

A literary history of the strange expression 'what is it like?'

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A straightforward question that changed its function and took universal hold

Introduction

Much serious linguistic attention is at present focused on recent and ever more extraordinary developments in the use of the ubiquitous *like*. In this article I want to take a more light-hearted look at the journey of *what is it like?* as a way of asking for a description.

It is extremely puzzling. How does it come about that we ask 'what is it like?' to request a *description*? Taken literally, the question is clearly asking for a *comparison*. But, undoubtedly, it is a description that it seeks, and gets: 'What's the weather like?' 'It's cold and wet.' (But that is not what it is *like* – that is what it *is*.) 'What was the food like?' 'Delicious.' 'Tell us what the party was like.' 'Not very exciting.' Moreover, as a description-seeking form of words, 'what is it like?' is apparently unique to English. Other languages typically use 'how is it?' to ask for a description, for example, French *Comment est-il?*; Spanish *Cómo es?*; Italian *Com'è?*; German *Wie ist es?*; Swedish *Hur är den?* And so on. The grammatical form of the question is unusual too, possible in English because we can use *like* as a preposition.

So, how did 'what is it like?' evolve in English as a way of asking for a description? Surely it must have *begun* as a request for a comparison? That would make sense. And indeed, by delving into literature databases (*Library of the Future* 1997; Literature Online) and tracing the use of the expression by writers through the centuries, it is possible to observe it developing from a comparison-associated question into our familiar description-seeking one.

Early examples of 'what is it like?' eliciting a comparison

In the 16th century, we find an instance in Tyndale's 1525 translation of Luke's gospel

(spelling modernised), where the context is certainly comparison:

Then said he: What is the kingdom of God like? Or whereto shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his garden.

In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (c. 1600) there is this example, where a comparison is what is sought, and supplied:

Olivia What's a drunken man like, fool?

Clown Like a drowned man, a fool, and a mad man: One draught above heat, makes him a fool, the second mads him, and a third drowns him.

But Helena in *All's Well that Ends Well* (c. 1602) leaves us tantalisingly in the air by asking the question and leaving it unanswered:

Lafeu Farewell, pretty lady; you must hold the credit of your father.

Helena O, were that all! I think not on my father;



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... What was he like?

I have forgot him; my imagination

Carries no favour in't but Bertram's.

She uses the expression so beguilingly in the way we would ourselves that we hardly notice it. No wonder Shakespearean commentators pass it over without comment.

But Ben Jonson in one of his elegies (from the 1640 edition of his works) provides a solid example of the comparison-seeking use when he tells us what parting is like, comparing it to a sudden absence of sunlight:

Since you must go, and I must bid farewell,
Hear, Mistress, your departing servant tell
What it is like: and do not think they can
Be idle words, though of a parting Man;
It is as if a night should shade noon-day,
Or that the Sun was here, but forced away.

And Christiana in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress Part II* (1684) is at a loss for anything to compare the Fiend to when asked what it is like:

Methinks I see something yonder upon the Road
before us, a thing of a shape such as I have not seen.
[*The Fiend appears.*] Then said Joseph, Mother,
what is it? An ugly thing, Child; an ugly thing, said
she. But Mother, what is it like, said he? 'Tis like I
cannot tell what, said she.

The writer John Hall Stevenson, a friend of Laurence Sterne, makes the following comparisons in explaining what the parts of government are like:

My thoughts of Government, though vain,
Are singular and entertaining:
How many parts it may contain,
And what they're like, is worth explaining.
They're three, and each like a wild beast:
The first to a lion I compare;
The next a tiger from the East;
The third is like an Alpine bear.
(*A Pastoral Cordial* 1763)

Emily, in William Godwin's *Things as They Are* (1794), has this unflattering comparison to make in the case of Mr Grimes, who has been suggested to her as a husband:

Mr Grimes is such a strange man. Why, I do not know what he is like! He is like for all the world a great huge porpuss.

The description-seeking function of 'what is it like?' establishes itself

It is not until around the turn of the 19th century that we get really definite hits for the description-seeking function of 'what is it like?'. In the following example from Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) it can hardly be a *comparison* of Mrs Ferrars to this or that that Elinor is curious about – she wants to know the facts about her personality and be able to *describe* her to herself:

Though she [Elinor] could now meet Edward's mother without that strong anxiety which had once promised to attend such an introduction ... her desire of being in company with Mrs. Ferrars, her curiosity to know what she was like, was as lively as ever.

And it is a case for straightforward description – 'even greyer'? or 'white'? – when Byron in *Don Juan* (1819) is wondering about the colour of his hair in ten years' time:

But now at thirty years my hair is grey
(I wonder what it will be like at forty?)
I thought of a peruke the other day).

The Brontës are quite at home with the description-requesting function of 'what is it like?' In these examples from Emily and Charlotte, a detailed description is readily supplied in reply to the question:

'And what is my father like?' he [Linton] asked. 'Is he as young and handsome as uncle?' 'He's as young,' said I; 'but he has black hair and eyes, and looks sterner; and he is taller and bigger altogether.'
(*Wuthering Heights* 1847)

and

'The ladies were magnificently dressed; most of them ... looked handsome; but Miss Ingram was certainly the queen.'
'And what was she like?'
'Tall, fine bust, sloping shoulders; long, graceful neck: olive complexion, dark and clear; noble features; eyes rather like Mr. Rochester's: large and black, and as brilliant as her jewels.'
(*Jane Eyre* 1847)

Dickens is also happy with the description-seeking function. Here in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) Mr Brewer, when asked what 'that Sale' was like, recounts the happenings at it:

'I took,' says Brewer in a favourable pause, 'a cab this morning, and I rattled off to that Sale.'
'And what was it like?' inquires Veneering.
'I assure you,' replies Brewer ... the things were going for a song. Handsome things enough, but fetching nothing.'

Alice, in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), thinks she knows how to describe whiting when asked what they are like:

'Oh, as to the whiting,' said the Mock Turtle, 'they – you've seen them, of course?'
'Yes,' said Alice, 'I've often seen them at dinn-' she checked herself hastily.
'I don't know where Dinn may be,' said the Mock Turtle; 'but, if you've seen them so often, of course you know what they're like?'
'I believe so,' Alice replied thoughtfully. 'They have their tails in their mouths – and they're all over crumbs.'

And here is another neat explanatory description from Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1893):

'What are the wheels like, then?'
'They are oval, my Lord. Therefore the carriages rise and fall.'

Sherlock Holmes, in Conan Doyle's *The Red-Headed League* (1892), receives this detailed physical description of a man he's investigating, when he asks what he's like:

'What is he like, this Vincent Spaulding?'
'Small, stout-built, very quick in his ways, no hair on his face, though he's not short of thirty. Has a white splash of acid upon his forehead.'

And the Whale in Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories* (1902) gets this description from the 'Stute Fish when he asks what the flesh of Man is like as a yet untried taste:

And the small 'Stute Fish said in a small 'stute voice, 'Noble and generous Cetacean, have you ever tasted Man?'
'No,' said the Whale. 'What is it like?'
'Nice,' said the small 'Stute Fish. 'Nice but nubbly.'

Disapproval of the description-seeking 'what is it like?'

However, 'what is it like?' has its critics. Anthony Trollope evidently thinks it an inapposite way to ask for a description. Here in *Doctor Thorne*

(1858) he puts this response into the doctor's mouth when Mary asks what Louis Scatcherd is like:

'What is he like, uncle?'
'Like – I never know what a young man is like. He is like a man with red hair.'
'Uncle, you are the worst hand in describing I ever knew ...'
'Well, he's a little man.'

Responding with a comparison instead of a description

Understandably enough, 'what is it like?' is sometimes deliberately taken literally and a comparison or likeness supplied in the response, even though a description is what is expected. In Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) there is this exchange between Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco about Anne Catherick:

'I must know how to recognise our invisible Anne. What is she like?'
'Like? Come! I'll tell you in two words. She's a sickly likeness of my wife.'

Sensory variations on 'what is it like?'

We are not restricted merely to 'what is it like?' to ask for a description. To request a visual, tactile, mental, auditory, gustatory or olfactory impression we can ask 'what does it look like, feel like, sound like, taste like, smell like?' See, for example, Jane's request to know what John Reed looks like, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and Bessie's disparaging description:

'He is such a dissipated young man, they will never make much of him, I think.'
'What does he look like?'
'He is very tall: some people call him a fine-looking young man; but he has such thick lips.'

So too Master Tom's bloodthirsty desire to know what his captured bird will taste like, in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847):

'And what do you do with them [the birds], when you catch them?' ...
'Sometimes I give them to the cat; sometimes I cut them in pieces with my penknife; but the next, I mean to roast alive.'
'And why do you mean to do such a horrible thing?' ...
'First, to see how long it will live – and then, to see what it will taste like.'

Also Anne's experience of what distrust feels like, in L. M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (1908):

I know what it feels like to have your word doubted.

and Professor Higgins's despairing declaration that English spelling makes it impossible to know what English should sound like, in George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913):

The English have no respect for their language ... They spell it so abominably that no man can teach himself what it sounds like ... German and Spanish are accessible to foreigners: English is not accessible even to Englishmen.

Description-seeking alternatives to 'what is it like?'

If 'what is it like?' did not establish itself as a description-seeking question until about 1800, how did English elicit a description before this time? Evidently, as with other languages, 'how is it?' was used – and continues to be:

Second gentleman You saw the ceremony?

Third Gentleman That I did.

First Gentleman How was it?

Third Gentleman Well worth the seeing.
(Shakespeare *Henry VIII* c. 1611)

He came in pale and tired. His mother looked at him ...

'Well, and how was it?' she asked.

'Ever so funny, mother,' he replied. 'You don't have to work a bit hard, and they're nice with you.'
(D. H. Lawrence *Sons and Lovers* 1913)

And, for all those other impressions, you can ask 'how does it look, feel, taste, sound?':

Lady Wishfort And – well – and how do I look, Foible?

Foible Most killing well, madam.

(William Congreve *The Way of the World* 1700)

In addition, there is a choice of the description-seeking devices 'what kind of?', 'what sort of', 'what manner of?':

Lepidus What manner o' thing is your crocodile?
(Shakespeare *Antony and Cleopatra* c. 1606)

'Ah!' cried Mrs. Bennet, shaking her head ... 'And what sort of young lady is she? is she handsome?'
'She is a most charming young lady indeed.'
(Jane Austen *Pride and Prejudice* 1813)

Incidentally, 'what sort of?' generates an oddly inelegant request for a physical description: 'what sort of looking person is so-and-so?', to be found, for example, in the following two passages, the first from Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816) and the second from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871):

The next question was – 'What sort of looking man is Mr. Martin?'

'Oh! not handsome – not at all handsome. I thought him very plain at first, but I do not think him so plain now.'

'But what sort of looking man is he? Describe him [Mr Lydgate] to me.'

'How can one describe a man? I can give you an inventory: heavy eyebrows, dark eyes, a straight nose, thick dark hair, large solid white hands ... But you will see him.'

The usage may sound awkward to us, but it must have been absolutely acceptable, because the speaker in the first example is consciously correct Emma herself and, in the second, it is socially aspiring Rosamond Vincy.

Conclusion

Inapposite as it may be, 'what is it like?' is what we predominantly use to ask for a description. The inappositeness, when you think about it, is compounded in the question we ask when we want to know the real truth about someone or something: 'What are they *really like?*' ■

References

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