the way they are told. Poe places the entire story inside the murderer's mind through first-person narration, so that the reader receives the crime only as the criminal experienced and justifies it. The result is a sustained exercise in psychological tension: the tension between the narrator's protested sanity and his evident madness, between his pride in his cunning and his mounting terror, and between what he tells us and what his telling reveals against his will. This essay examines how Poe uses the first-person voice — its claims, denials, rhythms and breakdowns — and how he builds and releases psychological tension, shaping the reader's understanding of the narrator's guilt, fear and disintegrating mind.

First-Person Narration: A Confession That Thinks It Is a Defence

The story opens in mid-argument: "True! — nervous — very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?" Before we know anything, we know the situation

of the telling. The narrator is defending himself against an accusation of madness, addressed to an unnamed "you" who may be a judge, a doctor, a fellow patient or the reader. This framing is Poe's masterstroke. Everything that follows is evidence offered in a defence, and everything, read attentively, convicts the witness. The narrator's proof of sanity is his method: he asks us to observe "how healthily — how calmly I can tell you the whole story", and boasts of the wisdom, foresight and dissimulation with which he planned the murder. But the content of the calm account is deranged. His motive is the old man's eye — "One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture — a pale blue eye, with a film over it" — and he insists, with a logician's pride, that since he loved the old man and desired neither his gold nor revenge, the eye alone "made up his mind" rationally. First-person narration forces the reader to inhabit this logic from inside, and the experience is more disturbing than any external description of madness could be, because we feel how madness reasons: fluently, confidently and entirely within its own premises.

The narration is also retrospective and unreliable in ways Poe carefully controls. The narrator claims total recall and total candour, yet his account keeps slipping: he cannot say how the idea "first entered my brain"; he confuses times; he hears sounds "all over hell"; and his climactic certainty that the police "heard! — they suspected! — they knew!" is unsupported by anything in the scene except his own panic. As unreliable narrator, he becomes a puzzle the reader must solve by reading against the grain — believing his facts, usually, while rejecting his interpretations. This double reading is precisely how the tale shapes our understanding of his mind: Poe never tells us the man is mad in the author's voice, because there is no author's

voice. The diagnosis is performed by the reader, from evidence the patient himself supplies, which makes the conclusion feel discovered rather than imposed.

Building Tension: The Seven Nights and the Eighth

Poe builds psychological tension through ritual, delay and repetition. For seven nights the narrator opens the old man's door at midnight, inch by inch, taking an hour to insert his head, and projects a single thin ray from his lantern onto the vulture eye — which is always closed, so the work cannot be done. The maddening slowness is rendered in the prose itself, in long sentences of careful procedure, and it serves two purposes. It exhibits the narrator's vaunted cunning, and it winds the reader's nerves to the same pitch as the narrator's own, so that form imitates feeling. On the eighth night the pattern breaks: the old man stirs, sits up, listens in the darkness, and the narrator hears "a low, dull, quick sound" which he identifies as the beating of the old man's terrified heart. His response reveals the tale's psychological mechanism. He claims the sound increases his fury and his terror at once; he worries it will wake a neighbour; and in that fusion of fear, excitement and identification — he has listened to the same dread himself, night after night — the murder finally happens, swiftly and almost impersonally, the old man dragged to the floor and smothered under the heavy bed.

Poe's prose rhythm is essential to the tension throughout. Short exclamatory fragments, dashes, italics, repetitions and direct appeals to the reader — "has it ever occurred to you", "do you mark me well" — give the narration a breathless, interrupted quality, the sound of a mind racing and stumbling. As the tale proceeds, the sentences fracture further, mirroring the narrator's deterioration in measurable form. Sound becomes the dominant sense: the groan of terror, the heartbeat, the ticking he compares to a watch enveloped in cotton, and finally the

ringing in his ears during the police visit. Poe understood that hearing is the sense least under voluntary control, and he makes his narrator a man destroyed by sounds — real, imagined and symbolic — that he cannot shut out.

The Heartbeat: Guilt Made Audible

The beating heart is the story's central symbol, and first-person narration determines its meaning. Objectively, no heart beats: the old man is dead and dismembered beneath the floor. Subjectively, for the narrator, the sound is overwhelming, and Poe arranges the final scene so that the reader understands what the narrator cannot: the heart he hears is his own conscience, guilt converted into hallucination. The scene's construction is an essay in dramatic irony. The police, satisfied by the narrator's performance — he has shown them the house, seated his chair directly above the corpse in bravado — chat pleasantly. The narrator at first triumphs, then pales, wishes them gone, hears the ringing grow louder, talks more fluently, then more vehemently, gesticulating, raving, until the unbearable sound forces the confession that ends the tale: "Villains! dissemble no more! I admit the deed! — tear up the planks! here, here! — It is the beating of his hideous heart!" His interpretation is that the officers are mocking him with feigned ignorance; ours is that a guilty mind, denied every other outlet, has manufactured an accuser out of its own pulse. Guilt in Poe is not described as a feeling but enacted as a perception, and only first-person narration could achieve this, because the hallucination exists solely inside the account we are reading.

Fear, Pride and the Unstable Mind

The narrator's account also lets Poe trace, with clinical precision, the interlocking of fear and pride in an unstable mind. His fear long predates the murder: he is "dreadfully nervous",

haunted by the eye, terrified on the eighth night that a neighbour will hear, and afterwards terrified of discovery despite having removed, as he boasts, every trace — no stain, no blood, the tub has caught all. His pride is the other pole of the same disorder. He congratulates himself on his caution, his sagacity, his perfect dissimulation in greeting the police, and his performance above the corpse is pure theatrical vanity: he must not merely escape but be admired for escaping. Poe shows these two emotions feeding each other until they destroy him. It is pride that seats him over the body and keeps him talking; it is fear that converts talk into raving; and it is guilt, wearing the mask of both, that speaks at last. Critics have variously read the tale as a study of paranoia, of the divided self — the narrator and the old man, who shares his terrors and his night-vigils, are doubles and the murdered eye has been read as the murderer's own "I" turned against itself — or of conscience in a mind without moral language for it. The first-person form sustains all these readings because Poe gives us symptoms, not explanations, and symptoms admit interpretation exactly as a patient's words do.

Conclusion

In conclusion, "The Tell-Tale Heart" derives its power from the union of first-person narration and psychological tension. By confining us within the murderer's voice, Poe turns a simple crime into an experience of madness from the inside: we hear the defence that convicts, follow the reasoning that is fluent and deranged at once, and watch the sentences themselves fracture as the mind does. Tension is built through ritual delay, sensory obsession and rhythmic acceleration, and released in a confession produced not by detection but by guilt made audible as a dead man's heart. The narrator's account shapes our understanding at every point precisely because it is unreliable: his protestations establish his insanity, his calm establishes his

disorder, and his final accusation against the police establishes, for the reader, the one fact he never grasps — that the hideous heart he hears is his own.

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