

Professional Development Programme (2018/19) Stylistic Analysis on Prose and Poetry

Part 1: Understanding Close Reading

Last year, we suggested that detective fiction can offer students a viable metaphor for textual close reading; this year, we want to offer another metaphor.

Charles Dickens once compared the work of a writer to weaving tapestries, calling himself “the story-weaver” at “his loom” (*Our Mutual Friend* 798). He argued that “the relations of its finer threads to the whole pattern ... is always before the eyes of the story-weaver,” but this pattern may not be obvious to the reader. The goal of the close reader, of course, is to identify this pattern.

Dickens’s metaphor can be useful in teaching students about close reading and about relating the analysis of a small passage to the whole of a novel or a short story. This workshop will introduce the concept of close reading a short story and a novel through the metaphor of a cloth or tapestry. Each part of the cloth will have unique details and techniques worthy of analysis, but a close reading of a section does not stand on its own; it requires that we link up this analysis to an understanding of the tapestry as a whole.

This metaphor encourages students to see the work of writing as something created through labor and sometimes (though not always) through artistic intentionality. It will also teach them to think about the patterns that work together to create the whole of a novel or short story. By thinking of a work of writing as a tapestry or cloth, students will come to a new appreciation of part and whole and the act of close reading and analysis.

Exercise 1

Consider the two images displayed on the board. One is a photograph of “The Walthamstow Tapestry” (Grayson Perry, 2009), and the other is a close up of a part of the tapestry. The tapestry is said to explore “the emotional role and meaning of brand names in our lives.” In groups, discuss the following questions:

1. What patterns, details, colors, shapes, etc., do you notice in the smaller section of the tapestry? What meanings or significance do you attach to these details? What do these details and patterns suggest about the relationship between our emotional lives and brand names?
2. How do the patterns and details in this smaller selection relate to the whole of the tapestry?

Exercise 2

When interpreting a tapestry, a painting, or any other large visual artwork, we both expand and constrict our gaze. We alternate between examining details and then reflecting on the larger whole. We use similar tactics when analyzing a novel or any other long work of writing.

Since students frequently have to read *The Great Gatsby*, I’d like to consider the relationship between close reading (part) and whole through an analysis of this novel. A major theme of

The Great Gatsby is social inequality. Keeping this theme in mind, consider the selected passage on the board and answer the following questions in small groups:

1. What patterns and details do you notice in this passage? What is the passage's style, and how would you describe its vocabulary, imagery, syntax, etc.? What is this passage's context? How do the details of the passage yield insight into the novel's perspective on social class?
2. How does this passage relate to the larger novel? Does it seem consistent with or out of place with other parts of the novel? How does it give us deeper insight into the theme of social inequality across the novel as a whole?

Source: https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-walthamstow-tapestry/fQF_eyAHekpkTA?hl=en-GB

Part 2: Working with Short Stories

- Begin planning your paper by making sure you understand where in the text the passage you have chosen comes so that you can set the context of your quotation. Who's talking and to whom? When? Where? Why?
- Underline the words or phrases in the quotation that you find interesting. Notice any patterns, repetition, emphasis etc. in the quote.
- Why and how do these words and phrases answer the exam question?

DSE Question: Comment on the description of childhood in the following passage

“The game proceeded. Two pairs of arms reached up and met in an arc. The children trooped under it again and again in a lugubrious circle, ducking their heads and intoning

‘The grass is green,

The rose is red;

Remember me

When I am dead, dead, dead, dead...’

And the arc of thin arms trembled in the twilight, and the heads were bowed to sadly, and their feet tramped to that melancholy refrain so mournfully, so helplessly, that Ravi could not bear it. He would not follow them, he would not be included in this funereal game. He had wanted victory and triumph – not a funeral. But he had been forgotten, left out, and he would not join them now. The ignominy of being forgotten – how could he face it? He felt his heart go heavy and ache inside him unbearably. He lay down full length on the damp grass, crushing his face into it, no longer crying, silenced by a terrible sense of his insignificance.”

From Anita Desai's "Games At Twilight"

The “Quote Sandwich” or One Way to Build an Effective Paragraph

Every sandwich requires 2 (or more) pieces of bread to hold the filling together. Without the bread, the sandwich wouldn't be a sandwich; with only one piece of bread, you wouldn't be able to pick the sandwich up. I want you to think of your paragraphs as “sandwiches” and your ideas as “bread” and your quotes as the “filling.”

Use this space to outline your idea for the paragraph. Some writers call this a “topic sentence:”

“In this paragraph, I want to argue...”

QUOTE

Provides textual evidence or support for your idea

Your explanation of the quote: what's going on in this quote, why is it important to your paragraph?

Use this space to conclude the paragraph or, to answer the question “so what?”:

- How does your discussion connect back to your idea at the beginning of this paragraph?
- What is the significance of this paragraph to your thesis?

Notice that it is YOUR IDEA that is the “bread” that holds the quote. Also notice that you need an “explanation of the quote”: explaining what is important about the quotation and why you chose it will help your reader understand why you're using it. Perhaps the “explanation of the quote” can best be understood as lettuce or butter, something that will help your reader easily swallow your argument. The final piece of bread that holds the paragraph together is the conclusion or “so what?” of your paragraph.

Part 3: Working with Poetry

Poem in October

Dylan Thomas

It was my thirtieth year to heaven
Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood
And the mussel pooled and the heron-
Priested shore
The morning beckon 5
With water praying and call of seagull and rook
And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall
Myself to set foot
That second
In the still sleeping town and set forth. 10

My birthday began with the water-
Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name
Above the farms and the white horses
And I rose
In rainy autumn 15
And walked abroad in a shower of all my days.
High tide and the heron dived when I took the road
Over the border
And the gates
Of the town closed as the town awoke. 20

A springful of larks in a rolling
Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling
Blackbirds and the sun of October
Summery
On the hill's shoulder, 25
Here were fond climates and sweet singers suddenly
Come in the morning where I wandered and listened
To the rain wringing
Wind blow cold
In the wood faraway under me. 30

Wallace Stevens

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

I

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II

I was of three minds,
Like a tree 5
In which there are three blackbirds.

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV

A man and a woman
Are one. 10
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections 15
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

VI

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird 20
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

Analysing Primary Text Quotations in English Literature Essays

- *Almost every one* of the points in an essay of high quality will be supported with a quotation from the poem(s) it is analysing.
- You can set out the quotation in several ways: if brief, run into the sentence itself or included ‘in-line’ in the paragraph; or separated and indented for longer quotations.

Dylan Thomas writes that his “birthday began with the water-/Birds” (ll. 11-12). The bright alliteration on *b* connects the lines, creating...

Dylan Thomas’ poem has a generally positive tone. “My birthday began with the water-/Birds” (ll. 11-12). The bright alliteration on *b* connects the lines, creating...

Dylan Thomas’ poem has a generally positive tone, which is particularly visible in the second verse.

My birthday began with the water-

Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name

Above the farms and the white horses (ll. 11-13).

The bright alliteration on *b* connects the lines, creating...

- But it is what *follows* the quotation that is of central importance. The ‘discussion’ or ‘explanation’ section of a paragraph gives you the opportunity to display the depth of your knowledge of the text, to provide clear and detailed steps of reasoned argument to strengthen your claims, and to achieve what should be the aim of every literature essay: genuinely to help the reader to understand how the poem is formed, and what it means.
- So: what sorts of things can you (or should you) say about a quotation?

Analysing Elements of Poetic Diction

1) CONTEXT

This often comes *before* the quotation is included.

- Who said it? To whom?
- When was it said? Where?
- What is it said in reference to?

Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*.

Pope, for example, uses *thou* frequently in his poems, and **in *An Essay on Criticism***, invokes within this poetic sphere the solidarity associations of the pronoun 'thou'. **The imagined erring critic** is in general addressed as 'you', but **in a passage recommending good criticism, he is exhorted**: 'Be thou the first true merit to befriend; / His praise is lost, who stays till all commend' (ll. 474-5).

2) ORGANISATION OF IDEAS IN THE TEXT

What is mentioned first, what is mentioned last? Why is this significant?

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*.

But before the fatal flight, Ovid the dramatist carefully prepares his emotional ground. Hence that lovely and ironic moment when the boy in his father's workshop plays with the falling feathers and soft wax:

His boy stood by
Young Icarus, who, blithely unaware
He plays with his own peril, tries to catch
Feathers that float upon the wandering breeze...

Icarus is first introduced as "*his boy*:" (italics added) the father-son relationship lies at the heart of this emerging tragedy.

3) MEANING

Restate the quotation in your own words. Say what it means.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*.

His father's lament climaxes the tale:

His wretched father, now no father, cried
'Oh, Icarus, where are you? Icarus,
Where shall I look, where find you?' On the waves
He saw the feathers. Then he cursed his skill ...

Daedalus blames and curses his genius, for he discovers too late that his creation has cost his son his life.

4) UNDERLYING THOUGHTS OR IDEAS

If the line is spoken by a character, or poet/narrator, you may wish to explain his or her motivating ideas or beliefs. This can come from information you have about the poet's life.

Ben Jonson, *Inviting a Friend to Supper*.

He was morally committed to playing a major role in the life of a healthy society. Take for example: "Tonight, grave Sir, both my poor house and I/ Do equally desire your company." The pause the rhythm forces us to make before the 'and' is very effective here: both Jonson *and* the house play host – and Jonson puts himself second. The house – and the whole setting and menu – almost become a person: **they help Jonson create and celebrate those values expressed in and through this most remarkable invitation.**

5) EMOTIONAL CONTENT / TONE

This may refer to character emotion or to the tone of the author. Be direct!

Eliot, *Middlemarch*.

The direct dialogue continues with Dorothea's response: "What a wonderful little almanac you are, Celia! Is it six calendar months or six lunar months?" Dorothea here employs a clever satiric tactic to change the topic in a direction more congenial to herself. **Her tone is confident, teasing, condescending** – the "little," she thinks, fixes her sister perfectly; it might equally, however, apply to the meanness of her conversational strategy.

Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*.

In Brobdignag, they marvel at the pettiness and smallness of mankind's achievements and ambitions. After listening carefully, for example, to Gulliver's summary of the history and institutions of "our noble country, the Mistress of Arts and Arms, the Scourge of France, the Arbitress of Europe, the Seat of Virtue, Piety, Honour and Truth, the Pride and Envy of the World" the king responds thus:

My dear friend Grildrig; you have made the most admirable panegyric on your country.

... I cannot but conclude the bulk of your race to be the most pernicious race of little odious

vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth.

A more damning judgment can hardly be imagined, and **the sensitivity and compassion of tone with which it is handed down – the king tried hard not to hurt Gulliver's feelings** – makes the savagery of his comment even more telling.

6) **SYMBOLISM, IMAGERY, ETC.**

Objects, colors, metaphors, images: these might suggest a deeper meaning.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*.

That the dream was doomed to failure is hinted at in the opening lines of the description. Zobeide is the “white city, well exposed to the moon.” **The moon, of course, is sacred to Diana, “huntress, chaste and faire”¹ of Classical mythology, who will always remain a virgin.** The hunters of the chaste huntress are doomed to the trap of their own desire.

7) **LANGUAGE ISSUES (I.E. THE TECHNICAL DETAIL OF POETIC DICTION)**

A very important aspect of your analysis! May include:

- choice of words: their meanings, connotations, associations
- choice of tense: its impact on meaning and tone
- sentence length and type
- punctuation
- choice of grammatical mood (indicative, subjunctive, imperative)
- choice of grammatical voice (active, passive)
- metaphor and simile: do they have suggestions beyond simple description?
- rhythm (stresses, pauses, etc.)
- rhyme
- repetition
- poetic form (free verse, blank verse, ballad form, etc.)
- patterns in sound: alliteration, assonance, etc.
- sounds that are chosen in the words (harsh, smooth, long, short...)
- visual layout of lines on the page

Hopkins, *The Windhover*.

In line three, for example, **the succession of heavy stresses** (“the rólling undernéath hím stéady áir”) **creates an almost physical sense of the bird’s complete control of that element which rolls and bucks beneath him**, a superb rider on a tumultuous steed; a worthy prince of the King of Creation. **The fourth line, beginning with the single enjambed, stressed syllable “High” precisely charts his next movement: the regular dips and rises** of another moment in flight; then we swing with the bird, via the skate’s heel image of the fifth and sixth lines, into the prolonged power of the swoop which rebuffs and conquers the wind – and the poet.

Randall Jarrell, *Death of a Ball Turret Gunner*.

What happens next is inevitable: “When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.” **The monosyllabic length of the last line**, its tonal matter-of-factness, the physical horror to which it refers, is revolting and heartbreaking.

¹ Ben Johnson, *Queen and Huntress* (from *Cynthia’s Revels*).

Dickens, *Bleak House*.

An early scene will serve to show this characteristic of Dickens' authorial-narrative method.

My Lady Deadlock has returned to her house in town for a few days previous to her departure for Paris, where her ladyship intends to stay some weeks; after which her movements are uncertain. The fashionable intelligence says so, for the comfort of the Parisians, and it knows all fashionable things. (20)

The voice here is apparently solely that of the omniscient narrator: **no formal boundaries (such as punctuation or introductory words) divide the first sentence from the second.** But the voice of the opening sentence is that of 'fashionable intelligence', not that of the author – it is in fact **a parody of the pretentious journalistic style** of such text types as the "Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty" to which Mr Weevle is so addicted. **The pseudo-intimacy of "My Lady", the choice of an inflated "her ladyship" above the more mundane 'she',** the uncertain certainty of her reported movements: these catch perfectly the voice (and thus the ideology) of the fashion publication.

8) USE OF EXTERNAL SOURCES

Does the writer quote another author? Refer to a fable, or biblical verse? Quote Shakespeare? Echo another text?

Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

The world created by Joyce is one in which language and its variety of significances and uses are deliberately and self-consciously explored.

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo...

Here, the world is created *ex nihilo*. **It is brought into existence by the magic wand of fairytale: "Once upon a time...;" it echoes the Jehovah of the Old Testament: "And God saw that it was good..." (Gen. 1:10).** This echo is in turn simultaneously overlaid by the lilted brogue of the Irish father: 'and a very good toime it was'. The creative surge flows without punctuation into the language of the nursery, where an adult voice transmutes cow into the "moocow" of baby-talk, and reality into **the repetitive patterns of the storybook text** in which Stephen first appears, embedded as "a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo." We note, too, the simultaneous creation in this new world of moral values: in the "good" and "nicens" nature of its phenomena.

9) SURFACE APPEARANCE VS. 'TRUE' MEANING

Often, you will want to distinguish the *apparent* meaning of a line from its *actual import*, as you see it.

Marvell, *To His Coy Mistress*.

And the point is that this terror is not just conjured to frighten "his coy mistress"; or if so, then Marvell becomes his own victim, because the poet himself is rocked to the core by the force of the image: "Yonder all before us lye ...". Marvell's own fear can be seen in the stuttering note of the alliteration in "But at my back" – he too is trapped in Time; and what perhaps began as a logical move in the poem's rhetoric becomes a reality which shocks the poet himself. **The smooth, witty control of the next eight lines would appear to contradict this perception. But under this surface is the shock of the revelation.** This comes in the final series of images, which are distinguished by a violence and desperation which the poet is barely able to control.

10) **AUTHORIAL ATTITUDE**

Can you catch and delineate how the author feels about the thing described, or the character speaking?

Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*.

The Houyhnhnms, for example, organize their nuptial joinings in order solely to produce a population which is at once gender balanced and environmentally sustainable. But the young Yahoo female, struck by Gulliver's irresistible beauty of form as he bathes, throws herself into the water and into his arms, and there "fulsomely" embraces him. The contrast is clear; and we are surely not intended to respond as Gulliver does, with embarrassment and revulsion to that lovely Yahoo's impetuous lust, and with (implied) respectful awe to the monitored matings of the Houyhnhnms. The attractive anarchy of the Yahoos' world contradicts and balances the bland order in the world of the Houyhnhnms. And of course both are recognizably human. Neither, however, represents the ideal. **Ultimately, and unlike Gulliver, Swift is in Part IV not at all judgmental. He leaves us with this final and all-encompassing irony: that to be man, one must be beast; that to be rational requires an embracing of the irrational.** In all narratives, at least "two truths are told," and in this one the 'real' truth always lies somewhere in the ironic tensions Swift has created between them.

How to Write a Comparison of Poems

Matthew Arnold wrote that “Comparison is the lifeblood of criticism” – and criticism is what literature essays are all about.

- Comparison helps us to understand each poem more fully, by showing how it differs from (or is similar to) another work.
- Comparison helps us to develop an overall argument about poetry and how it uncovers meaning, using multiple points of evidence.
- Comparison helps us to make points about poems more efficiently, by providing two sources of evidence for one idea.

In your comparison between poems, you can:

- compare the *message* of the poems
- compare the *style or diction* of the poems
- compare the poets’ *use of language*
- compare any moment or image in the poems
- compare the poets’ approaches to poetry, ideas, or truth itself

Try to avoid making your comparison a simple list of similarities or differences. Make sure your comparison serves a greater claim you would like to make about both poets.

Example paragraph:

In the imagery of the blackbird itself, Stevens and Thomas share an interest in the literal and symbolic meaning of birds. For Thomas, the focus on birds give the poem its generally positive tone, which is particularly visible in the second verse.

My birthday began with the water-
Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name
Above the farms and the white horses (ll. 11-13).

The bright alliteration on *b* connects the lines, creating a driving momentum in the rhythm, and pushing the reader forward through the triumphant beauty of the morning scene. There is a joy in life, a celebration of birth, with the flying birds impart to all life around them in these images: the birds seem to give wings even to the trees, and the poet feels that they carry his name into the air, like a banner flown high. Birds also symbolize life in the early stanzas of Stevens’ poem: “I was of three minds,” he writes, “Like a tree/In which there are three blackbirds” (ll. 4-6). These birds, as in Thomas’ poem, are described as being part of the tree itself, as though they function as the mind of the tree. The simplicity of the language is deceptive here: the idea the Stevens presents is a complex one, expressing the complexity of human thought and life (“in three minds”) through a straightforward simile that is expressed in short, direct words.

In this brief image, Stevens suggests the interconnectedness of nature: this way of looking at a blackbird sees it as part of the natural world it inhabits. The blackbird that appears in Thomas' poem is one of many: "the bushes brimming with whistling/Blackbirds" (ll. 22-3); together these birds are both a literal description of the wildlife around Thomas' beloved village, and a symbolic representation of his brimming heart on his birthday, as he revels in the waking life of the woods and fields he walks through. For Stevens, this same duality is apparent: his blackbird, whichever way he looks at it, is both a real bird, accurately described, as a representation of human life itself: "A man and a woman and a blackbird/Are one" (ll. 11-12). [The power of both poems depends upon the success of both halves of this equation: the accurate evocation of the real bird, and the subtle symbolism that it represents.](#)

Questions:

- 1) What is the *claim* of the paragraph?
- 2) Is it dependent upon *listing the differences* or does it have a broader purpose?
- 3) How does the writer move from one poem to the other?
- 4) What elements of the poems are compared?
- 5) How successful is the analysis?