**Crow**

A black crow arrived when the rain stopped. There was a gnarled old post on our boundary, near where the fence sagged over the creek, and that's where the bird perched and cast its cold yellow eyes over our farm.

The creek. Oh, that beautiful creek, meandering across the fertile flats like a big green serpent, its head buried in a grove of mature gums to the south, its tail somewhere out of sight, north of the sagging fence. It pulsed with life, a constant artery carrying the crystal blood of some distant unseen heart deep under the pastures and rich volcanic soil. "We're bloody lucky to have this creek," Dad would say, ruffling my hair. "Bloody lucky. I reckon if that creek ever dried up, we'd be stuffed. We'd have to sell up."

I never took much notice when he said that. In my seven years I'd only ever known the creek to flow. It seemed implausible it could do otherwise. Until the crow came. I'd seen crows before, of course. Watched their effortless paths across the sky, and listened to them drawl their laconic obscenities from the treetops. But I knew I'd never seen this one, blacker and colder than a moonless night.

"S’been a bit of a dry autumn," Dad said the night before the crow arrived. "Looks like the winter'll be much the same." The lack of rain had, at that stage, escaped my notice. But I noticed the crow. It was just a bird on a fencepost, and yet somehow it was more. An omen. On my way down to the creek, fishing rod in hand, I felt its black presence before I saw it, nonchalant as it stared at me, through me, beyond me, as if summoning something from beyond the hills. And the something came, like slow spreading oil. The drought. There was no howling wind, no violent red storm, no cataclysmic holocaust. Just a continuing absence, a lack, and an endless blue sky, day after depressing day. Green paddocks transformed into squares of baking dust; dams became big clay bowls, their bottoms cracking like a jigsaw; young trees gave up and died, leaves shriveling like burning plastic. And the crow presided over the whole unfolding disaster from its spot on the crooked fencepost.

One time I thought I could make it rain by shooting the crow with Dad's old shotgun. But the bird flew off before I even arrived, floating like a dark shadow at a safe distance above me as I discharged two ill-aimed shells into the indigo sky, and Dad, purple with rage, snatched the weapon from me and locked it away. The next day I had no gun, and the crow was back, eyeing me. Mocking me.

It was a while before I noticed the creek dwindling. But after two following rainless years its banks were crisp and dingo-coloured, the once-vital stream a cheerless string of stagnant ponds, wriggling with mosquito larvae. I remember that's where I sat, bum in the dust, when I noticed Dad's shadow beside me. I looked at him, his eyes sad and distant, his sun-drenched forehead creased with burden. He just …stood there, silent. And the crow watched. "Dad…?" He steered his gaze toward me, and I knew what he'd come to tell me.

"I've sold the farm mate," he said, and took a great, steeling breath. "Had to. Dint git much for it, but the 'countant reckons we're probly better off." He shifted his glazed eyes to the middle distance, focusing on nothing. "I'm sorry mate," he said, and trudged back to the house that was no longer ours.

I glared at the crow, and it mirrored me with its eyes of frozen yellow. My tears came then, running from my cheeks and into the thirsty earth. I don't know how long I sat there, but when I lifted my eyes again, a cold wind sprang up from the west, and all I could do was stare and tremble. The crow had gone.

“The Crow” – Feedback

The short, bleak narrative, “The Crow”, examines the concept of drought in the context of farming, conveying the idea that man is helpless in the face of the relentless power of nature. The first person child narrator charts the dry and wet years on a small farm through the ebb and flow of a life giving creek and the reactions of both himself and his father. When the creek is running, the land is fertile; without the creek, the farmer would be ruined. The eponymous crow acts as an omen, a harbinger of doom but it also symbolizes the indifference of nature to the aspirations of man. It flies off only when the man has been forced off the land by drought.

The most significant binaries to underpin the idea of the powerlessness of man are man/nature, reason/superstition and drought/fertility. The narrator’s assessment of this power imbalance is quite pessimistic, beginning with his reportage of his father’s foreshadowing of loss, “*I reckon if that creek ever dried up, we’d be stuffed. We’d have to sell up.”* Once the father has made this pronouncement, the boy begins to notice a particular crow which “*stared at me, through me, beyond me, as if summoning something from beyond the hills.*” It is suggested that the boy believes it is the crow which has brought the drought. In superstitiously believing the crow is an omen, the boy is able to transfer the blame for the loss of the farm onto an element of nature that he can perceive and understand rather than accept the enormity of the power of nature itself.

The first person narration internally focalizes on the credulous boy, positioning the reader to empathize with his defenselessness compared to natural forces outside his control. The boy is not a completely reliable narrator, however, because of his naïve insistence on the agency of the crow. “*It was just a bird on a fencepost, and yet somehow it was more*”. After he attempts to shoot the crow which floated “*like a dark shadow at a safe distance above”* him, the next day “*the crow was back, eyeing me. Mocking me.*” The crow symbolizes the boys growing anxiety about the fate of the farm which has been prompted by his father’s prescient words; the reader is prompted to sympathize with the boy’s growing anguish despite his delusional interpretation of the chain of events.

The idea that nature is beautiful yet untamable is enhanced through the poetic descriptions of aspects of the landscape throughout the text. The land is initially represented as being fertile through a simile likening the creek to a “*big green serpent, its head buried in a grove of mature gums to the south*”. It is also metaphorically “*a constant artery*”, which “*pulsed with life”,* “*carrying the crystal blood of some distant unseen heart deep under the pastures…*”. This personification of the creek suggests that nature itself is an enormous living entity which has the power to both give and take away. The contrasting descriptions of the creek in drought are no less evocative although now “*its banks were crisp and dingo-coloured, the once vital stream a cheerless stream of stagnant ponds”*. As the drought arrives, the author employs the rule of three and repeated negatives to represent the coming desolation, “*There was no howling wind, no violent red storm, no cataclysmic holocaust*.” The author adds to this description a rhetorical device in the form of a cumulative list to further emphasize the bleakness of drought, “Just *a continuing absence, a lack, and an endless blue sky, day after depressing day*”. Nature is powerful yet arbitrary in its changeability.

The capricious will of nature is further emphasized in the narrative’s text structure. Rather than moving satisfactorily from a state of equilibrium to disequilibrium and back again, the atmosphere is sinister at the very beginning and relentlessly bleak at the end. The seeds of complication are evident from the opening lines with the mention of the “*black crow*” with “*cold yellow eyes*” casting a pall over the farm. A sense of equilibrium and even of joy is then fleetingly conjured with the apostrophe to the creek, “*The creek. Oh, that beautiful creek…*”. The mood is broken by the dour prediction by the father that to lose the creek would be to lose the farm. The tension mounts as the days pass without rain; the farmer notices; the boy, initially, does not. The climax arrives slowly and with deliberation in the form of a drought which came “*like slow spreading oil”*. The harbinger crow “*presided over the whole unfolding disaster*”, a proxy for the malevolence of nature. The anticlimax of the boy attempting to shoot the crow, and perhaps break the drought, is to no avail; the conflict between man and nature is resolved by the defeat of man, “*I’ve sold the farm mate*”. It appears that the story has been told retrospectively by the boy. He is able to invest the crow with meaning only after all of the events have unfolded.

The text reinforces an environmentalist worldview which supports the notion that man is insignificant in comparison to the majesty, beauty, power and vagaries of nature. The crow superstitiously portends the coming drought in the mind of the naïve narrator but for the reader, the crow represents the unfeigned indifference of nature to man’s puny efforts to control it. In fact, the crow is malevolent with its “*cold yellow eyes*” and its accompanying motifs of shadow and cold. It has a “*black presence*”, it is “*nonchalant”* as it stares at the boy and it mirrors the boy’s stare with “*its eyes of frozen yellow*”. Nature holds no pity for the puny weakness of man. The underpinning environmentalist ideology is that man should accept his place on earth with more humility; he is no stronger or weaker than any other animal in the face of nature.

The conflict between man and nature is fittingly resolved with the tears of the narrator rather than those of nature in the form of life-giving rain, “*My tears came then, running from my cheeks and into the thirsty earth*”. This is ironic as the tears of man will always be insufficient to make up for the random deficiencies of nature. Nature continues to mock man as “*a cold wind sprang up from the west”* and all the boy could do was “*stare and tremble*”, presumably in awe and despair.

Notes:

* Take note of underlines t-c strategies. Recognize that there is a wide range of terms already known to you that you can apply. These terms can be integrated into the body of paragraphs.
* There may be more paragraphs here than you will need. I am just showing you some of the possibilities. For example, don’t overlook text structure as a possible strategy. You could use a combination of Todorov’s terms (equilibrium, disequilibrium) with the terms you should know from English (orientation, complication, climax, resolution etc.)
* The only way you will gain mastery of the skills required in this exam is through practice of planning and practice of writing. You should draft introductions and body paragraphs in response to this and other stimuli provided and send them through for feedback.
* As a bare minimum learn and understand all the terms on the QCAA strategy document.