

A Certain Oil Refinery, by Theodore Dreiser

1 There is a section of land very near New York, lying at the extreme southern point of the
2 peninsula known as Bayonne, which is given up to a peculiar business. The peninsula is a long
3 neck of land lying between those two large bays which extend a goodly distance on either hand,
4 one toward the city of Newark, the other toward the vast and restless ocean beyond Brooklyn.
5 Stormy winds sweep over it at many periods of the year. The seagull and the tern fly high over
6 its darksome roof-tops. Tall stacks and bare, red buildings and scores of rounded tanks spread
7 helter-skelter over its surface, give it a dreary, unkempt and yet not wholly inartistic appearance
8 which appeals, much as a grotesque deformity appeals or a masque intended to represent pain.

9 This section is the seat of a most prosperous manufacturing establishment, a single limb
10 of a many-branched tree, and its business is the manufacturing, or rather refining, of oil. Of an
11 ordinary business day you would not want a more inspiring picture of that which is known as
12 manufacture. Great ships, inbound and outbound, from all ports of the world, lie anchored at its
13 docks. Long trains of oil cars are backed in on many spurs of tracks, which branch from main-
14 line arteries and stand like caravans of steel, waiting to carry new burdens of oil to the uttermost
15 parts of the land. There are many buildings and outhouses of all shapes and dimensions which
16 are continually belching forth smoke in a solid mass, and if you stand and look in any direction
17 on a gloomy day you may see red fires which burn and gleam in a steady way, giving a touch of
18 somber richness to a scene which is otherwise only a mass of black and gray.

19 This region is remarkable for the art, as for the toil of it, if nothing more. A painter could
20 here find a thousand contrasts in black and gray and red and blue, which would give him ample
21 labor for his pen or brush. These stacks are so tall, the building from which they spring so low.
22 Spread out over a marshy ground which was once all seaweed and which now shows patches of
23 water stained with iridescent oil, broken here and there with other patches of black earth to
24 match the blacker buildings which abound upon it, you have a combination in shades and tones
25 of one color which no artist could resist. A Whistler could make wonderful blacks and whites of
26 this. A Vierge or a Shinn could show us what it means to catch the exact image of darkness at its
27 best. A casual visitor, if he is of a sensitive turn, shudders or turns away with a sense of
28 depression haunting him. It is a great world of gloom, done in lines of splendid activity, but full
29 of the pathos of faint contrasts in gray and black....

30 On a gray day or a stormy one, if you have a taste for the somber, you have here all the
31 elements of a gloomy labor picture which may not long endure, so steadily is the world
32 changing. On the one hand, masters of great force and wealth, penurious to a degree, on the other
33 the victims of this same penuriousness and indifference, dumbly accepting it, and over all this
34 smoke and gas and these foul odors about all these miserable chambers. Truly, I doubt if one
35 could wish a better hell for one's enemies than some of the wretched chambers here, where men
36 rove about like troubled spirits in a purgatory of man's devising; nor any mental state worse than
37 that in which most of these victims of Mother Nature find themselves. At the bottom nothing but
38 darkness and thickness of wit, and dullness of feeling, let us say, and at the top the great brilliant
39 blooms known to the world as the palaces and the office buildings and the private cars and the art
40 collections of the principal owners of the stock of this concern. For those at the top, the brilliancy
41 of the mansions of Fifth Avenue, the gorgeousness of the resorts of Newport and Palm Beach,
42 the delights of intelligence and freedom; for those beneath, the dark chamber, the hanging
43 smoke, pallor, foul odors, wretched homes. Yet who shall say that this is not the foreordained
44 order of life? Can it be changed? Will it ever be, permanently? Who is to say?

1. The primary rhetorical strategy in introduction paragraph of the passage (lines 1-8) is
- a. generalization
 - b. definition of key terms
 - c. direct address to the audience
 - d. visually powerful description**
 - e. outline of key arguments

ANS: D

Rationale: The passage as a whole is primarily a visually powerful description of the effects of the oil and gas industry on a particular area of land. It begins, appropriately enough, with a powerful description that introduces the area that will be discussed further in the passage. The focus of the introduction is and specific rather than generalized.

2. In context, “helter-skelter” (line 7) connotes:
- a. disorderly haste
 - b. confusion
 - c. tumultuous feelings
 - d. haphazard disregard of order**
 - e. hurry

ANS: D

Rationale: Helter-skelter can have any of the above connotations; however, in this context, the reference suggests that the “Tall stacks and bare, red buildings and scores of rounded tanks” were spread over the surface of the land without care for order and upkeep of the area.

3. In lines 19-21, the author most directly implies which of the following?
- a. The land is useless for any purpose.
 - b. The landscape possesses a strangely appealing beauty.**
 - c. The region should be set aside as a preserve for artists.
 - d. Painters could need a wide range of colors and hues to capture the imagery of the place.
 - e. The area is rich with possibility for work and industry.

ANS: B

Rationale: “Despite the haphazard disorder of the place, there is a strangely appealing beauty about it. Using primarily visual terms, the author describes the scene as a painter might see it, with it’s range of bleak colors and oddly shaped buildings.”

4. These sentences, in lines 25-29, include an example of which of the following rhetorical devices? “A Whistler could make wonderful blacks and whites of this. A Vierge or a Shinn could show us what it means to catch the exact image of darkness at its best.”
- a. hyperbole
 - b. allusion**
 - c. personification
 - d! all of these
 - e! none of these

ANS: B

Rationale: These sentences include allusions to three artists: James Whistler, Daniel Vierge, and Earl Shinn. All three artists had masterful examples of scenes painted with dark colors and stark

images. The sentences do not include hyperbole (exaggeration) or personification of objects or ideas.

5. In lines 30-24, the speaker makes a comparison between
- a. grey, stormy days and bright, sunny days on the peninsula
 - b. refinery owners and refinery workers**
 - c. the old world of wealth and a new world of busy workers
 - d. the beauty of the landscape and smelly interior of the buildings
 - e. generous masters and miserable workers

ANS: B

Rationale: In these lines, the speaker compares the “masters of great force and wealth”, who own the Standard Oil Company, to the laborers who work in the “miserable chambers” of the refinery. The speaker uses this comparison to suggest that the rich and selfish (“penurious to a degree”) profit from the workers, who accept their victimization as they work in miserable conditions.

6. The “purgatory of man’s devising” mentioned in lines 34-37 can be inferred to be a consequence of
- I the “penurious” nature of the “masters of great force and wealth” (line 32)
 - II the dumb acceptance of the workers of their miserable working conditions (lines 33-34)
 - III “the pathos of faint contrasts in gray and black” in the visual landscape (line 29)
- a. I only
 - b. II only
 - c. III only
 - d. I and II only**
 - e. I, II, and III

ANS: D

Rationale: The description of the working environment as a kind of hell suggests a reference back to previously established ideas about the deliberate participation of the owners and the workers to create the misery. In this instance, the speaker implies that the workers “dumbly accept” their miserable working conditions that are created in part by the profit-hungry company owners. The bleak appearance of the visual landscape is really a consequence of man’s actions; though it contributes to the misery of the environment, it isn’t a cause of the misery.

7. Lines 37-40 feature an appeal to
- a. empathy
 - b. shared religious belief
 - c. shared values
 - d! all of these
 - e! none of these

ANS: A

Rationale: These lines include an appeal to a sense of empathy for the workers, who endure “darkness and thickness of wit, and dullness of feeling,” while the “principal owners of the stock of this concern” enjoy the “brilliant blooms” of “palaces”, “office buildings”, “private cars” and “art collections.”

8. The series of rhetorical questions that conclude the passage serves which of the following functions?

- a. leads readers to question a common assumption
- b. implies a negative answer
- c. sets up a direct answer statement
- d. suggests that the question is unanswerable
- e. encourages readers to question their own conceptions**

ANS: E

Rationale: Rhetorical questions can serve a variety of functions depending on type and context. This particular series of rhetorical questions encourages readers to examine their own mental images of the human and environmental damages caused by the oil refinery, and perhaps, by extension, their own participation in the creation of “a purgatory of man’s devising” in their role as consumers of the refinery’s products.