

Advanced Paper 2 Section II

Module B: Critical Study of Texts

Winton's *Cloudstreet* continues to engage readers through its narrative treatment of hardship and optimism.'

In the light of your critical study, does this statement resonate with your own interpretation of *Cloudstreet*?

In your response, make detailed reference to the novel.

Understanding the question

Key words/phrases:

Engage readers – a personal response is required by you as a reader, indicated in both the opening stimulus statement and the detailed question that follows.

Narrative treatment – you will need to focus on the way the novel is written and organised (techniques)

Hardship and optimism – your thesis must be about the creation of these two concepts in the text.

Prescribed text: Cloudstreet, Tim Winton, 1991

The opening paragraph connects the book with the key words in the question: *engage readers*, *hardship*, and *optimism*

Conventions of the genre of the *family saga* (an aspect of *narrative treatment*) are connected to the reader's engagement

Characters (an aspect of *narrative treatment*) are introduced as typical of the genre and connected with *hardship*

National surveys conducted over the last few years have repeatedly shown that Cloudstreet is Australia's favourite Australian novel, and one of our favourite books overall. Winton has engaged his readership so successfully by using the techniques of prose fiction to create a compelling story of hardship that finishes with a sense of optimism and hope for the future. The context of the novel also plays an important role in engagement. Cloudstreet was first published in 1991, following a decade of national discussion and acknowledgement in the 1980s of issues of Australian identity and Aboriginal reconciliation. As such, it deals with ideas that are at the core of what it might mean to be 'Australian'.

Cloudstreet is a family saga, a genre that charts the fortunes and misfortunes of a family through several generations. Readers become engaged in sagas through the series of crises that befall characters, encountering difficulties and hardships that they either manage to rise above, as Oriel and Lester do, or tend to give in to, as Sam and Dolly do. All the characters in the novel experience hardship and loss, but have different ways of dealing with their problems. Winton has created characters who are essentially one-dimensional (Oriel is hard-working and unemotional, Dolly is irresponsible and over-emotional, Sam is feckless and superstitious, and so on), and it is this caricatured quality about them that helps us to feel sympathy for them. We recognise their strengths and weaknesses because these are so clearly highlighted by Winton. However, because these people are essentially likeable, we want them to overcome their failings and be successful, both personally and materially.

We also want them refers directly to the reader's engagement

Elements of plot (*narrative treatment*) engage the reader

Optimism is discussed

Final outcomes (an aspect of *narrative treatment*) are explained as they illustrate *optimism*

The way language (an aspect of *narrative treatment*) is used to *engage the reader* is now discussed with specific examples

Note how the quotations become part of the sentence

Humour (an aspect of *narrative treatment*) and the reader

We also want them to successfully deal with the hardships that they encounter in their lives. We are shown early in the novel that both families have suffered serious losses: the Lambs have lost the lively and vital part of Fish, who could “endear teachers to him by giving them lip” before the accident, but is now very limited and dependent, and Sam Pickles has lost his hand and his livelihood. The ways both families deal with their losses shows us the very great difference between them and why they spend so much of their lives in their own separate parts of the divided house. The Lambs, and especially Oriel, cope by committing themselves to hard work, with very little time for enjoyment in their lives, while the Pickleses attribute everything to chance, the “shifty shadow”, live entirely in the moment and drift from one problem to another. The novel takes the reader through the ups and downs of the two families, to finally reach a point of hope and optimism, where all characters seem more personally complete, able to accept themselves and others more readily, and able to better cope with the external hardships of life. In the union of Rose and Quick we see that the strengths of each family “complete” the other and that their children will combine the best of both parents. Even Fish is made whole again at the end, his two separated selves “healed” in the water, creating a sense of rightness from what would normally be considered a tragedy.

The language of the novel engages the reader. Winton is a master of imagery, creating vivid mental pictures in very few words. He describes a country town as having “a rarefied air of boredom, almost a tangible purity of boredom that blows in through the windows”. “Rarefied” and “purity” suggest that the town has refined the art of being boring and attained the highest standards of boredom, while “tangible” and “blows” suggest that boredom has a solid, physical presence in the town. Even the repetition of “boredom” adds to the sense of tedium. In the burning man incident, Fish’s distress is succinctly conveyed through “Fish mouth all black with hurt”, a phrase that eloquently portrays his protracted howl of anguish, even though no sounds are mentioned. We are engaged by these types of descriptions because we know these emotions ourselves and can relate to the feelings of the characters. The intensity of the images helps us to understand Winton and his characters.

Winton also uses humour to engage us, often in scenes that are distressing and confronting, such as Fish’s resuscitation. Oriel’s frantic attempts to revive Fish appear to Lon as though his brother is being punished for his cheekiness and Lon laughs delightedly when Fish coughs up water all over his mother. There is also humour in the determinedly Australian vernacular of the novel, with its understated irony. This black, ironic humour reminds us that even in the face of hardship, there is a lighter side to be found and it is an Australian trait to find humour in adversity.

The book is placed into a historical and national context which is related to the audience

Other people's views are used to support the thesis

The conclusion summarises the topics of the preceding paragraphs each on an aspect of narrative treatment

The uniquely Australian context and 'feel' are important ways of engaging the reader. International readers often comment that they do not understand the language of the characters or the landscape, but the novel has a different effect on many Australians. Speaking on 'The First Other Tuesday Book Club' on ABC TV, 2 March 2010, Marieke Hardy commented that, "It is Australian ... But reading it felt like coming home. It feels like looking through the plane window when you're flying back into the country." Cloudstreet was published just a few years after the bicentenary of white settlement in Australia and looks at issues that are still relevant, such as Aboriginal reconciliation and Australian identity. The growth of characters in the novel parallels the growth of Australia, the post-war struggles leading to a broader outlook, greater prosperity, a stronger sense of identity and optimism for the Lambs, the Pickleses and the nation. The setting is also quintessentially Australian, in an almost mythical sense, pitting Aussie battlers against the landscape, fate and themselves. Australian readers recognise this stereotypical character who battles hardship and refuses to give in and admit defeat.

The genre, style, characters, language, setting and plot of Cloudstreet all engage readers in their own particular ways. The struggle to cope with hardship and perhaps to achieve something better is at the core of the action of the novel and embedded in the notion of saga. The movement from crisis to crisis engages the reader through suspense. The gradual growth of characters towards acceptance and optimism also engages us, as we sympathise with the characters and want them to succeed and be happy. This finally seems achievable when the ghosts of the past (the Aboriginal man, the girl and the old woman) are exorcised by love and a better future beckons for the united families, suggesting the possibilities of reconciliation on a wider scale.