
UNIT 4 DESCRIPTIVE PROSE—3

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Passage from Alan Moorehead's *The Blue Nile*
 - 4.2.1 Text
 - 4.2.2 Glossary
 - 4.2.3 Discussion
- 4.3 Passage from *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens.
 - 4.3.1 Text
 - 4.3.2 Glossary
 - 4.3.3 Discussion
- 4.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.5 Answers to Exercises

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you will examine two more passages of descriptive writing in some detail. After reading this unit carefully and completing the exercises, you will be able to:

- distinguish between historical and fictional descriptive writing;
- recognize the literary characteristics and stylistic features of a prose piece;
- explain the role of style in presenting the content effectively.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Descriptive writing as we have seen, is one of the varieties of prose. We have also seen that even within descriptive writing we can find writings of different kinds. In the earlier two units, you have seen the way that historians, travellers and anthropologists use prose for descriptive writing. While the content is important, it is style and presentation which separates literary prose from the non-literary and functional variety. It is for this reason that it is important to look at the literary aspect a little more closely by analysing the stylistic features.

In this unit, you will read two passages of descriptive writing. The first passage is a description of Cairo, one of the oldest living cities in the world as seen in the closing years of the eighteenth century. This extract is from Alan Moorehead's book *The Blue Nile*.

The second passage is from the novel *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens. There are marked contrasts in the two passages. The first is a specimen of historical prose and the second a piece of fiction. The first is of a formal variety. The powerful and stately style matches the grandeur of the theme and elevates it to the status of literature. The second passage, though fictional in nature, captures the authentic atmosphere of the period.

4.2 PASSAGE FROM ALAN MOOREHEAD'S *THE BLUE NILE*

Now read the passage two or three times, slowly and carefully, marking the words that are difficult or unfamiliar. Some of the words and phrases are picked out and listed for your special attention; they are mainly the key words and phrases that are essential to the understanding and interpretation of the passage. There are bound to be more that you might want to look up in a good dictionary or reference book. The

passage has many colourful and evocative expressions that you will find challenging and worth paying special attention to.

When you have become sufficiently familiar with the passage, explain to yourself the meanings and suggestions of the words and phrases you find difficult. You will find the glossary at the end of the passage helpful.

4.2.1 Text

THE FRENCH IN EGYPT

Cairo, on the other hand, was a flourishing place; after Constantinople it was the most important city in the Near East, with a population of about 250,000 people. Since it was first founded over a thousand years before it had been rebuilt several times, and the present city (variously known as Masr, Misr, El-Kahira or Grand Cario) stood on the site of an ancient Roman fortress. It lay a little distance from the right bank of the river under the cover of the Mokattam Hills, and was ringed by high walls and dominated by a citadel. The skyline, seen from a distance, had romantic aspects: the domes and minarets of 300 mosques rose from the smoke of cooking fires, and the palm trees and cultivated fields along the river bank gave the place a **placid** and rather rural air. The **citadel**, built by Saladin in the twelfth century, was a fine complex of **dun-coloured battlements**, and in the desert beyond, on the opposite side of the river, one **descried** the pyramids. Seen from closer at hand, however, these noble prospects disintegrated. Except for the large open squares such as the Esbekiah, which were flooded and thronged with boats during the annual **inundation** of the Nile, the city was a warren of narrow unpaved streets and **nondescript** Turkish houses covering about three square miles. Rubbish lay about on every side, the haunt of scavenging dogs and cats, and in the worst slums it was hard to say which were the ruins of fallen buildings and which the hovels of the present generation. 'Not a single fine street,' Denon cries in despair, 'not a single beautiful building... They build as little as they can help; they never repair anything.'

The mosques, crowded with pilgrims living in their outer courtyards, cannot have been very sanitary places, and the bazaars, roofed over with **canopies** of straw or linen, were both hot and smelly. Browne speaks of 'the polluted dust'.

Yet no one with any love for oriental life could resist this place. The day began before dawn when the mueddins (many of them chosen because they were blind and thus unable to see down into the private houses) roused the people with their first call to the mosques: 'Come to prayer. Come to security. God is most great.' Within an hour—that first fresh hour of the Egyptian morning—the life of the city spilled itself out into the streets, the bazaars and the coffee-houses, and at every turn the passer-by was bound to come on a spectacle of some kind: a marriage or a funeral, an **impromptu** performance of strolling players in the square, a well-to-do merchant trotting along on his ass with a slave running in front to clear the way, a string of camels thrusting through the crowds with their heads held high and **disdainfully** in the air. There was a constant passage of street-vendors shouting up to the balconies overhead, and of water-carriers with goatskins slung round their shoulders, and a **hullabaloo** of shouts and cries filled the air: '*Ya bint; dahrak*, "Watch thy back, daughter," '*Ya efendee*, "Take care," 'O consoler of the embarrassed, my supper must be thy gift'—this last from the innumerable beggars whom one confused by replying with some such phrase as 'God will sustain'.

Craftsmen did their work in their shops under the customer's eye, there was one street for gold—and silversmiths and jewellers, another for leatherworkers and brass-founders, others for potters, silk-spinners, makers of weapons, dyers and perfumers. There was no appetite, no refinement of the senses, that could not be satisfied somewhere in the bazaars, and if the city was **squalid** it was also very much alive.

Nightfall and darkness (there were no street lights) put an end to the **hubbub**. Soon after the mueddins' fifth and final call the gates of the city were locked,

and many of the streets with large wooden doors at either end were shut up for the night as well. 'One might pass through the whole length of the metropolis,' Lane says, 'and scarcely meet more than a dozen or twenty persons, excepting the watchmen and guards, and the porters at the gates of the bye-streets and quarters. The sentinel, or guard, calls out to the approaching passenger in Turkish "Who is that?"; and is answered in Arabic, "A citizen". The private watchman, in the same case, exclaims, "Attest the unity of God!" or merely, "Attest the unity!" The reply given to this is, "There is no deity but God!"'

The Nile was the all-provider of this existence. It grew every ounce of food, it supplied water to the wells which were dug in each quarter of the city, and it was the main highway to the outside world. The ceremony of the opening of the canals when the flood rose in August was one of the great occasions of the year. The river at Cairo was about half a mile wide, but it was divided by two islands, Bulaq and Rhoda, where crops were grown and where some of the wealthier people had their pleasure-gardens. Memphis, the ancient capital a little further up the river, had decayed to nothing. In the desert at Gizeh the Sphinx lay buried up to its neck in sand, its nose already broken.

There was one other aspect of the city which gave it a special importance, and which made travellers think of it not simply as Cairo but Grand Cairo: It was the great terminal of the caravan routes that spread out over northern Africa and the Near East. No one dreamed of travelling alone through the desert any more than one would dream of crossing the Atlantic in a canoe. You waited until a caravan was being formed in Cairo, and then applied to the sheikh in command for permission to accompany it. Sometimes months would go by before all was ready, and then on a certain day the order to march would be given, and a long **straggling** procession of camels, mules, donkeys and men on foot would set off into the desert. Incoming caravans signalled their arrival at the pyramids and were then told where to cross the Nile and encamp. The distances covered were **prodigious**. One route—and of course there were no clearly defined tracks in the desert, merely a general line of march that led on from one waterhole or oasis to the next—took you north-east to Damascus, where the traveller could join other caravans headed for Aleppo and Baghdad; another carried the pilgrims down to Mecca and the Red Sea; another followed the general course of the Nile to Sennar and Darfur in the Sudan; still another led off to Fezzan in the west. Every journey was an adventure, and the traders, like migratory birds, were controlled by the seasons and beset at every stage by unpredictable hazards such as civil wars, Bedouin raids, drought, floods and sickness. A year, two years on the road—this was nothing to an experienced merchant. Taking with him his wives, his children and his slaves, he would go on and on wherever the markets offered a profit, and in the end **nomadism** became an object in itself, and many of these men could endure no other way of life. No one knew the extent of this vast, haphazard network. It was quite possible for a man to travel from Egypt to Timbuktu on the other side of Africa, and it is certain that Indian and even Chinese goods appeared in the bazaars in Cairo.

The merchants dealt in kind rather than in money. In Cairo they obtained grain, rice, cotton, flax, and the thousand and one products of the bazaars. These things, increasing in value with every mile they travelled, would be bartered for other goods in the Near East and in the primitive villages in the far interior of Africa. The Sudan trade was particularly profitable. It produced black slaves, gold, ivory, ostrich feathers, rhinoceros horn, gum arabic, ebony, coffee (brought from Ethiopia) and spices (from the Red Sea). Petroleum was also brought in small quantities from the Arabian Gulf; it was either drunk as a medicine or rubbed on the body. Thus there was a continual interchange at Cairo, a constant ebb and flow of strange faces and of strange goods displayed for sale, a commotion of arrivals and departures.

4.2.2 Glossary

placid: calm, peaceful

citadel: a strong, heavily-armed fort

battlements : a low wall round the flat roof of a castle or fort, or the roof behind the wall

dun-coloured : coloured brownish grey

descried : noticed something a long way off

inundation : flooding over large areas

nondescript : dull, very ordinary, without any interesting or strong qualities

canopy : a cover, usually of cloth or other material

impromptu : said or done at once without preparation

disdainfully : to look (or appear to look) with contempt

hullabaloo : a lot of noise, especially voices

squalid : very dirty and uncared for, filthy

hubbub : mixture of loud noises

straggling : without order or shape, untidy

prodigious : impressive because of size, amount or quality; very great

nomadism : wandering from place to place without any fixed home, seeking fodder for cattle, etc.

4.2.3 Discussion

In the first paragraph the author deals with the past history of Cairo, a city that was rebuilt many times, its population and its eminent position among the cities in the East. What is noteworthy is the perspective and the way the description is developed. The next paragraph tells us what it looked like from a distance, its imposing skyline and its strategic location, with the famous pyramids and the sphinx in the background, across the river Nile. However, on entering the city 'the romantic aspects' are much less in evidence. On the contrary, dirt and decay seem to be the dominant impression that it created in the eyes of the visitor. The Ottoman empire was still not formally challenged and the Turkish language of the rulers was used by those in authority, while Arabic was spoken by the people at large. The Nile was the 'all-provider' and naturally the life of the city centred round the river. The Nile provided, both the city's sustenance and its principal means of communication and transportation. Most of the places of historical interest such as Memphis and Damascus were situated along the course of the river, and the great caravan routes converged on Cairo.

Cairo in the past was indeed, Grand Cairo, the symbol and source of oriental luxury and romance, the heart and vital trade centre of the mysterious and fascinating East since all the caravan routes from the East and the whole of Africa converged there. A dawn to dusk description of the city, its people and the varied activities that go on amidst the apparent squalor and confusion show a certain order and regularity. This might escape the casual Western observer, from whose point of view it is described. He has to learn to reconcile reality with appearances, coming as he does with all the presumptions and prejudices of a different, yet increasingly assertive civilization, which dominated and exploited the East. The first impressions of the city recorded by European travellers, who belonged to a different culture seem uninformed and biased. The author, in this passage, attempts to correct such false impressions.

What makes this passage of particular interest is the way this ancient seat of civilization, one of the cradles of the world's oldest civilization, is presented. There are a large number of words that indicate a value judgement about the people, their culture, the objects of historical significance and the various aspects of the life of the city. The author attempts to correct some of the harsh contemporary judgements on the religion, culture and the ways of the people held by those who came from a different cultural background and who presume that everything Western was admirable, while the Eastern and unfamiliar was quaint and despicable.

Travellers and adventurers from the industrialized west tended to look down with scorn at the opulent life of Cairo. Some of the enchantment and excitement of a

once prosperous and thriving city is communicated to the reader through this memorable passage.

Check Your Progress I

- i) Comment on the value judgements implied in the following words and expressions. How many of these words have strong unfavourable connotations? Try and find words which have only denotation or neutral meanings; e.g., *scavenging*—eating from the dustbins; *hovels*—houses of the poor. Consult Roget's *Thesaurus*, which you will find extremely useful for this purpose.

the noble prospects disintegrated
 a warren of narrow unpaved streets
 the haunt of scavenging dogs and cats
 hovels of the present generation
 decadent, superstitious and uncouth
 cacophony to European ears
 shiftlessness and deceit of the orientals
 helpless indolence

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- ii) What is the first view that the reader gets of the city of Cairo?

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- iii) How does the author try to make you see the city as he imagined it looked like from historical accounts? What details help in building up this picture of Cairo?

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- iv) Do you think the author was in agreement with the accounts of European travellers about the Egyptians and the East in general? Pick out the contrasts he brings out between reality and popular racial and cultural prejudices, using concrete evidence from the passage.

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4.3 PASSAGE FROM *BLEAK HOUSE* BY CHARLES DICKENS

Let us now take up the next passage, which is from *Bleak House* (1852-53), a novel by Charles Dickens. This passage from the opening chapter of the novel sets its whole tone and mood and strikes the keynote of its theme. Fog is a symbol of the confusion and obscurity created by the endless complexities and the twisted and winding nature of legal proceedings. Litigation, especially, for equity, for fair play, for redressal of the law's own confusions and ambiguities, has a way of dragging on interminably, not only for a lifetime but often for generations together. In the meantime untold miseries are inflicted on innocent and unsuspecting children, adults and old people who had become destitute solely because of the "law's delays".

4.3.1 Text

London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. **Implacable** November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a **Megalosaurus**, forty feet long or so, **waddling** like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snow-flakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very **blinkers**. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points **tenaciously** to the pavement, and the accumulating at compound interest.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green **aits** and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the **cabooses** of **collier-brigs**, fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the **rigging** of great ships; fog drooping on the **gunwales** of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little **'prentice** boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.

Gas looming through the fog in divers places in the streets, much as the sun may, from the spongy fields, be seen to loom by husbandman and ploughboy. Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time—as the gas seems to know, for it has a haggard and unwilling look.

The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth.

On such an afternoon, if ever, the Lord High Chancellor ought to be sitting here—as here he is—with a foggy glory round his head, softly fenced in with crimson cloth and curtains, addressed by a large advocate with great whiskers, a little voice, and an interminable brief, and outwardly directing his contemplation to the lantern in the roof, where he can see nothing but fog. On such an afternoon, some score of members of the High Court of Chancery bar ought to be—as here they are—mistily engaged in one of the ten thousand stages of an endless cause, tripping one another up on slippery precedents, groping knee-deep in technicalities, running their goat-hair and horse-hair warded heads against walls of words, and making a pretence of equity with serious faces, as players might. On such an afternoon, the various solicitors in the cause, some two or three of whom have inherited it from their fathers, who made a fortune by it, ought to be—as are they not?—ranged in a line, in a long matted well (but you might look in vain for Truth at the bottom of it), between the registrar's red table and the silk gowns, with bills, cross-bills, answers, rejoinders, injunctions, affidavits, issues, references to masters, masters' reports, mountains of costly nonsense, piled before them. Well may the court be dim, with wasting candles here and there; well may the fog hang heavy in it, as if it would never get out; well may the stained glass windows lose their colour, and admit no light of day into the place; well may the uninitiated from the streets, who peep in through the glass panes in the door, be deterred from entrance by its owlish aspect, and by the drawl languidly echoing to the roof from the padded dais where the Lord High Chancellor looks into the lantern that has no light in it, and where the attendant wigs are all stuck in a fog-bank! This is the Court of Chancery; which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire; which has its worn-out lunatic in every manhouse, and its dead in every churchyard; which has its ruined suitor, with his slipshod heels and threadbare dress, borrowing and begging through the round of every man's acquaintance; which gives to monied might, the means abundantly of wearing out the right; which so exhausts finances, patience, courage, hope; so overthrows the brain and breaks the heart; that there is not an honourable man among its practitioners who would not give—who does not often give—the warning, 'Suffer any wrong that can be done you, rather than come here!'

4.3.2 Glossary

implacable: which cannot be satisfied, or whose demands cannot be reduced

Megalosaurus: a gigantic carnivorous dinosaur (megalo means huge)

waddling: a heavy awkward way of walking, like that of a duck

blinkers: a pair of flat pieces of leather fixed beside a horse's eyes

tenaciously: holding firmly

ait: a small island, especially in a river

caboose: a ship's kitchen

collier brig: a ship for carrying coal

rigging: all the ropes and sails of a sailing ship

gunwale: the upper edge of the sides of a small ship or boat

prentice: short form of apprentice

floundering: struggling, losing control, almost sinking

pestilent: having an evil influence

hoary: grey with age, or having white hair in old age

interminable: (seemingly) endless

precedent: a former action or case used as an example or rule for the present or future action

goat-hair and horse-hair warded heads: British lawyers usually wore wigs made of these

languidly: lacking strength or will

blighted: having a destructive effect

4.3.3 Discussion

This opening passage sets the scene. It begins with a one word **sentences**: 'London'. The second sentence is longer, but we note at once that it has no finite verb; the third is shorter, but again verbless. In sentence after sentence we have the same **elliptical syntax (ellipsis)** is a rhetorical device, involving the omission of words and phrases, often easily supplied contextually) building up an atmosphere of gloom, ill-temper, irritating and repetitive and unproductive activity. Dogs, horses as well as people splashed in mud are struggling for a foot-hold in the all-pervading fog, wallowing in the slippery snow, as though the earth was just recovering after the biblical floods. In such a strange world, where even the snow seems to have turned black, in mourning for the death of the sun (again a figure of speech), meeting a Megalosaurus would have caused no surprise.

In the second paragraph the word fog occurs for the first time and is repeated over and over again; the verbless sentences (the main verb elided) describe the fog expanding in all directions, all over London, outside London, in Essex and Kent, on the land, the river and the sky. It penetrates into the closed cabins of ships of every size and variety, into the 'eyes and the throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners', into the pipe the angry ship's captain was smoking. People on bridges thought 'they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds'. The fog becomes a symbol of complete insulation from the world of real people, suggesting the true nature of the Court of Chancery, living in its own world, isolated from humanity, hanging 'in the misty clouds'. And this is the setting for the 'Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery'.

The street lamps were lit earlier than usual, but they failed to dispel the gloom. The thickest of fogs and the deepest mud and mire could not match the confusion and ineffectualness of the Court. Note particularly the use of superlatives. Then follows the contrast between the comfort, warmth and luxury in which the Court functions routinely day after day with its meaninglessness and utter indifference to human suffering. Justice is delayed from generation to generation and abject misery and helplessness are inflicted on the orphans, the old, the weak and the derelict. The syntax (the arrangement of words, phrases and clauses), the sentence structure and the tenses used emphasize the unvarying routine and pointlessly interminable procedures, 'the groping knee-deep in technicalities', 'the slippery precedents', the wigged and gowned lawyers fighting their mock battles 'making a pretence of equity with serious faces, as players might'. The repetitions with variations of certain structures serve to emphasize the futility and the ridiculous nature of their petty wranglings, carried on from generation to generation. Over this sterile activity presides each succeeding Lord Chancellor, concentrating, like the lawyers 'on the lantern in the roof, where he can see nothing but fog'. Reality in the form of daylight never penetrates into the courtroom through the stained glass windows.

The repeated structures 'on such an afternoon, if ever, the Lord High Chancellor ought to be sitting here—as here he is' and 'well may the court be dim....' both emotionally and logically build up to the climax 'where the Lord High Chancellor looks into the lantern that has no light in it, and like the people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog', feeling suspended and drifting like a balloon, are all 'stuck in a fog-bank'. It is not difficult to see how at this point all the descriptive strands are tied up, reinforcing the central theme of the futility of whatever goes on inside the Chancery. Instead of dispensing justice, the Chancery delays it, causing untold misery to generations of people.

Check Your Progress II

Now read the passage carefully as many times as you consider necessary and then try to understand the exact meanings and suggestions of the words and phrases you find

difficult in the contexts in which they are used in the passage. The glossary at the end of the passage is meant to help you.

i) What kind of atmosphere does the frequent use of the word 'fog' evoke?

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ii) Mark True/False after reading the following statements

- a) The passage opens in spring True/False
- b) The weather is bright True/False
- c) It is night time True/False
- d) The Court of Chancery is an unpopular place True/False

iii) Explain the following:

- a) hard by
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- b) in the heart of
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- c) monied might
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iv) How many times is the word afternoon repeated in the final paragraph? What purpose, do you think is served by this repetition?

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4.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have analysed two passages of prose both of which convey the genuine feel of the periods and cultures described; We have:

- examined some of the distinctive stylistic features in the passage such as evocative diction, imagery and syntax.
- seen how style plays a decisive role in presenting content.

4.5 ANSWERS TO EXERCISES

Check Your Progress I

i) All the words and expressions here carry strong unfavourable meanings, and are typical of cultural prejudices that were openly expressed in the nineteenth century about the East. The writer is quoting samples of those opinions rather than expressing his personal views.

2. See section 4.2.3
- iii) Section 4.2.3
- iv) Turn to 4.2.3 and if necessary re-read the passage.

Check Your Progress II

- i) You may read the passage again. Keeping in mind the fact that writers use natural background and seasons in order to trace some correspondence between outer events and inner states of mind.
- ii)
 - a) False
 - b) False
 - c) False
 - d) True
- iii)
 - a) nearby
 - b) in the midst of
 - c) power that stems from great wealth.
- iv) (b) Repetition serves the following purposes :
 - moves from the particular to the general
 - gives it an effect of timelessness
 - conveys a strong impression of the repetitive and pointless activity that goes on endlessly in the Court of Chancery.