HSC Standard English
Module B: Close Study of Text

Sample response: Prose fiction

2015 HSC examination question:

3(b) Mark Haddon, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time

How does Mark Haddon’s The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time portray interesting ideas about difference?

In your response, make detailed reference to your prescribed text.

Prescribed text: The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time, Mark Haddon (novel)
Response by: Anita Dawes

Mark Haddon’s novel, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time, is an autobiographical murder mystery narrated from the perspective of an autistic teenager, Christopher Boone. Throughout the text, Haddon cleverly positions the audience to experience life through the perspective of one who cannot hope to grasp the subtle nuances of human interactions and societal norms. Christopher’s autism spectrum disorder (ASD) shapes not only what we the audience are able to experience, but also subverts the structural features of the text itself, thereby openly flouting the rules of conventional storytelling. In doing so, Haddon is able to explore everyday settings and events through the perspective of a highly unconventional narrator, thus allowing him to portray interesting ideas about the differences that exist both within the nuanced world he has created and contemporary society as a whole.

The structure and genre of The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time are subverted almost immediately, allowing Haddon to portray some highly interesting details about difference through the narrative organisation. In the opening chapter, it appears as though the text will follow the genre of a typical ‘whodunnit’ murder mystery by opening at the scene of the murder with short, sharp sentences designed to create tension – ‘It was 7 minutes after midnight.’ However, once it is made clear that the murder victim is a dog and the narrator relies on deadpan narrative and emoticons to communicate his story, the audience realises that this text will be anything but conventional. Throughout his murder investigation, narrator Christopher Boone applies all of the structural features of a detective novel to convey his story. He frequently uses jargon associated with the genre, such as ‘red herrings’, ‘prime suspect’ to refer to Mr. Shears, and makes frequent intertextual references to famous crime fiction novels such as The Hound of the Baskervilles. However, unlike other crime fiction novels, the climactic solution occurs in the middle of the text in which Ed Boone emotionally confesses to both the murder of the dog and to concealing Christopher’s mother’s whereabouts from him for three years. With the murder of the
dog solved, Christopher’s focus now shifts from his investigation to finding independence away from his father, with whom he no longer feels safe: ‘I had to get out of the house. Father had murdered Wellington. That meant he could murder me.’ From this point onwards the genre of the text changes from murder mystery to Bildungsroman as Christopher exercises his independence for the first time. In leaving the familiar world of Swindon, Christopher has to overcome the limitations of his ASD to independently navigate his way to London, thus shifting the focus of the text to Christopher's coming-of-age. By changing the genre half way through the text, Haddon successfully adopts a different way of storytelling that is both engaging to the reader and more readily represents real life, which is non-linear and subject to change.

By choosing an unconventional narrator for his text, Haddon provides his audience with a refreshing insight into the different ways people communicate with one another. Christopher’s alternative methods of communication are a direct result of his ASD and are addressed at the beginning of the novel with the introduction of emoticons. Christopher states that while he could identify happiness and sadness, he was ‘unable to say what these (other emoticons) meant’. This highlights Christopher’s inability to grasp the nuances of social communication, which forms the basis of many unintentionally comedic events within the novel. For instance, to communicate love without causing sensory overload Christopher and his father spread their fingers out in a fan and let their ‘fingers and thumbs touch each other’. This emotional exchange is initially heart-warming, but later in the text Christopher threatens a stranger with a knife and the man backs away with his fingers spread out like ‘he wanted to say he loved me’. Christopher’s inability to comprehend body language allows the audience to appreciate the assumptions embedded in social norms and encourage us to consider this aspect of life from an entirely different perspective. This is further conveyed as the text is physically shaped by Christopher’s methods of communication. When Christopher wants to emphasise a point or concept, he uses capitalisation to emphasise ideas such as ‘Behaviour Problems’ or ‘Super Good Day’. The use of capitalisation later changes into garbled graphics physically representing Christopher’s experience of sensory overload caused by the signs in London. This text also contains other digressions such as diagrams of constellations to communicate Christopher’s unique thought patterns to the audience. In doing so, Haddon positions the viewer to consider the world from the perspective of someone with ASD and develop empathy for those who think differently.

One aspect of the text that diverges most starkly from the norm is Haddon’s realistic portrayal of the contemporary family unit. Christopher’s primary caregiver is his father, Ed Boone, who is characterised as a dedicated father with a dark temper. Initially, Christopher relies heavily on his father as the embodiment of morality: ‘Loving someone is … telling them the truth, and Father […] always tells me the truth’, thus making Christopher feel safe. However, Ed’s temper proves to be the undoing of his relationship with Christopher, as he
ways of discussing the text by looking at relationships as different

reveals that it caused him to murder the neighbour’s dog and also to lie to Christopher about his mother’s whereabouts. When Ed confesses his crimes to Christopher, he refers to his temper metaphorically as ‘when that red mist comes down …’. Ed’s fierce yet flawed portrayal distinguishes him from the father figures typically found in such novels, yet he is a vastly more empathetic and believable character for it. The difference in Haddon’s portrayal of Ed Boone allows him to represent interesting ideas about the family unit, moving away from the nuclear family archetype to something grittier and more realistic.

In addition to the realistic portrayal of the single-parent family unit, Haddon also uses the character of Judy Boone, Christopher’s mother, to portray interesting ideas about the differences experienced by parents of children with disabilities. Judy’s narrative voice is the only other voice present in this text apart from Christopher’s, and it is through her that we experience a different perspective. Through an epistolary interlude, Judy speaks directly to the audience of the trials she faced raising Christopher: ‘Maybe if things had been different, maybe if you’d been different, I might have been better at [parenting]’. The spelling mistakes and simple language hint not only at Judy’s working-class background, but also portray her simple yet powerful emotional conflict; she loves her son but cannot cope with his disorder. She then goes on to describe instances where she was unable to deal with Christopher’s ASD as well as his father, which ‘broke my heart, but eventually I decided it would be better for us all if I left’. By justifying leaving her disabled son and therefore her marriage in these terms, the audience is confronted with the harsh realities faced by families in these situations. We are also confronted with a highly atypical mother figure – one who loves her son but ultimately feels inadequate as a caregiver and leaves him in order to pursue a relationship with another man.

For a text to truly engage its audience, it needs to offer us a different perspective of life as we know it. Haddon’s ability to explore everyday settings and events through the perspective of a highly unconventional narrator allows him to portray interesting ideas about the differences that exist both within the nuanced world he has created and contemporary society as a whole.