
UNIT 2 DESCRIPTIVE PROSE

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall introduce you to different varieties of descriptive prose. We shall do this by outlining the characteristics of descriptive prose and then explaining these by giving you two passages to read.

If you read this unit carefully and complete the given exercises, you will be able to:

- summarise the passages;
- analyse and appreciate their stylistic features; and
- become more perceptive readers of other descriptive passages.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

It is not always easy to distinguish between descriptive and narrative prose. One way of making a distinction is to group them both together and to say that descriptive prose is “passive” and narrative “active”. This means that descriptive prose is concerned mainly with seeing things as they are, recording the impressions received by our senses: what we see, hear, touch, smell and taste. Narrative deals with what actually happens, that is, with events. This may not be true in every case, and may very well be an over-simplification, as we shall see in the course of the lessons that follow.

But, all the same, this distinction can be useful up to a point. Essentially, describing people and places and objects and narrating what happened to them are two related and complementary activities, indeed very often writers do both in the course of the same sentence. However, description and narration need to be examined separately for the sake of training ourselves in looking at and recognising the different functions of language. Various kinds of methods and techniques are employed by writers for describing and narrating. The real distinction between the two is one of focus, and focus can keep shifting from one to the other, according to the writer's purpose and design. If the writer's purpose is to introduce us to an important character in a story, the author can attempt this

introduction either in any one of these ways or by using a combination of several techniques. Take, for example, the case of the Martian in our very first extract in this lesson. H.G. Wells does not directly present the Martian to us. He does this through another character in the novel, who narrates the story as well as describes what the Martian looks like.

2.2 PASSAGE FROM H.G. WELLS' *THE WAR OF THE WORLDS*

Descriptive writing, as you will see may be either purely fictional as in H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* or it may present factual details as in the passage from Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*. You will notice that the presentation techniques will differ in both cases. In your first passage, the Martian is not like any human being that anyone has seen before. The author, therefore, goes about this difficult task using many subtle tricks of the writer's craft. Describing and narrating might very well be considered two sides of the same coin. Both descriptive and narrative elements are found throughout this passage. In describing the Martian in *The War of the Worlds*, Wells has to make his description convincing, giving it the illusion of reality. The Martian who exists only in the writer's imagination must be presented to the reader in such a way as to make him/her believe that the Martian is real. Let's see how the writer accomplishes this task.

H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* is a book of science fiction published in 1898 long before man had landed on the moon. The passage describes what happened after the Martians arrived inside a cylinder which landed on the earth with such great force that it made a large crater in the ground. The person who describes it returns to the site after a brief interval. In the meantime a big crowd has collected around the crater. This extract has a few narrative elements but the main focus is on the writer's description of the Martian. Let us now take up this passage for discussion. The first thing to do is to read it carefully two or three times if necessary. Some of the words and phrases that are likely to be unfamiliar have been given in the glossary at the end of the passage.

After you have made sense of all the strange and not so familiar words whose meanings you are not sure of, you should look up the references and allusions in the passage. In this case the references to the Gorgons is of crucial importance to the understanding of the passage, because it is intended to suggest something equally terrifying and deadly.

2.2.1 Text

I saw a young man, a shop assistant in Woking. I believe he was standing on the cylinder and trying to scramble out of the hole again. The crowd had pushed him in. The end of the cylinder was being screwed out from within. Nearly two feet of shining screw projected. Somebody blundered against me, and I narrowly missed being pitched on to the top of the screw. I turned, and as I did so the screw must have come out, and the lid of the cylinder fell upon the gravel with a ringing **concussion**. I stuck my elbow into the person behind me, and turned my head towards the thing again. For a moment that circular cavity seemed perfectly black. I had the sunset in my eyes.

I think everyone expected to see a man emerge – possibly something a little unlike us **terrestrial** men but in all essentials a man. I know I did. But, looking,

I presently saw something stirring within the shadow – greyish **billowy movements**, one above another, and then two luminous discs like eyes. Then something resembling a little grey snake, about the thickness of a walking stick, coiled up out of the **writhing** middle, and **wriggled** in the air towards me – and then another.

A sudden chill came over me. There was a loud shriek from a woman behind. I half turned, keeping my eyes fixed upon the cylinder still, from which other **tentacles** were now projecting, and began pushing my way back from the edge of the pit. I saw astonishment giving place to horror on the faces of the people about me. I heard inarticulate exclamations on all sides. There was a general movement backward. I saw the shopman struggling still on the edge of the pit. I found myself alone, and saw the people on the other side of the pit running off, Stent among them. I looked again at the cylinder, and ungovernable terror gripped me. I stood **petrified** and staring.

A big greyish, rounded bulk, the size perhaps, of a bear, was rising slowly and painfully out of the cylinder. As it **bulged up** and caught the light, it glistened like wet leather. Two large dark-coloured eyes were regarding me steadfastly. It was rounded, and had, one might say, a face. There was a mouth under the eyes, the brim of which quivered and panted, and dropped saliva. The body **heaved** and **pulsated convulsively**. A **lank tentacular appendage** gripped the edge of the cylinder, another swayed in the air.

Those who have never seen a living Martian can scarcely imagine the strange horror of their appearance. The peculiar V-shaped mouth with its pointed upper lip, the absence of **brow ridges**, the absence of a chin beneath the **wedge like** lower lip, the **incessant** quivering of this mouth, the Gorgon groups of tentacles, the tumultuous breathing of the lungs in a strange atmosphere, the evident heaviness and painfulness of movement, due to the greater gravitational energy of the earth – above all, the extraordinary intensity of the immense eyes – culminated in an effect akin to **nausea**. There was something **fungoid** in the oily brown skin, something in the clumsy deliberation of their tedious movements unspeakably terrible. Even at this first encounter, this first glimpse, I was overcome with disgust and dread.

Suddenly the monster vanished. It had toppled over the brim of the cylinder and fallen into the pit, with a thud like the fall of a great mass of leather. I heard it give a peculiar thick cry, and forthwith another of these creatures appeared darkly in the deep shadow of the aperture.

At that my rigour of terror passed away. I turned and, running madly, made for the first group of trees, perhaps a hundred yards away; but I ran slantingly and stumbling, for I could not avert my face from these things.

There, among some young pine-trees and **furze-bushes**, I stopped, panting, and awaited further developments. The common around the sand-pits was dotted with people, standing, like myself, in a half-fascinated terror, staring at these creatures, or, rather, at the heaped gravel at the edge of the pit in which they lay. And then, with a renewed horror, I saw a round, black object bobbing up and down on the edge of the pit. It was the head of the shopman who had fallen in, but showing as a little black object against the hot western sky. Now he got his shoulder and knee up, and again he seemed to slip back until only his head was

visible. Suddenly he vanished, and I could have fancied a faint shriek had reached me. I had a momentary impulse to go back and help him that my fears overruled.

2.2.2 Glossary

concussion: violent blow, shock; sound caused by it.

terrestrial: of or related to the earth (rather than some other planet)

billowy movements: swelling out like sails

writhing: twisting the body (like a snake)

wriggled: twisted from side to side

tentacles: long snake-like boneless limbs without joints

petrified: in a state of shock or fear, losing all power of thought or action; to become like a stone

bulged up: swelled out (came out)

heaved: rose and fell regularly

pulsated : shook rhythmically

convulsively: unnaturally and violently

lank: hanging loosely and without strength

tentacular: like tentacles (explained above)

appendage: a thing hanging from something larger

brow ridges: eyebrows that project (the Martian had no eyebrows)

wedge-like: V-shaped

incessant: never stopping

nausea: a feeling of sickness and desire to vomit

fungoid: like fungus, a fast growing variety of plant growth generally considered a disease

furze-bushes: wild bushy plants with prickles and yellow flowers.

2.2.3 Discussion

When we read the passage carefully we notice that the author employs several devices (or artifices, if you like) to avoid a direct description because the subject is so unfamiliar, that the reader's credibility has to be built up step by step. So Wells does not describe the Martian directly, the way perhaps an ordinary man or woman or an event could have been described. The person who describes the Martian in the book keeps reminding us that he is part of the crowd, and comes back again and again to the reactions of the others with him. His own reactions, of course, are also recorded. If we pay particular attention to the words, phrases and sentences in the passage we can see that the man takes his own time in coming to the actual description of the Martian. This delayed description heightens suspense and arouses our expectations. At the end of the first paragraph, he reveals his inability to see things clearly: "For a moment that circular cavity seemed perfectly black. I had the sunset in my eyes." In the second paragraph, he gradually arouses the reader's curiosity, without really satisfying it. "I think everyone expected to see a man emerge.... I know I did...." In the third paragraph, he

describes his own reactions and those of the crowd. “A sudden chill came over me. There was a loud shriek from a woman behind. I saw astonishment giving place to horror on the faces of the people about me.... saw the people on the other side of the pit running off....and ungovernable terror gripped me. I stood petrified and staring.” It is only after all this that he attempts to say what the Martian looks like. In the fourth paragraph, the point of view shifts again. It is now assumed that all those present have become familiar with the sight of the Martian and their reactions are now commented upon.

Note the clever repeated use of the definite article. “The peculiar V-shaped mouth....the absence of chin, the incessant quivering of the mouth....” In fact all these have not been described before, only mentioned; but the reader is made to believe that these features are already familiar to the people who have by now become acquainted with the sight of the strange creature. It is necessary for a discerning reader to get behind the mass of words and sentences and paragraphs with which the literary artist constructs his elaborate verbal edifice, the product of his imagination.

From the discussion so far, we realise how important it is for us to consider the point of view of the describer and what he does or does not describe and to what extent we are to take what he says literally as ‘the truth’, or ‘the actual reality’. Because, after all, the fictional world is the product of the writer’s own creative imagination.

Check Your Progress 1

The following questions relating to the passage will enable you to examine it more closely and to grasp the full significance of the description of the Martians. Give your answers in about 4-6 sentences.

- i) What words in the passage indicate the attitude of the describer towards the Martian? Do you think the Martian had human feelings?

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- ii) Why do you think the describer was terrified? Is there any evidence in the passage to justify it?

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- iii) What tells us that the Martians were not very comfortable on the earth? List the words and phrases that convey this impression?

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- iv) Did anyone among the spectators feel sympathetic towards the Martians? Why were they reacting as they did?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

2.3 PASSAGE FROM ISAK DINESEN'S *OUT OF AFRICA*

We shall now look at a passage containing a description of African birds by Isak Dinesen, who lived in Africa for a long time. Her book *Out of Africa* has been made into an outstanding film.

Descriptive writing, whether it is imaginative or factual, faces the problem of selection as well as of presentation. Too much detail can be confusing or bewildering just as inadequate or haphazard choice of detail will result in disorganised and blurred presentation.

The passage is an excellent model for study and analysis from this point of view: it depends on objective fact (in the sense that we can see them and recognise them in reality). Although other writers might write very different descriptions about the same things, they cannot often distort reality beyond the bounds of credibility. Degrees of objectivity are of course bound to differ from writer to writer, depending on his/her perceptions and purposes. Writing about African birds, the author makes deliberate choices, relating both to inclusion and exclusion, since exhaustiveness is neither possible nor called for. In presenting them, the writer also decides consciously the order in which they are to be introduced, their distinguishing individual characteristics, and the nature of the emotions or attitudes that the writer wishes to project. Let us see what happens in this passage.

2.3.1 Text

Just at the beginning of the long rains, in the last week of March, or the first week of April, I have heard the nightingale in the woods of Africa. Not the full

song: a few notes only—the opening bars of the **concerto**, a rehearsal, suddenly stopped and again begun. It was as if, in the solitude of the dripping woods, someone was, in a tree, tuning a small **cello**. It was, however, the same melody, and the same abundance and sweetness, as were soon to fill the forests of Europe, from Sicily to Elsinore. We had the black and white storks in Africa, the birds that build their nests upon the thatched village roofs of Northern Europe. They look less **imposing** in Africa than they do there, for here they had such tall and **ponderous** birds as the **Marabout** and the **Secretary Bird** to be compared to. The storks have got other habits in Africa than in Europe, where they live as married couples and are symbols of domestic happiness. Here they are seen together in big **flights**, as in clubs. They are called locust-birds in Africa, and follow along when the locusts come upon the land, living high on them. They fly over the plains, too, where there is a grass-fire on, circling just in front of the advancing line of small leaping flames, high up in the **scintillating** rainbow-coloured air and the grey smoke, on watch for the mice and snakes that run from the fire. The storks have a gay time in Africa. But their real life is not here, and when the winds of spring bring back thoughts of mating and nesting, their hearts are turned towards the North, they remember old times and places and fly off, two and two, and are shortly back after wading in the cold **bogs** of their birth-places.

The Crested Cranes, which come on to the newly rolled and planted maize-land, to steal the maize out of the ground, make up for the robbery by being birds of good omen, announcing the rain; and also by dancing to us. When the tall birds are together in large numbers, it is a fine sight to see them spread their wings and dance. There is much style in the dance, and a little **affectation**, for why, when they can fly, do they jump up and down as if they were held on to the earth by magnetism? The whole ballet has a sacred look, like some ritual dance, perhaps the cranes are making an attempt to join Heaven and Earth like the winged angels walking up and down **Jacob's Ladder**. With their delicate pale grey colouring, the little black velvet skull-cap and the fan-shaped crown, the cranes have all the air of light **frescoes**. When, after the dance, they lift and go away, to keep up the sacred tone of the show they give out, by the wings or the voice, a clear ringing as if a group of church bells had taken to the wing and were sailing off. You can hear them a long way away, even after the birds themselves have become invisible in the sky: a chime from the clouds.

The Greater Hornbill was another visitor to the farm, and came there to eat the fruits of the Cape-Chestnut tree. They are very strange birds. It is an adventure or an experience to meet them, not altogether pleasant, for they look exceedingly knowing. One morning before sunrise I was woken up by loud **jabbering** outside the house, and when I walked out on the terrace I saw forty-one Hornbills sitting in the trees on the lawn. There they looked less like birds than like some fantastic articles of finery set on the trees here and there by a child. Black they all were, with the sweet, noble black of Africa, deer darkness absorbed through an age, like old soot, that makes you feel that for elegance, vigour and vivacity, no colour rivals black. All the Hornbills were talking together in the merriest mood, but with choice **deportment**, like a party of inheritors after a funeral. The morning air was as clear as crystal, the sombre party was bathing in freshness and purity, and, behind the trees and the birds, the sun came up, a dull red ball. You wonder what sort of a day you are to get after such an early morning.

The Flamingoes are the most delicately coloured of all the African birds, pink and red like a flying twig of an Oleander bush. They have incredibly long legs and the bizarre and **recherché** curves of their necks and bodies, seem as if from some exquisite traditional **prudery** they were making all attitudes and movements in life as difficult as possible. I once travelled from Port Said to Marseilles in a French boat that had on board a consignment of a hundred and fifty Flamingoes, which were going to the *Jardin d'Acclimatation* in Marseilles. They were kept in large dirty cases with canvas sides, ten in each, standing up close to one another. The keeper, who was taking the birds over, told me that he was counting on losing twenty per cent of them on a trip. They were not made for that sort of life, in rough weather they lost their balance, their legs broke, and the other birds in the cage trampled on them. At night when the wind was high in the Mediterranean and the ship came down in the waves with a thump, at each wave I heard, in the dark, the Flamingoes shriek. Every morning, I saw the keeper taking out one or two dead birds, and throwing them overboard. The noble wader of the Nile, the sister of the lotus, which floats over the landscape like a stray cloud of sunset, had become a slack cluster of pink and red feathers with a pair of long, thin sticks attached to it. The dead birds floated on the water for a short time, knocking up and down in the **wake** of the ship before they sank.

2.3.2 Glossary

concerto: a piece of music for one or more solo instruments and orchestra

cello: (full form-violincello) a large violin-type musical instrument

imposing: large in size, powerful looking

ponderous: large and heavy; hence slow and awkward; dull and solemn

Marabout: a large African stork

Secretary Bird: a large African bird, its crest resembles quill pens stuck over the ear, hence its name

flights: group of birds flying together

scintillating: sending out quick flashes of light or sparks, sparkling, hence brilliant

bog: soft wet marshy area

affectation: not natural behaviour, but what appears put on

Jacob's Ladder (biblical allusion): a ladder, seen by **Jacob** (son of Isaac) in a dream connecting earth and heaven

frescoes: painting on walls

jabbering: quick unclear speech or noise; here, unpleasantly noisy

deportment: manner of standing or walking

recherché (French): too rare or strange

prudery: over-sensitiveness, tendency to be easily shocked; excessive modesty

wake: here a path or tract of foam left by the moving ship

2.3.3 Discussion

The passage is full of delightful descriptions of some birds. The first paragraph is about the nightingale, the bird with rich and varied associations in Western

literature. The black and white storks again are European birds. From time immemorial (until popular scientific knowledge destroyed the myth) they were engaged in the safe delivery of new born infants to every household (according to children’s story books) and lived like ‘married couples’, and ‘symbols of domestic happiness’. In Africa they have a gay time but ‘their real life is not here’ and they prefer the cold bogs of their birth-places’ when winter comes. It is quite a change for them.

The crested cranes described in the next paragraph are ‘birds of good omen’ announcing rain. They are like winged angels walking up and down Jacob’s Ladder, attempting to join heaven and earth.

Note the sudden change in the author’s attitude to the ‘Greater Hornbill’; the diction signals a more critical and less endearing tone. If you contrast the words and metaphors used for them with those found in the previous paragraph this change will appear dramatic: ‘strange’, ‘jabbering’, ‘exceedingly knowing’, ‘a party of inheritors after a funeral’, indicate the author’s attitude to them.

The last paragraph is devoted to the flamingoes. The passage ends on a sad note, lamenting human cruelty and indifference to these delicate birds and to nature in general. You will, no doubt agree that although only six birds out of hundreds of varieties are described here, there is a certain artful rounding-off of this topic; what is presented is beautiful and memorable, each bird has its individuality, every paragraph a self-contained theme and tone, the well-chosen figures of speech helping to bring out their unique features.

Some words have strong overtones or connotations in addition to what is often described as their simplest meaning found in a small dictionary. While words like ‘table’, ‘chair’, ‘read’, ‘sit’, ‘stand’, etc. have only their lexical meanings, or what is usually called denotation, words like ‘ponderous’, ‘shrieks’, ‘affectation’, ‘jabbering’, ‘trample’, ‘sombre’ have suggestions that tend to be unfavourable. Similarly words like ‘delicate’, ‘spirited’, ‘fantastic’, ‘noble’ have favourable connotations.

Some words may also take on special meanings from the context, particularly when irony is intended and so one has to watch out for such words. As students of literature we have to be constantly alert and ready for surprises. We have also to learn to use a good dictionary.

Check Your Progress 2

Now read the passage carefully once more (in fact as many times as you think necessary) and do the following exercises:

- i) What is the point of view of the author? Are the birds described from the point of view of an African or an outsider? Give your reasons.

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ii) What is the significance of the phrase ‘from Sicily to Elsinore’?

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iii) Comment on the tone of the last paragraph. Do you think the writer is critical of the way the Flamingoes are transported to France?

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iv) Besides telling us about the appearance of African birds, what does the passage do? Pick out some of the metaphors and similes from the passage that you find striking. Justify your choice.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

2.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have:

- introduced you to different kinds of descriptive writing;
- shown you how words acquire different connotations in different contexts;
- pointed out how the choice of point of view determines the overall artistic effect of the writing

2.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i) Ungovernable terror gripped me; I stood petrified and staring; the strange horror of their appearance; groups of tentacles; and effect akin to nausea; something fungoid in the oily brown skin; clumsy deliberation of their tedious movements unspeakably terrible; overcome with disgust and dread; the monster.

That the Martian had hardly any human characteristics or feelings can be easily seen from the extract. There is nothing even remotely human about the Martian. He is compared to a bear.

- ii) The describer was terrified because the faint shriek made by the disappearing shopman caused terror and a strange feeling of dread.
- iii) Look at the paragraph beginning ‘Those who have never seen a living Martian....’ Carefully note expressions like the ‘tumultuous breathing’, ‘evident heaviness and painfulness of movement’, ‘clumsy deliberation of their tedious movements’, which indicate that they were out of their element.
- iv) The answer is clearly No. Go back and read the passage again, if you are in doubt. You will see that the reactions of the crowd are described and these were not at all sympathetic. No one is inclined to go and help the Martians. Instead they are terrified by their very sight.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) The very first paragraph makes this clear. The point of view is that of a European. There are several more clues in the passage. The birds are, in the eyes of the author, visitors in Africa, more or less like herself, except that their visits are seasonal migrations.
- ii) Sicily is practically the southernmost point of Europe and Elsinore is one of the northernmost. In fact the whole of Europe is thus indicated.
- iii) Yes. The author’s disapproval is clear and she laments human cruelty and indifference to these delicate birds.
- iv) The passage describes the kind of life that they live in Africa, what they do, what they eat, etc. Re-read the passage if necessary and pick out the comparisons relating to the song of the nightingale; the sea and the African plains; Jacob’s ladder, the sound of church bells; inheritors after a funeral; etc.