

Touching the Void – Exam Preparation

To Achieve you must

- ✓ Focus on the question.
- ✓ Use effective quotations to prove your points.
- ✓ Explain the **effects of language** on the reader.
- ✓ Include a range of points in your answer.

To go beyond and Achieved you must

- ✓ Keep the **focus on the question** all the way until the end of your answer.
- ✓ Write with insight – get to the core of what the writer is trying to say.
- ✓ Use quotation analytically.
- ✓ Make evaluative comments on **language / structure**.
- ✓ Suggest different interpretations of the text.

Other things to remember!

- ✓ Re-read the novel several times before the examination.
- ✓ Keep thinking about quotations that you could use in your answer. Memorise a few key ones that support a particular question. Also have a back up...

Why study this text?

This is a vivid, intense and powerful story of a horrifying adventure in the Peruvian Andes. Two experienced climbers, Joe Simpson and Simon Yates, set out to conquer the mountain Siula Grande. They do indeed achieve their aim, but disaster strikes on the way down and Simon has to make an impossible decision – should he cut the rope holding Joe, thereby saving his own life, or should he stay attached, leading to certain death for both of them? The subsequent chapters relate how Joe managed to return to camp, in agony and often literally ‘out of his mind’.

This true story will appeal to all those who like to experience tales of adventure, adversity and endurance. It shows the triumph of the human spirit, the immense will to survive and the innate strength we have within us to succeed. It is partly factual travel writing and partly autobiographical, but also falls into the genre of literary non-fiction. The variety of themes it encompasses ensures its appeal to all kinds of reader, and there is also much to comment on in the use of language and literary techniques. There is no requirement for specialist knowledge of mountaineering to understand the many inspirational messages in this book.

Background and context

In 1985 climbers Joe Simpson and Simon Yates went to the Cordillera Huayhuash in Peru to climb Siula Grande. At 6344 metres it is the second highest mountain in the range and previously unconquered. They succeeded in their attempt to be the first to reach the summit, but disaster struck on the way down when Joe broke his leg. Joe's survival and his account of it have earned its place as one of the most remarkable pieces of mountaineering lore in history. It is not without controversy. Was Simon right to cut the rope? Shouldn't he have held on as long as he could to give Joe more of a chance to work out a solution? Joe, on the other hand, has always offered complete support for Simon's actions. He is vindicated by the probability that both would have died if he had held on. Cutting the rope freed Simon to seek shelter from the storm, and allowed for the possibility that Joe would be dropped to a spot where he could shelter from the weather. Simon was able to climb down to base camp and spent time regaining his strength. When Joe finally arrived, Simon and Richard (who had been waiting at base camp) were intending to leave in the morning. If Simon had not returned to the camp ahead of Joe, Richard would probably have left well before Joe had managed to get to camp. Without anyone to help him out of the mountains, Joe would have died there. So, by cutting the rope Simon actually saved both their lives. This is not to say that he didn't suffer extreme feelings of guilt and thought that he had in fact killed Joe.

When does the action take place?

The action takes place in 1985. Joe's survival and his recollection of events have made *Touching the Void* one of the most remarkable pieces of literary non-fiction.

Where does the action take place?

The action takes place in the Peruvian Andes-remote, unfamiliar and often unconquered mountain territory even for the most experienced mountaineer.

Touching The Void Plot Overview

Touching the Void tells the powerful story of two climbers – Joe Simpson and Simon Yates – and their expedition to climb the daunting west face of the Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes. The story follows the men as they attempt this daring feat for the first time; no other climbers have ever endeavoured to climb the Siula Grande. Amongst their fellow mountaineers, if the men were successful, this would be considered a massive achievement.

Joe and Simon overcome significant obstacles on the first few days of their expedition, including snowstorms and dangerous terrain, to arrive at the summit on day three of their trip. When the men stand at the summit they are effectively four miles above sea level; an incredible achievement.

However, as the men attempt their descent down the dangerous North Ridge, disaster strikes the mountaineers when Joe falls and breaks his leg. In an attempt to rescue Simpson using a complicated rope manoeuvre, Yates inadvertently lowers Simpson off a cliff. In order to save himself from near-certain death, Yates is forced to cut the rope joining them together.

Simpson wakes to find himself on a small ledge. He assumes – rightly – that Yates will think he is dead. In turn, Simpson must find his own way back to safety and proceeds to crawl, walk and struggle back to the base camp.

Touching the Void-Characters

Joe Simpson:

- Joe is the author of the book and is one of the two climbers attempting to climb the west face of Siula Grande.
- He describes the ascent of Siula Grande with Simon P15.
- Joe reaches the summit via the west face P44.
- Joe falls down an ice cliff and shatters his leg P66.
- He is then lowered down the mountain by Simon but falls into a crevasse when Simon cuts the rope P76-109.
- Joe escapes the crevasse P141.
- He crawls off the mountain in spite of his injury, lack of food and water P145-95.
- He makes it safely back to camp P195.

Other points to note:

- Joe is the narrator for most of the novel.
- Note how he changes in the novel: (i) at the beginning he seems thoughtful and focused (ii) he later admits to making rash choices that cause the accident (iii) he recounts his pain and at times is delusional-we should question/consider how much of these events have been re-interpreted on hindsight/looking back
- You must also point out the changes in his mental state and emotions but more importantly his determination and strength to survive.

Simon Yates:

- Simon is the other climber attempting to climb the west face of Siula Grande.
- He narrates some of the events in the novel.
- Simon begins to climb Siula Grande with Joe P15.
- Simon reaches the summit with Joe P44.
- Simon slips off the edge of the ridge P47.
- After helping Joe on the descent, Simon cuts the rope when Joe falls off an ice cliff and allows Joe to fall into a crevasse, presuming him to be now dead P101.
- Simon descends the mountain alone (P118), meets Richard at base camp and tells him the truth P127-29.
- Simon finds Joe outside the tents at base camp and arranges for him to get to a hospital P 203-07.

Other points to note:

- Simon's character is shaped by events in the novel, more so than Joe's.
- He changes dramatically over the course of the book.

- Note the contrasts: (i) at the beginning he is optimistic and brave (ii) he ignores Joe's caution about the weather (iii) on the mountain it is up to Joe to persuade Simon that there is a route, even though Simon more often than not takes the lead (iv) at the end of the book Simon is shown as angry and confused, but then efficient in his help for Joe.

Richard Hawkings:

- Richard meets Joe and Simon in Lima and stays at their base camp for the entire expedition.
- He gets as far as base camp and suffers from altitude sickness and decides he will venture no further P3.
- He stays at base camp while Joe and Simon do test climbs P6.
- Richard walks with Joe and Simon until the going gets too tough P15.
- Richard looks after Simon on his return P153.
- Richard presses Simon to leave for Lima P172.
- Richard holds Joe's leg as Simon inspects the damage P199.

Other points to note:

- Richard is a minor character, but he plays an important part in helping us understand the events.
- He represents the outside audience that Simon will have to face when he returns from the expedition.
- It is easier for us to empathise with the Richard's reactions when one of the climbers does not return than it is to consider the reactions of people we have not met in the book.
- He acts as a **plot device** in helping us gauge our understanding and reactions to events as well as when Richard suggests he and Simon leave base camp in chapter 12.

The Local Villagers:

- These are a group of people who Simon, Joe and Richard call on for supplies and help.
- They give Richard a place to stay when he gets lost on his way to base camp P4.
- They sell homemade cheese and provide other food supplies to the climbers P12.
- The girls smile sadly at Simon, showing sympathy for his loss of Joe P176.
- The girls expect to take some of Joe's possessions as they are no longer needed P177.
- Spinoza haggles over the price of the mules that will get Joe off the mountain P203.

Other points to note:

- The main role of the villagers in the book is their reaction to the problems the men face on the mountain.
- When Richard is lost he has to 'negotiate' for food and shelter.
- When Joe needs to get down the mountain, near death, Simon has to strike a deal with Spinoza.
- As with the environment, there is little sense of compassion with the locals-their job is survival and the outsiders bring items they need.

Key Quotes on Simon-what do YOU think they SUGGEST?

- "I envied Simon his carefree take-it-as-it-comes attitude." P6

- “He was an easy friend: dependable, sincere, ready to life as a joke...that touch of madness that makes few people special.” P6
- “He had an odd air of detachment.” P69
- “He had suddenly become stern and efficient.” P198
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Key Quotes on Joe-what do YOU think they SUGGEST?

- “I resolved to try some that very night.” P4
- “The sudden fright still had me breathing hard and it annoyed me to see Simon climb easily over the difficulties and know that I had lost control and let fear get the better of me.” P38
- “I looked back and was amazed to see that Joe had started traversing away from the cliff. He was trying to help himself by contouring round the small rise in front of him.” P72
- “...like the paintings by Titian of grossly fat nudes that had mesmerised me at fourteen.” P149

Other Key Quotes:

- “...I relished this moment when I could be entirely alone.” P2 **Isolation**
- “...4,500 foot West Face had so far defeated all attempts.” P2 **Foreshadowing**
- Joe on Simon: “I envied Simon his carefree take it as it comes attitude.” P6 **Relationships**
- Joe on Simon: “There were few other people I could have coped with for so long. Simon was everything I was not, everything I would like to have been.” P6 **Relationships**
- “...the weather had taken a turn for the worse and dark threatening clouds were rapidly converging on our exposed position.” P12 **Foreshadowing and Pathetic Fallacy**
- Simon-“Get moving, I don’t like it here.” P22 **Foreshadowing**
- “For the first time we could see the summit...it looked like bad weather was on the way.” P36 **Foreshadowing**
- “Frustration and the mounting exhaustion maddened me to a fury which I knew would be vented on Simon if he came close enough.” P63 “...we were...very much alone...” P68 **Isolation**
- “Simon would not be able to get me up it. He would leave me. He had no choice. Left here? Alone? I felt cold at the thought.” P68 **Isolation/Relationships/Survival**
- “In an instant an uncrossable gap had come between us and we were no longer a team working together.” P70 **Isolation/Relationships/Survival**
- “You’re fucked, matey. You’re dead...no two ways about it!” P71 **PoV/Relationships**
- “I was alive and for the moment that was all I could think about.” P102 **Survival/Relationships**
- “Where Joe was, or whether he was alive, didn’t concern me in the long silence after cutting the rope.” P102 **Survival/Relationships**
- “...he had gone. Had I killed him? I felt numb.” P102 **Survival/Relationships/Short Snappy**
- “The rope jolted...So! It ends here. Pity! I don’t want to disappear without a trace. They’d never know we did it.” P106 **Short Snappy/Ellipsis**
- “Cut! I couldn’t take my eyes from it.” P114 **Short Snappy/Survival/ Relationships**
- “Something prevented me from leaving.” P172 **Dramatic Irony**
- Richard to Simon-“...he’s not coming back. You know it...I think we should go.” P172 **Relationships/Richard as plot device**
- “The voice countered this. I lay still and listened to the argument.” P181 **Survival**
- “You saved my life you know. It must have been terrible for you that night. I don’t blame you. You had no choice...You did all that you could have done. Thanks for getting me down.” P201 **Relationships/Survival**
- “Some would argue that there was no decision to be made; that cutting the rope and the powerful symbol of trust and friendship it represents should never have entered my mind. Others say that it was simply a matter of survival.” P212 **Survival/Symbolism**

Key Words for Language and Structure:

Multiple Narrative- when we hear both perspectives. Foreshadowing- Hinting something is going to happen.

Pathetic Fallacy- using the weather to reflect the danger. First person- we hear Joe's voice and true emotions.

Chapter Titles- to create tension and foreshadow. *The Voice*- used to give us an insight to Joe's deterioration.

Use of Adjectives- to vividly set the scene for the reader.

Use of climbing terminology- makes it harder for the reader to access the language used by him, makes it professional, Joe knows what he is talking about, a clear climbing focus.

Short sentences- reflect the out of control feeling that Joe is trying to give the reader.

Personification- describing something as if it is a real person. Joe personifies the mountains to make them seem alive.