Identifying Organizing Principles

Most of the prose and poetry extracts that you will get in the Paper 1 exam are ‘trying to do’ a limited number of two or three main things. These ‘main things’ (the phrase has been left vague on purpose) basically unify the text, they draw it together, they are the main points that the author wanted to get across and they are the ideas around which you can organize your commentary. If you have a good grasp of what the organizing principles of a text are then you will probably have a pretty good idea of ‘what this text is about’.

However, be careful: the organizing principles of a text are different to the basic story or the events that happen. You must understand the basic story to do well in the exam, but talking just about what happens or what the characters do isn’t going to enable you to score very highly. Organizing principles, on the other hand, look beyond what is basically happening to the message or ideas that the author is trying to convey to the reader. Diagrammatically it might look like this:

As you can see, these two sets of ideas work at quite different levels: the basic story level is concerned with what is happening in the text while the organizing principle level is concerned with how the reader is responding to / feels about what is going on in the text. If you find that your organizing principles are focused on things that happen on the story rather than things that happen in the reader then you are probably not really focused on the right things.

Your job when writing the commentary then basically breaks down into three main stages:

1) Work out the BASIC STORY of the text, what is happening
2) Work out the ORGANISING PRINCIPLES or how the reader responds / is meant to respond
3) Work out HOW the author has used literary features to create those organizing principles

What counts as an Organizing Principle?

Essentially, anything can count as an organizing principle, and not every text can be nicely bundled up in this way, but generally speaking organizing principles tend to fall into the following categories:

- The creation of a character and the reader’s judgment or response to this character
- The creation of a relationship between characters and the judgment or response to this
- The creation of a setting, either in terms of place or time
- The evocation of a mood, feeling or emotion
- The elucidation of a message, philosophy, theme or comment on life / the human condition

Often when you are analyzing a poem it will be possible to pick out a message, theme or comment because the poem is usually complete and so you should be able to fully understand what the author was trying to say. This is not always possible with the prose because you are usually given only an extract, not the complete thing. As such, when analyzing prose you might tend to focus more on the characters, relationships, settings and moods.