‘The Other Side of the Dale’ by Gervase Phinn

Exploring the dales

Section 1 — Lines 1-56

1. How does Phinn’s use of adjectives indicate that he finds visiting this school a positive experience?

2. How does he contrast this with the obvious nervousness of the teacher Mrs Durdon?

3. How does he use language and syntax in paragraph 3 to establish the beauty and the bleak nature of the Yorkshire moors? Why is this important for the reader to appreciate?

4. How does Phinn show Joseph is an unusual and grown up boy?

5. How does he use syntax to emphasise Joseph’s knowledge and enthusiasm for the moors and its history? Do you get the impression that Phinn feels sorry for or is fascinated by Joseph?

Section 2 — Lines 57-104

1. How does Phinn use language and syntax to establish the noise of the school? How do you know it is a noise he enjoys (apart from the fact that he says so!)?

2. Why has Phinn used the accent and dialect of the children? Why has he included the children’s descriptions of the morning’s events?

3. Find the simile used to describe Miss Precious and analyse why he has used it. Why do you think he has called her Miss Precious?

4. How does he use language akin to that of a school report to highlight how positive the classroom was in the paragraph beginning line 79?

5. He describes the language of the child’s account as poetic. What does he mean by this and why has he included the account in this piece?

6. How apt is the child’s comment about penguins? (Look at the way the teacher is described.) What is Phinn aiming to achieve here?

Section 3 — Lines 105-166

1. How are the journal entries differentiated from the rest of the text? Why has Phinn reproduced them exactly as they were written?

2. What do these diary entries reveal about the school, how long it has been there and how it has changed?

3. What does Captain Mac’s description reveal about him and the state of education in the time after the war in Yorkshire? How does this contrast with what Phinn is seeing now?

4. Why do you think Phinn has reproduced Miss Precious’s paragraph about their history book in its entirety?

5. What do you learn about Yorkshire society and how can you tell that Miss Precious really enjoyed doing the project with the children?

6. What is added to our picture of Joseph in this paragraph? Miss Precious describes him as ‘very unusual’. Why, when we know this already, has Phinn structured his whole account so Miss Precious’ comment doesn’t come as a surprise?
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Section 4 — Lines 167-221

1. Look at Joseph’s speech. How do his words betray his precocious nature?

2. What does the story about Emily’s mother show about the education at this school?

3. How do the other children treat Joseph and what does this show us about how the other children see him? Does it suggest anything further about Joseph’s personality?

4. Which image in this section perhaps suggests that Phinn feels Joseph should be more of a little boy?

5. How does Miss P’s comment about Joseph’s knowledge parallel the comments in the old Inspector’s report? Is this a problem though?

General questions:

1. What expectations for the text are created by the title? Is there more than one way to read the title?

2. How does Gervase Phinn convey his appreciation of the work done at Barton Moor School?

3. How does Phinn bring the characters of Barton Moor School to life?

4. To what extent does this extract highlight show what inspectors were looking for in schools?

5. Explore the picture of Barton Moor school, its surroundings and its people that Phinn creates.

6. How does Phinn show that he finds Joseph a fascinating and unusual child?

7. How does this passage prove that Phinn admires and appreciates the work that the teachers are doing at Barton Moor School?