1.4 Literature: Prose Analysis

AQA 7712 · about 170 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions.

Cinder Row

Source written for Revision Library (original, copyright-free). An extract from an original prose narrative, composed in the tradition of British social-realist fiction for the purposes of A-level unseen prose analysis. This text is not extracted from, and does not paraphrase, any published or in-copyright novel.

The foundry breathed all night, and Nell had learned to breathe with it.

From her window at the end of Cinder Row she could see the tall stack lit orange from beneath,

a slow pulse against the dark, as though the town itself had a heart and had chosen,

for reasons she had never questioned, to keep it beating on the hill above the houses.

Her father worked the four-till-midnight shift, and when the hooter sounded she would count

the minutes it took him to walk the cinder path home, matching her breath to his footsteps

long before she could have heard them.

He came in that night smelling of iron and rain, and stood a moment in the doorway

shaking the wet from his cap, before he saw her sitting up.

'You should be asleep,' he said, not unkindly, and hung the cap on the nail behind the door

where it had hung, she supposed, every night of her life.

'I was counting,' she said. 'You were four minutes slower tonight.'

'Rain,' he said, as if that explained everything, and it did.

She had been six, or thereabouts, when she first understood that the row of houses

took its name not from poetry but from the cinders themselves, the grey ash that drifted

down from the stack on windless evenings and settled on the sills, the washing, the tops

of the privet hedges, until everything wore the same soft coat of forgetting.

Her mother, before she died, had scrubbed the step every morning as if the ash

were an insult that could be answered, and Nell still scrubbed it now from habit

more than hope, though she no longer believed the step could ever be truly clean.

Her father sat heavily at the table and did not speak for a while.

The clock on the mantel ticked through its small disagreements with itself,

fast on the hour, slow on the half, and neither of them had ever thought to have it mended,

because a broken clock, her father said once, was at least an honest one.

'They're closing the number three furnace,' he said at last, to the table rather than to her.

'Not this year. Maybe not next. But they're closing it.'

Nell said nothing. She thought of the stack, and its steady orange pulse,

and tried to imagine the hill gone dark, the town without its heartbeat,

and found that she could not, any more than she could imagine her own chest still.

'Will we go, then?' she asked. 'When it closes?'

Her father looked at her for a long moment, and something moved behind his eyes

that she would not have a word for until she was much older and had left the row herself,

gone looking, as young people do, for a version of home that did not smell of iron.

'This is Cinder Row,' he said, as if that were an answer, and perhaps, for him, it was enough.

'Where else would we go.'

Outside, the stack kept its patient light, indifferent to furnaces or to daughters,

and somewhere under the hill the fire that had outlived better men than her father

went on quietly consuming whatever was fed to it, and asking, in its wordless way, for more.

1 Re-read lines 1 to 14. Explore how the writer uses narrative viewpoint and structure to present the relationship between Nell and her father in this opening section.

(a) Explore how the writer uses narrative viewpoint and structure to present the relationship between Nell and her father in lines 1 to 14. **(10)**

(Total for Question 1 is 10 marks)

2 Using your knowledge of the changing fortunes of British heavy industry in the twentieth century, explain how this extract reflects social and historical context.

(Total for Question 2 is 8 marks)

3 Re-read lines 16 to 23. Explore how the writer presents Nell's relationship with her late mother through the description of the step.

(a) Explore how the writer presents Nell's relationship with her late mother through the description of the step in lines 16 to 23. **(10)**

(Total for Question 3 is 10 marks)

4 Analyse the writer's use of light and fire imagery across the extract as a whole.

(a) Analyse the writer's use of light and fire imagery across the extract as a whole, considering how this imagery develops from the opening to the closing paragraph. **(12)**

(Total for Question 4 is 12 marks)

5 Explore the significance of structure in this extract, considering how the writer moves between the present scene, memory and reflection.

(Total for Question 5 is 10 marks)

6 Explore the significance of the title 'Cinder Row' in relation to the extract as a whole.

(Total for Question 6 is 10 marks)

7 This extract can be read within a wider tradition of British working-class prose fiction.
Referring to at least one other prose text you have studied, compare how writers present the relationship between individuals and their industrial or working environment.

(Total for Question 7 is 12 marks)

8 Two critics have offered contrasting readings of the closing paragraph (lines 42 to 44): one describes it as 'bleakly deterministic', the other as 'quietly resilient'. Evaluate these two interpretations, using close reference to the writer's language.

(a) Evaluate the two interpretations of the closing paragraph ('bleakly deterministic' versus 'quietly resilient'), using close reference to the writer's language. **(15)**

(Total for Question 8 is 15 marks)

9 'The extract ultimately presents Cinder Row as a place that offers both entrapment and identity.' Using your knowledge of the whole extract and awareness of different critical approaches, evaluate this view.

(Total for Question 9 is 25 marks)

10 Explore how the writer creates a shift in tone and mood between the opening (lines 1 to 14) and the closing paragraph (lines 42 to 44).

(Total for Question 10 is 10 marks)

11 Nell's father says: 'This is Cinder Row... Where else would we go.' Explore how the writer presents ideas about home and belonging in this extract.

(Total for Question 11 is 20 marks)

Mark scheme · 1.4 Literature: Prose Analysis

Question 1

(a) **L4** Assured, perceptive analysis of viewpoint and structure, with well-selected, precise textual detail; consistently coherent, well-expressed argument using appropriate terminology.	**9-10**
(a) **L3** Clear, sustained analysis of viewpoint and/or structure, supported by apt textual detail; generally coherent expression with appropriate terminology.	**7-8**
(a) **L2** Some relevant comment on viewpoint or structure, with reasonable but sometimes generalised textual support; expression mostly clear.	**4-6**
(a) **L1** Limited or descriptive comment, with little clear link to viewpoint or structure; basic or narrative-retelling approach.	**1-3**
(a) **L0** Nothing worthy of credit.	**0**

(a) Indicative content:

- Close third-person narration focalised through Nell allows the reader privileged access to her private ritual of counting, building intimacy before her father even speaks.
- The delayed entrance of the father (lines 9-10) mirrors Nell's own waiting, so structure enacts the relationship rather than simply describing it.
- Free indirect style in 'and it did' (line 14) lets Nell's interpretation of her father's speech merge with the narrative voice, suggesting deep, unspoken understanding between them.
- The short, alternating dialogue exchange (lines 11-14) is structured almost like a private code, reinforcing a bond built on routine and brevity rather than open declaration.
- Candidates might note the withholding of exposition (we are not yet told about the mother, the furnace, or the town's fate) as a structural choice that keeps the focus tightly on the domestic, felt relationship first.

Question 2

Level 4 Detailed, well-integrated explanation of context, clearly and precisely linked to textual evidence; assured expression.	**7-8**
Level 3 Clear explanation of relevant context, linked to the text with reasonable precision.	**5-6**
Level 2 Some relevant contextual comment, though the link to the text may be general or under-developed.	**3-4**
Level 1 Limited or largely unsupported contextual comment, with minimal reference to the extract.	**1-2**
Level 0 Nothing worthy of credit.	**0**

Indicative content:

- The threatened closure of 'the number three furnace' (line 29) reflects the real decline of British steel and heavy manufacturing across the mid-to-late twentieth century, particularly in Yorkshire and the North.
- Shift-pattern work ('four-till-midnight shift', line 5) and the hooter (line 5) reflect the disciplined, factory-clock rhythms of industrial working-class life.
- The naming of the street after industrial waste ('Cinder Row') reflects how industry shaped not just employment but the physical and social geography of such towns, including housing built close to and dependent on the works.
- The father's fatalistic response ('This is Cinder Row... Where else would we go', lines 39-40) reflects the limited social and geographic mobility often available to industrial working-class families facing deindustrialisation.
- Candidates might also note the domestic gender roles implied (the mother's scrubbing, the father's shift work) as reflecting typical mid-twentieth-century working-class household patterns.

Question 3

(a) **L4** Assured, perceptive exploration of language choices, with precise and well-integrated textual detail; fluent, accurate expression.	**9-10**
(a) **L3** Clear exploration of language, supported by well-chosen textual detail; generally accurate expression.	**7-8**
(a) **L2** Some valid comment on language, with reasonable but occasionally general textual support.	**4-6**
(a) **L1** Limited, descriptive or narrative comment with minimal analytical engagement.	**1-3**
(a) **L0** Nothing worthy of credit.	**0**

(a) Indicative content:

- The extended metaphor of 'the same soft coat of forgetting' presents the ash as a slow erasure of memory and identity, against which the mother's scrubbing was a form of resistance.
- 'As if the ash were an insult that could be answered' presents the mother as defiant, almost personifying her grief/pride as active combat against the town's encroachment.
- Nell's continuation of the ritual 'from habit more than hope' shows the relationship persisting through inherited action even after belief in its purpose has faded, suggesting complicated, understated grief.
- The shift from 'truly clean' being possible (for the mother) to impossible (for Nell) marks a subtle generational and emotional distance, implying loss of faith as much as loss of a parent.
- Candidates might discuss the semantic field of domestic labour and cleanliness as a vehicle for exploring class, dignity and maternal love without direct emotional statement.

Question 4

(a) **L4** Discriminating analysis tracing the development of imagery across the whole extract, with precise, well-selected textual detail throughout; assured, controlled expression using accurate terminology.	**10-12**
(a) **L3** Clear, sustained analysis of imagery with good coverage of the extract, supported by apt detail; generally accurate expression.	**7-9**
(a) **L2** Some relevant analysis, but coverage may be partial (e.g. focused on only one part of the extract); reasonable expression.	**4-6**
(a) **L1** Limited or largely descriptive comment on imagery, with little sense of development.	**1-3**
(a) **L0** Nothing worthy of credit.	**0**

(a) Indicative content:

- Opens with the stack's orange pulse presented almost tenderly, as a 'heartbeat' that structures the family's life (lines 2-4).
- The recurring image of the furnace/fire is developed through the father's iron smell (line 9) and the closing image of the fire 'consuming whatever was fed to it' (lines 43-44), shifting from protective/domestic to hungry and threatening.
- Ash imagery (lines 17-22) presents the by-product of the same fire as a slow, smothering force linked to memory, cleanliness and grief.
- By the close, the personified fire is 'indifferent to furnaces or to daughters', a marked tonal shift from the earlier heartbeat image, suggesting the town's apparent benevolence was always illusory.
- Candidates might comment on the cyclical structure: the extract begins and ends with the stack/fire, framing the human drama within an indifferent industrial process that will outlast it.

Question 5

Level 4 Perceptive, well-organised exploration of structural choices across the whole extract, with precise textual support; fluent, controlled expression.	**9-10**
Level 3 Clear exploration of structure, supported by relevant textual detail; generally coherent expression.	**7-8**
Level 2 Some valid structural comment, with reasonable but occasionally general support.	**4-6**
Level 1 Limited or narrative-based comment with little structural awareness.	**1-3**
Level 0 Nothing worthy of credit.	**0**

Indicative content:

- The extract opens in a habitual/iterative mode ('had learned to breathe with it') before narrowing to a single specific night (line 9), moving the reader from general pattern to particular event.
- The flashback to age six (lines 16-23) interrupts the present scene, providing context for the ash/step motif before returning to the father at the table, allowing past and present to comment on each other.
- A proleptic aside ('until she was much older and had left the row herself', lines 37-38) briefly opens the narrative beyond the extract's timeframe, hinting at Nell's eventual departure and reframing the present scene as formative.
- The final paragraph pulls back from the domestic interior to an external, almost omniscient view of the stack and fire, structurally closing the extract on an image of indifferent permanence rather than personal resolution.
- Candidates might note how the news of the furnace closing (line 29) functions as a structural turning point, shifting the extract's register from tender domestic ritual to anxious uncertainty about the future.

Question 6

Level 4 Perceptive, wide-ranging exploration of the title's symbolic significance across the extract, with precise textual support; assured expression. **9-10**

Level 3 Clear exploration of the title's significance, supported by relevant detail from more than one part of the extract. **7-8**

Level 2 Some valid comment on the title, though support may be limited to a single moment in the text. **4-6**

Level 1 Limited, largely literal comment on the title with little exploration of significance. **1-3**

Level 0 Nothing worthy of credit. **0**

Indicative content:

- Literally, the row is named after cinders/ash from the foundry (lines 16-19), grounding the title in the extract's physical and industrial world.
- Symbolically, cinders/ash suggest residue, decay and the by-product of a process that consumes rather than creates, foreshadowing the eventual closure of the furnace.
- The 'soft coat of forgetting' (line 19) links the title to memory and erasure, connecting to the mother's death and Nell's fading connection to her ritual (lines 20-22).
- The father's line 'This is Cinder Row... Where else would we go' (lines 39-40) uses the title as shorthand for identity and belonging, suggesting the place-name has become inseparable from a sense of self with limited alternatives.
- Candidates might explore irony in a place named for waste product being the only home the family can imagine, or discuss how the title anchors an otherwise universal coming-of-age narrative in a specific, working-class industrial setting.

Question 7

Level 4 Perceptive, well-developed comparison, integrating precise detail from both texts and articulating clear connections and differences; assured expression. **10-12**

Level 3 Clear comparison with relevant detail from both texts, though the connection may be more developed for one text than the other. **7-9**

Level 2 Some valid comparative comment, though treatment may be largely sequential (discussing each text separately) rather than genuinely comparative. **4-6**

Level 1 Limited comment, with minimal genuine comparison or reference to a second text. **1-3**

Level 0 Nothing worthy of credit. **0**

Indicative content:

- Candidates may compare Cinder Row's presentation of industry as both a threat and a source of identity with a studied text's similar treatment of work and place (e.g. a novel or short story dealing with mining, mill, or factory communities).
- Comparisons might focus on how both texts use physical, sensory detail (smell, sound, light) to make an industrial setting feel oppressive or, conversely, familiar and comforting to those who live within it.
- Candidates might compare the use of a family/parental relationship as a lens for exploring wider social change, such as a father figure whose working life symbolises a declining industry or way of life.
- Strong responses will note similarities and differences in narrative distance and tone: whether the comparator text is more overtly political/critical of industrial conditions, or, like Cinder Row, blends critique with tenderness.
- Credit any genuinely comparative, well-substantiated reading regardless of which specific text is chosen, provided it engages meaningfully with individuals and their industrial/working environment.

Question 8

(a) **L5** Discriminating, independent evaluation of both interpretations, weighing them against precise textual evidence to form a convincing, well-substantiated personal judgement; assured expression.	**13-15**
(a) **L4** Clear, well-supported evaluation of both interpretations, reaching a reasoned personal judgement; controlled expression.	**10-12**
(a) **L3** Sound engagement with both interpretations, with relevant textual support, though evaluation may be more developed for one reading than the other.	**7-9**
(a) **L2** Some relevant comment on the interpretations, with reasonable but occasionally generalised textual support; limited independent judgement.	**4-6**
(a) **L1** Limited or largely descriptive response, restating the interpretations with minimal evaluation or textual support.	**1-3**
(a) **L0** Nothing worthy of credit.	**0**

(a) Indicative content:

- The 'bleakly deterministic' reading might point to 'indifferent to furnaces or to daughters' and the fire 'consuming whatever was fed to it' as language suggesting an impersonal, inescapable process that will continue regardless of human cost.
- The 'quietly resilient' reading might point to 'patient light' as suggesting endurance rather than menace, and to the wider extract's tender domestic detail as evidence that human warmth persists alongside industrial hardship.
- Strong evaluations will note that 'asking, in its wordless way, for more' can support either reading: as a sinister image of endless demand, or as a natural, almost neutral description of process without malice.
- Candidates might argue that the paragraph deliberately withholds a single fixed meaning, allowing the extract to end on ambiguity that reflects the family's own uncertain, unresolved position.
- The most successful answers will reach and justify a personal judgement (which reading, if either, is more convincing, or how the two might be reconciled) rather than simply presenting both sides.

Question 9

Level 6 Sophisticated, discriminating evaluation of the statement, sustaining a conceptualised, critically aware argument that integrates language, structure, context and alternative interpretations with precise, wide-ranging textual support; sophisticated, assured expression throughout.	**22-25**
Level 5 Assured, well-developed evaluation of the statement, integrating language/structure, context and some awareness of alternative readings, with well-selected textual detail; fluent, controlled expression.	**18-21**
Level 4 Clear, sustained evaluation with relevant use of context and/or alternative interpretation, supported by apt textual detail; generally coherent expression.	**14-17**
Level 3 Reasonable engagement with the statement, with some relevant textual and contextual support, though treatment of alternative interpretations may be limited or absent.	**10-13**
Level 2 Some relevant comment on the statement, with generalised or partial support; limited independent evaluation.	**6-9**
Level 1 Limited, largely descriptive or narrative response with minimal evaluative engagement with the statement.	**1-5**
Level 0 Nothing worthy of credit.	**0**

Indicative content:

- Entrapment might be evidenced through the father's fatalistic 'Where else would we go' (line 40), the threatened furnace closure (line 29) removing economic choice, and the cyclical, inescapable imagery of the fire that 'outlived better men' (line 43).
- Identity might be evidenced through the tender rituals that bind Nell to her father and, through the step, to her mother, suggesting Cinder Row is inseparable from selfhood as much as it is a trap.
- A social-realist/materialist critical approach might emphasise economic determinism, reading the family's rootedness as a consequence of limited industrial-era social mobility, foregrounding AO3 context (deindustrialisation, working-class housing).
- A more psychological or humanist approach might foreground the extract's intimate, sensory detail (counting footsteps, the honest broken clock, line 27) as evidence that identity and belonging are freely and warmly felt, not merely imposed.
- Nell's foreshadowed departure (lines 37-38) complicates a purely entrapment-based reading, suggesting that identity formed in Cinder Row can be carried beyond it, so entrapment and identity are not simply opposed but intertwined.
- The closing paragraph's ambiguous tone (see Q8) can be used as pivotal evidence for either critical position, and the strongest answers will use this ambiguity to develop a nuanced, personal conclusion rather than settling for one reading.
- Very strong responses might question the terms of the statement itself, for instance arguing that 'entrapment' and 'identity' are presented as inseparable rather than as a simple binary, reflecting the extract's overall refusal of easy resolution.
- Candidates should be rewarded for any well-substantiated personal response that engages seriously with the statement, whether they broadly agree, disagree, or qualify it, provided the argument is sustained and evidenced throughout.

Question 10

Level 4 Assured, precise exploration of tonal shift, drawing pointed contrasts between opening and closing language, with sophisticated, well-controlled expression. **9-10**

Level 3 Clear exploration of tonal shift, with relevant contrasting detail from both sections; coherent expression. **7-8**

Level 2 Some relevant comment on tone, though contrast between the two sections may be under-developed or one-sided. **4-6**

Level 1 Limited, largely descriptive comment on tone with little sense of shift or contrast. **1-3**

Level 0 Nothing worthy of credit. **0**

Indicative content:

- The opening's warm, intimate register (counting footsteps, the cap on its familiar nail) creates a tone of tenderness and security despite the industrial backdrop.
- By the close, the same stack is described as keeping 'its patient light, indifferent to furnaces or to daughters' (line 42), a marked tonal cooling from intimacy to impersonal indifference.
- The verb 'consuming' and the personified fire 'asking... for more' (lines 43-44) introduce a hungry, faintly menacing quality absent from the opening's protective heartbeat image.
- Candidates might note that the shift mirrors the emotional arc of the extract, from domestic security through the anxiety of the furnace-closure news (line 29) to a bleaker, more distanced final perspective.
- The closing zoom-out from intimate dialogue to an almost omniscient, impersonal narrative voice reinforces the tonal shift from human warmth to industrial/natural indifference.

Question 11

Level 5 Sophisticated, discriminating exploration of home and belonging, integrating precise, wide-ranging textual detail with a clear, sustained critical argument; assured, fluent expression throughout. **17-20**

Level 4 Assured, well-developed exploration with well-selected textual detail across most of the extract; coherent, controlled expression. **13-16**

Level 3 Clear exploration of home and belonging, supported by relevant textual detail, though coverage or depth may be uneven; generally coherent expression. **9-12**

Level 2 Some relevant comment, with reasonable but occasionally generalised or narrative-based support. **5-8**

Level 1 Limited, largely descriptive or narrative response with minimal analytical engagement with the theme. **1-4**

Level 0 Nothing worthy of credit. **0**

Indicative content:

- Home is presented first through small, repeated domestic rituals (the counting, the cap on the nail, the scrubbed step) that ground belonging in habit rather than sentiment.
- The father's fatalistic 'This is Cinder Row... Where else would we go' (lines 39-40) presents belonging as inevitability rather than active choice, raising questions about whether this is contentment, resignation or both.
- Nell's own eventual departure is foreshadowed ('gone looking... for a version of home that did not smell of iron', lines 37-38), suggesting the extract also explores the tension between inherited belonging and the desire to define home for oneself.
- The mother's absence, and Nell's continuation of her ritual 'from habit more than hope' (lines 20-22), suggests belonging can outlive both people and the belief that sustained it.
- The threatened closure of the furnace (line 29) destabilises the idea of home as fixed, since the town's identity and survival are shown to depend on an external, precarious economic force.
- The closing image of the indifferent fire (lines 42-44) implies that the sense of home the family constructs is fragile and, in a wider sense, unreciprocated by the industrial forces that shape it.
- Strong answers may consider how the extract balances a critical view of limited horizons with genuine tenderness towards working-class domestic life, avoiding a purely bleak or purely nostalgic reading.