

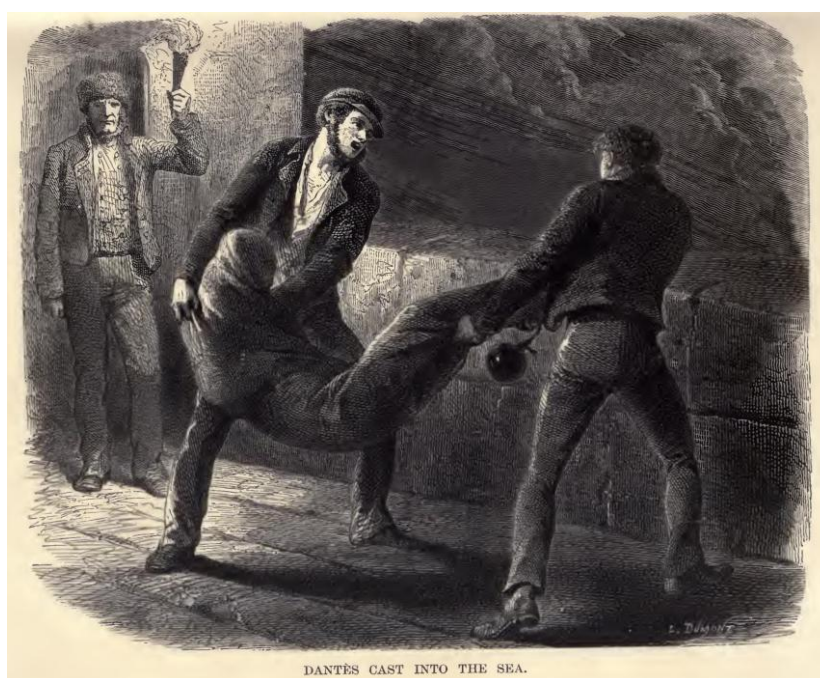
The Count of Monte Cristo – Written Comprehension

Optional time limit: 45 minutes

This sample paper shows one style of resources available from 11 Plus Lifeline. For more resources, visit www.11pluslifeline.com. Detailed solutions begin on page 7.

Edmond Dantès, an innocent man, has spent 14 years as a prisoner in the Château d'If: a castle perched on a rock in the Mediterranean sea, just outside Marseilles. At last he has the chance to escape, by breaking into the cell of a dead friend, hiding the body in his own bed, and sewing himself into the burial sack. He expects to be carried out of the prison and buried in the cemetery. When everybody has gone away, he hopes, he will be able to dig his way out of the grave and escape by swimming to freedom.

The Count of Monte Cristo and The Three Musketeers are the most famous books by Alexandre Dumas père. Both are tremendous adventure novels, which I strongly recommend.



At last, footsteps were heard on the stairs. Edmond felt that the moment had arrived, summoned up all his courage, held his breath, and would have been happy if at the same time he could have repressed the throbbing of his veins. The footsteps paused at the door. Dantès guessed that the two grave-diggers had come to take him.

- 5 The door opened, and a dim light reached Dantès' eyes through the coarse sack that covered him; he saw two shadows approach his bed, a third remaining at the door with a torch in its hand. The men took the sack by its ends.

"He's heavy, though, for an old and thin man," said one, as he raised the head.

10 "They say every year adds half a pound to the weight of the bones," said another, lifting the feet.

"Have you tied the knot?" inquired the first speaker.

"What's the knot for?" thought Dantès.

15 They deposited the supposed corpse on the stretcher. Edmond stiffened himself in order to play the part of a dead man, and then the party, lighted by the man with the torch, who went first, ascended the stairs. Suddenly he felt the fresh and sharp night air, and Dantès knew that the mistral was blowing. It was a sensation in which pleasure and pain were strangely mingled.

20 The bearers went on for twenty paces, then stopped, putting the stretcher down on the ground. One of them went away, and Dantès heard his shoes striking on the pavement.

"Where am I?" he asked himself.

"Really, he is by no means a light load!" said the other bearer, sitting on the edge of the hand-barrow.

Dantès' first impulse was to escape, but fortunately he did not attempt it.

25 They advanced fifty paces farther, and then stopped to open a door, then went forward again. The noise of the waves, dashing against the rocks on which the château is built, reached Dantès' ear distinctly as they went forward.

"Bad weather!" observed one of the bearers. "Not a pleasant night for a dip in the sea."

30 "Why, yes, the old man runs a chance of being wet," said the other; and then there was a burst of brutal laughter.

Dantès did not understand the joke, but his hair stood erect on his head.

"Well, here we are at last," said one of them.

35 "A little farther—a little farther," said the other. "You know very well that the last was stopped on his way, dashed on the rocks, and the governor told us next day that we were careless fellows."

They ascended five or six more steps, and then Dantès felt that they took him, one by the head and the other by the heels, and swung him to and fro.

"One!" said the grave-diggers, "two! three!"

40 And at the same instant Dantès felt himself flung into the air like a wounded bird, falling, falling, with a rapidity that made his blood curdle. Although drawn downwards by the heavy weight which hastened his rapid descent, it seemed to him as if the fall lasted for a century. At last, with a horrible splash, he darted like an arrow into the ice-cold water, and as he did so he uttered a shrill cry, stifled in a moment by his immersion beneath the waves.

45 Dantès had been flung into the sea, and was dragged into its depths by a thirty-six-pound shot tied to his feet.

The sea is the cemetery of the Château d'If.

50 Dantès, although stunned and almost suffocated, had sufficient presence of mind to hold his breath, and as his right hand (prepared as he was for every chance) held his knife open, he rapidly ripped up the sack, extricated his arm, and then his body; but in spite of all his efforts to free himself from the shot, he felt it dragging him down still lower. He then bent his body, and by a desperate effort severed the cord that bound his legs, at the moment when it seemed as if he were actually strangled. With a mighty leap he rose to the surface of the sea, while the shot dragged down to the depths the 55 sack that had so nearly become his shroud.

Dantès waited only to get breath, and then dived, in order to avoid being seen. When he arose a second time, he was fifty paces from where he had first sunk. He saw overhead a black and tempestuous sky, across which the wind was driving clouds that occasionally suffered a twinkling star to appear; before him was the vast expanse of 60 waters, sombre and terrible, whose waves foamed and roared as if before the approach of a storm. Behind him, blacker than the sea, blacker than the sky, rose phantom-like the vast stone structure, whose projecting crags seemed like arms extended to seize their prey, and on the highest rock was a torch lighting two figures.

He fancied that these two forms were looking at the sea; doubtless these strange grave- 65 diggers had heard his cry. Dantès dived again, and remained a long time beneath the water. This was an easy feat to him, for he usually attracted a crowd of spectators in the bay before the lighthouse at Marseilles when he swam there, and was unanimously declared to be the best swimmer in the port.

When he came up again the light had disappeared.

Adapted from *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas, père

1. "Edmond felt that the moment had arrived" (line 1).

What "moment" does this refer to? (1)

.....

.....

2. Why does Edmond Dantès "hold his breath" (line 2)? (1)

.....

.....

3. Why do the men look like "shadows" (line 6) to Dantès? (2)

.....

.....

4. Dantès feels "pleasure" (line 17) because when he notices the wind, this tells him that at last he is outside the prison.

However, why do you think he also feels "pain"?

Clearly explain two likely reasons. (You will not get any marks for suggesting that he is cold.) (3)

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

5. In lines 28-29, the two bearers exchange a joke.

(a) Clearly explain the joke, referring to what both bearers say. (3)

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

(b) Although Dantès does not understand the joke, his hair stands up (line 31).

What is Dumas trying to communicate by including this detail? (2)

.....

.....

.....

6. Using your own words, explain why the governor told the bearers that they were “careless fellows” (line 35). (2)

.....

.....

.....

7. The paragraph from line 39 to line 44 contains two similes.

(a) Write down these similes. You do not need to write complete sentences. (2)

Simile 1:

Simile 2:

(b) Explain clearly what each simile tells us about Dantès' fall. (4)

Simile 1:

.....

Simile 2:

.....

8. "The sea is the cemetery of the Château d'If."

Why do you think this sentence has its own paragraph? Make one point and explain it clearly. (2)

.....

.....

.....

.....

9. (a) Write down a phrase from lines 48 to 69 which helps us to imagine Dantes' fear. (1)

.....

(b) Explain how this phrase is effective. (2)

.....

.....

.....

TOTAL 25 MARKS

Solutions

1. "Edmond felt that the moment had arrived" (line 1).

What "moment" does this refer to? (1)

The moment when he will be taken away for burial.

Any similar answer which makes clear that he now expects to be taken away is fine.

You could also write an answer like this:

This is the moment when he will know whether his trick has succeeded.

The important thing is to show understanding of what is happening at the start of the passage.

Marking: Any reasonable answer. [1 mark]

2. Why does Edmond Dantès "hold his breath" (line 2)? (1)

He wants to appear dead, so the guards mustn't see him breathe.

The second part of this answer is the important bit.

It would be **incorrect** to write "because he is scared". The sentence clearly presents holding his breath as a **decision**, after "summoning up all his courage".

Marking: "So the guards won't see him breathing", or an equivalent point. [1 mark]

3. Why do the men look like "shadows" (line 6) to Dantès? (2)

He is looking through the "coarse sack". This makes everything seem faint and blurred.

The fact that Dantès is looking through the cloth of the sack is worth 1 mark. For the second, you have to explain clearly why this makes the men seem like "shadows".

If you don't mention the sack, but say that the light is "dim", or that it is behind the men, you can only get 1 mark: these things are true, but the text makes clear that the important thing is the fabric which Dantès has to look through.

Marking: See above. [2 marks]

4. Dantès feels “pleasure” (line 17) because when he notices the wind, this tells him that at last he is outside the prison.

However, why do you think he also feels “pain”?

Clearly explain two likely reasons. (You will not get any marks for suggesting that he is cold.) (3)

He might be scared of being buried, because he can't be sure that he will be able to dig himself free. He might also feel sad because the fresh wind makes him think of the 14 years he has wasted in a prison cell.

The two most likely reasons are given here, but any sensible comment will also get credit.

This is a comprehension question, and your answer needs to make sense in the light of the text. Beware of guessing!

However, the following point **would be acceptable**, because it is a reasonable response to what we know:

He might be sad because the wind reminds him of the outside world, and he wonders what has happened to his family and friends while he has been in prison.

On the other hand, the following point **would only get 1 mark**, because even though it is possible, it is **very much a guess**:

He might be sad because the wind reminds him of how long he has been shut away. If he had a favourite pet, it is unlikely to still be alive.

Whatever you write, make sure that you clearly explain how the wind is relevant.

Marking: 1 mark for each sensible point. 1 mark for each clear explanation. **[4 marks]**

5. In lines 28-29, the two bearers exchange a joke.

(a) Clearly explain the joke, referring to what both bearers say. (3)

They are going to throw Dantès (who they think is a dead body) into the sea. Because of the stormy weather, the first bearer jokes that it is a bad night for a swim (“a dip”): he is imagining that the body is a living person. The second bearer jokes that the body has “a chance” of getting “wet” – which he finds funny, because this is actually certain: they are going to throw him into the depths.

Few things are harder than explaining a joke – and few things are less funny than a joke that has been explained!

Unfortunately, in an exam you have no choice.

The main thing to communicate is that **they are laughing at the idea of the body as a living person going for a swim**. Making this point clearly is worth 1 mark. The other 2 marks are for a clear reference to how this joke is made by each of the bearers. For the full 3 marks, you need to show an understanding of how the second bearer’s point is a little different from his colleague’s.

If your answer suggests that the bearers **really know** (or suspect) they are throwing a living person into the sea, **you will lose marks** – probably scoring a maximum of 1 mark.

Marking: See above. Answers do not need to be quite as thorough as the example, which is illustrative. [3 marks]

(b) Although Dantès does not understand the joke, his hair stands up (line 31).

What is Dumas trying to communicate by including this detail? (2)

Dantès hasn’t worked out for sure that he is going to be thrown into the sea, but the bearers’ talk makes him wonder for the first time whether this is a possibility.

Another answer might be:

Dantès doesn’t understand, but he has worked out that something strange and unexpected may be about to happen.

And here’s another option:

Although Dantès doesn't fully understand, Dumas wants to show us that the prisoner's unconscious mind has worked out that a terrible thing is going to happen.

I can't think of any other possibilities, but perhaps you can!

Marking: 2 marks for a sensible idea, clearly explained. 1 mark if unclear or a little far-fetched, but not completely absurd. **[2 marks]**

6. Using your own words, explain why the governor told the bearers that they were "careless fellows" (line 35). **(2)**

The previous time a prisoner died, the bearers didn't throw him far enough, and he landed on rocks rather than in the sea.

You need to say that a previous body landed on the rocks (or the shore, or didn't reach the water) – for 1 mark – and that this was because it wasn't thrown far enough, or that the bearers didn't stand close enough to the edge, for the second mark.

Marking: See above. Deduct a mark if own words not consistently used: if there are quotations from the text, whether acknowledged or not. **[2 marks]**

7. The paragraph from line 39 to line 44 contains two similes.
(a) Write down these similes. You do not need to write complete sentences. **(2)**

Simile 1: "like a wounded bird"

Simile 2: "like an arrow"

Be careful! "It seemed to him as if the fall lasted for a century" is **not** a simile. It is just a statement of how long the fall seemed to him.

- However, it is almost certainly an example of **hyperbole**: an exaggeration.

Marking: Correct answers only. **[2 marks]**

(b) Explain clearly what each simile tells us about Dantès' fall. (4)

Simile 1: His body flaps uselessly, unable to stop itself from falling.

Simile 2: He hits the water travelling straight and rapidly.

You have to explain "**what**" each simile "tells us", but you don't need to explain **how** it does this – for instance, you don't need to discuss exactly why a "wounded bird" would fall in this way. You need to focus on the character in the story.

- If the question had said something more general, such as "Explain why each simile is effective", you **would** have needed to talk about the image itself, as well as what it tells us about the fall.

For each simile, you either need to make two brief points (see the second example answer), or make a single point with extra explanation (the first example).

Marking: See the last paragraph above. If no second point or further explanation of a simile, award 1 mark for that part of the answer. Also deduct marks for lack of clarity. **[4 marks]**

8. "The sea is the cemetery of the Château d'If."

Why do you think this sentence has its own paragraph? Make one point and explain it clearly. (2)

Dantès had thought that he would be buried in a cemetery. This is the terrible moment when, too late, he realises his mistake. It has its own paragraph to add force and horror to the discovery.

Another option might be:

The one-sentence paragraph has a sense of finality – like a full stop on Dantès' life. Because of his mistake, it seems likely at this point in the story that he will sink to the bottom of the sea and die.

It's very important to make clear how your idea connects to the fact that this is a one-sentence paragraph.

Marking: If more than one idea is included, only mark the first one. 1 mark for a sensible idea. 2 marks if convincingly linked to the fact that this is a one-sentence paragraph. **[2 marks]**

9. (a) Write down a phrase from lines 48 to 69 which helps us to imagine Dantes' fear. (1)

There are many possibilities here. These are a few of them:

"he felt it dragging him down"
"it seemed as if he were actually strangled"
"a black and tempestuous sky"
"waves foamed and roared"

The first two examples above are better than the last two, because they can be linked more obviously to fear, so will be easier to explain in (b). Always think ahead!

Marking: Any relevant phrase. 0 marks if overly long, so not demonstrating precise selection of a suitable phrase. [1 mark]

- (b) Explain how this phrase is effective. (2)

The following answer is based on the second phrase above, "it seemed as if he were actually strangled":

"Strangled" helps us understand how desperate for air and close to death Dantes is. It also implies that the water is pushing on his throat with great pressure, so we can imagine a choking sensation.

Another relevant point here might be that he feels as though he is in a fight with the ocean, as though it is gripping his neck.

This answer is perhaps fuller than necessary, but because of this it is completely clear and convincing. The second sentence would, however, be enough for 2 marks by itself.

The important thing is to explain **how** your chosen phrase helps **us** to imagine the character's fear. It isn't enough just to say **what** Dantes is afraid of. "He is afraid of drowning because he is sinking quickly and can't breathe" would only get 1 mark.

Marking: See above: must address **how** the phrase affects the reader. [2 marks]

END