

Read carefully the opening section of Chapter One, *Stairs*. In what ways does Deane establish the style and concerns of Chapter One in the first two pages?

Opening overview, putting extract in context and forming first stage of the answer (AO1). Focus on structure (AO2).

Deane's novel is structured using a sequence of short episodes, each of the six chapters comprising several such smaller sections. Each episode is often only loosely connected to the others on either side of it, meaning the novel develops through a series of what might be called 'narrative vignettes'. While they are chronological, each subtitled with the month and year when the events it describes took place, Deane ensures by this method that the reader does not easily follow a cohesive narrative, but gradually pieces it together by making connections across the novel between the different vignettes.

Specific focus on selected extract, linked to question (AO1).

The opening section, *Stairs*, immediately establishes this style, revealing the novel as a memoir, establishing some of its key concerns and giving the reader an introduction to features which will not become significant until later in the text. Immediately apparent is the child's perspective, in his careful knowledge of the staircase's division into 'Eleven steps... to the turn of the stairs' and 'Three more... to the landing.' This precision is very reminiscent of a small child's mapping of his own small world, and the childishness is even more apparent in his response to his mother, where Deane employs the short sentences, punctuation and language of excitement: 'I was enthralled... We were haunted!' However, in this boyish enthusiasm for ghosts, which in his imagination transforms the house into a gothic setting, 'all cobweb tremors', the reader also perceives his childish lack of empathy and understanding. He is excited, whereas his mother is 'small and anxious'; he does not respond to her view that there is 'Somebody unhappy' on the stairs and at the end Deane shows he is powerless to respond to his mother 'crying quietly at the fireside'.

Focus on the writing: language, tone, punctuation (AO2)

Links and contrasts made with selected quotations (AO2).

Clear progression to new focus at paragraph opening (AO1).

The novel traces the boy's gradual growing understanding of his family, but this inability to grasp emotion is a

Specific link to another part of the text (AO1).	<p>key feature of the first stages of his life in Chapter One, perhaps most memorably described in the episode <i>Feet</i>, where his perspective on the circumstances leading to his sister's death comes from a vantage point under a table, a literal low perspective which gives the reader an understanding of events through a description of feet. The uncles 'had identical shoes, heavy and rimed with mud and cement', his father's laces are 'thonged round the back' and finally his father's comforting of his grieving mother is poignantly described through the movement of their shoes: 'One of his boots was between her feet. There was her shoe, then his boot, then her shoe, then his boot.' The writing, emphasised through the repeated 'then', lists exactly what the boy sees, dispassionately; it is the adult reader who recognises the poignancy. We see a similar lack of understanding with the boy's showing off the pistol, an act of childish bravado which leads to such serious consequences.</p>
Focus on writing; analysis and interpretation (AO2).	
Specific link to another part of the text (AO1).	
Clear progression to new focus at paragraph opening (AO1).	<p>While the boy longs to feel the presence on the stairs, it is significant that he displays no curiosity about its identity, nor does he question the presence of a ghost. Throughout the novel there is an acceptance of the spirit world, which is perhaps an aspect of the Catholicism of the family. This unsceptical acceptance is clearly apparent in the boy's response to meeting his dead sister Una in the graveyard, reflected in the ordinariness of the language used to describe her 'dressed in her usual tartan skirt and jumper, her hair tied in ribbons'. It is possible for the reader to respond to Una's appearance as a psychological manifestation of the boy's grief, and especially as the presence on the stairs is unseen, we can see this as a projection of the mother's grief. This becomes an important part of the novel; while the community may believe in ghosts, the reader can interpret them to be the reverberations of a past which continues, unresolved, to create grief in the present. The boy's quest in the novel is to learn that past and unearth the grief; it is therefore appropriate that <i>Stairs</i> places the novel's first focus there.</p>
Understanding of wider context of the novel (AO1).	
Focus on language (AO2).	
Suggestion of reader response as analysis (AO2).	
Linking ideas to the rest of the novel (AO1).	

Linking extract to wider text (AO1) using specific quotations (AO2).

Even at this stage, the boy longs to discover – ‘I don’t mind feeling it’ – while his mother’s imperatives attempt to protect him – ‘Don’t move... Don’t cross that window.’

Clear paragraph focus (AO1).

The boy at this stage is willing to experience because he does not comprehend the pain. By the end of the novel he does, and the narrative skilfully interweaves the open-eyed boy’s perspective with the mature narration of the adult remembering. This is clear in the artfulness of the section’s opening, with the short single sentence paragraph creating the initial tension:

Acknowledgement of narrative method (AO2).

‘On the stairs, there was a clear, plain silence.’

Detailed language focus to support point (AO2).

The comma after ‘clear’ slows the sentence down further, creating greater expectation, before this is followed by

Detailed analysis of structure to develop point (AO2).

a longer discursive paragraph about the stairs, using extended sentences, which for the moment dissipate the tension. It is reinforced immediately, though, with the

Analysis of tone to develop point (AO2).

imperatives of mother’s dialogue: ‘Don’t move’. This careful manipulation of tension is a striking way to begin a novel, and it also suggests the significance of the presence on the stairs, a significance which is not confirmed until later, though is augmented with hints in the section *Eddie*.

Quick link to another section (AO1).

Clear focus at paragraph opening (AO1).

This episode is largely narrated in dialogue and this dramatic method recreates the immediacy of the moment, together with the boy’s excitement mentioned earlier.

Focus on narrative method and language (AO2).

However, the shaping hand of the older narrator is also apparent, not only in the tension of the opening, but in some of the language use. Notable are the picture created in the landing window, where ‘the cathedral and the sky hung in the window frame’, and the evocative description of the faded lino pattern, which ‘had the look of a faint memory’. While such metaphoric descriptions remind us

Awareness of wider context (AO1).

of Deane’s other literary persona as a poet, they are also images of absolute resonance to the novel, in the attempt to ‘frame’ a narrative and the resilience of ‘memory’. Similar evocative and suggestive language is used towards the end of the section, such as the disruption caused by the

Analysis and interpretation (AO2).

unseen in ‘moiling darkness’ and the image of containment

and restraint in 'the redness locked behind the bars of the range.'

Clear closing statements drawing on previous essay (AO1).

In these ways, the nature of the text as memoir is established, while Deane gives the reader a number of starting points for concerns which are developed in the rest of the chapter and the novel. The shifts in the structure require the reader to make connections and unravel the mystery which the boy pursues, so that the reader, like the novel's hero, is 'reading in the dark'.

*1112 words*  
*164 words in title and quotations*  
*Total 948 words*

