

***emagazine* Close Reading Competition 2017**

Comments from our judge, Professor Judy Simons

I very much enjoyed reading these ten shortlisted entries. All the submissions showed a real feeling for the text and an ability to extrapolate from the words on the page to the wider world they conjure up. All candidates were able to describe how McInerney represents Ryan's consciousness and could talk about the complexity of adolescent emotions, moving their discussion from the individual moment to the more general context in which the action is taking place. Many showed a sophisticated grasp of language and all sustained an intelligent focus on close reading and literary effect. There was a real understanding of the techniques of critical analysis and, in many cases, an appreciation and love of the possibilities of language.

The strongest entries were marked by a confidence in handling the subtleties of the passage and were able to blend a holistic view of the cultural background, the broken home, the impact of death on the family etc with a sense of how the personal detail reflects a world of unspoken history. I particularly liked the way in which the winners shaped their entries and the maturity of their insights – e.g. 'It is a brutal snapshot of Ryan's coming of age and his search for meaning in a desolate world where even the provocation to violence lacks meaning' (Finlay); 'The disturbing surreality of this opening image, and the framing of Ryan's personal progress as an act of cruel neglect hurl the reader into the tumult of his teenage emotions and fears' (Adem). The two top entries displayed different strengths and I found it difficult to choose between them, though Finlay gets there by virtue of the rounded structure of his commentary and a 'big picture' view that also picks up all the relevant detail. I thought this was an outstandingly mature and stylish reading. Adem's entry was much more close focus, identifying the textual nuances of the passage and then moving outwards to a broader contextualisation. The next three, Hana, Helena and Kate were all placed equal, with Harry McClean coming very closely behind.

There were one or two occurrences of misreading, slight repetitiveness and the occasional reference to cliché that I found difficult to endorse. In general, however, the entries maintained a high standard of textual interpretation. Congratulations to all finalists – and their teachers.

Reflections from the emagazine editors

We very much enjoyed reading the hundreds of entries for this year's competition. The ten we shortlisted were of a really excellent standard and showed just the kind of genuine engagement and thoughtfulness that we were hoping for. They spoke directly and clearly, with a strong independent voice, making valid, justifiable points in well-structured, insightful readings that were a pleasure to read. There were plenty of others that we admired too which didn't quite make it onto the shortlist, so this was a very good year for close reading! However, it's worth pointing out that there were still quite a large number of entries that fell short of this and the reasons were often very similar. Here are the five major ones we identified:

- Over-writing. Using academic language for its own sake and not always with full control.
- Reading the text as a sociological thesis rather than as a novel, for instance making sweeping statements about 'societal norms' and 'patriarchy'.
- Focusing on small things that really don't have much significance, rather than concentrating on more important aspects of the writing that leap out at you.
- Jumping into close analysis of tiny details without any overview or sense of the whole.

- Following a formula of unpicking words (perhaps derived from GCSE PEE or PQE?) without really giving deeper insight – for instance simply glossing the meanings of words rather than exploring the effect of them.
- If you entered the competition and are disappointed not to have been shortlisted, you might think about these five things ... and definitely read the writing of the winner, runner-up and highly commended students to see what it was that gave them the edge!

Winner

The key theme of this excerpt is the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is a brutal snapshot of Ryan's coming of age, and his search for meaning in a desolate world where even the provocation to casual violence lacks meaning: 'there was something very empty in the way the lot of them encouraged him to fight'.

The journey to adulthood is fraught with pain; the boy is 'flayed' from the newly formed man and his body is 'stinging from the possibilities whipping his flesh and pushing down on his shoulders'. Ryan is being formed, created and shaped by his surroundings; yet the outlook is bleak in a world where the only destination appears to be death or wrecked by the hardships of life. There is even aggression in what should be acts of love: "You look like you're possessed" ... she then declared her intent to try sucking the demon out through his tongue'. Ryan's life is unceremoniously carved by this vicious environment.

The passage gives a sense of hostile tribes, individuals being labelled and confined in the way others see them by their age, status or location: 'he'd never thought she would look at him as anything but a scrapper'; 'the only people my dad talks to live here'; and 'that group of girls who wore their skirts the shortest and who commandeered the radiator perches before every class'. The connections between the characters are non-existent, unsophisticated and superficial: Ryan's mother is dead and his father is mentally absent through an addiction to drink and gambling; the girls 'glide between impertinence and saccharine familiarity'; and his grandmother only connects with Ryan through Facebook. Consequently, these unsatisfying bonds leave an underlying feeling of isolation within a crowd. In particular, Ryan seems to resent his father; as he instinctively looks for help and support to deal with life's adversities, while his father acts childishly and hides away from the realities of life. In such a way, Ryan's isolation and lack of purpose is heightened by the obviously weak relations in this community.

However, there is ultimately redemption and affirmation of life at the end of the piece. Ryan finds the meaning that he had been searching for, and that appears to have eluded others, though his connection with Karine: 'he'd been on the lookout for something to dare him to get out of bed in the morning'. He found it in the kiss with Karine, the sprite who guided his 'metamorphosis' to adulthood that McInerney conjures in the first paragraph. Ultimately, Ryan's search for solace in Karine seems to reflect the book's title, *The Glorious Heresies*, as Ryan continued to hope for what his society told him he could not have: 'he'd been asking her to, silently, behind his closed mouth and downturned eyes, for fucking years'.

Finlay Saeger, Winchester College

Runner-up

On its most literal level, the passage presents the familiar, even innocent scene of a young couple worrying about their parents interrupting their intimacy, generally through terse, single-sentence paragraphs which build mood with action rather than language: 'He took his hand from hers and slipped it round her waist'.

Occasional diversions into backstory are littered with the language of young adult fiction: the 'build-up of boyish bravado', the 'Facebook photos', the kiss 'on the night of his birthday'.

But the sweetness of the situation is betrayed by the focus on Ryan's father, which is often bluntly juxtaposed: 'she was adamant he'd never hit six feet. His mother was four years dead and his father was a wreck'. The prose in such passages is more human, employing often-unfamiliar Irish slang ('divilment', 'on the lang', 'giving digs'), harshly emotive language and a darting, unfocused structure – we are never told why 'something didn't fit about that', for example – to bind the third-person perspective to Ryan's flowing inner thoughts.

Beneath his overt resentment, Ryan's view of his father is more nuanced. He 'made up for it' – 'it' is the personal pronoun of both the father and the 'gawky corpse', linking these sources of Ryan's anguish – 'around everyone else', perhaps by inhabiting the qualities his father lacks: responsibility in caring for his siblings; boldness in his 'metamorphosis' and progress with Karine. 'The boy' must be a victim of his father's 'foul temper', but the 'brave new man' might have the physicality and confidence to take hold of his family and himself – although these lingering worries suggest otherwise.

In an exaggeration of the gulf between the saccharine situation and Ryan's underlying worries about his father, his worries about himself are expressed in grotesque terms, starting with leaving 'the mangled, skinny limbs' of 'the boy' to starve. The disturbing surreality of this opening image, and the framing of Ryan's personal progress as an act of cruel neglect, hurl the reader into the tumult of his teenage emotions and fears. This is all swept up in the boyish language of 'strong arms and best feet forward' and the 'sprite' Karine, but that her 'hands' and 'kisses' have 'flayed away' his skin is the clearest bridge between his seeming progress from the 'fucking years' of longing, and the lingering insecurities that still line his path. In a sign of self-doubt and self-loathing, they tend to involve physical pain and torture: 'raw', 'stinging', 'whipping his flesh'.

Maybe 'the gawky corpse he'd left outside' has been the recipient of all this and, with this surge of self-confidence, he can leave the 'shiver'-inducing 'scrapper' behind him. Consider the oft-repeated 'fifteen', the birthday she kissed him on, signifying the transition to 'his adult form'. In an indication of his lasting worries, though, this 'brave new man' 'wasn't all that different' to the 'demon' he has previously seen himself as. The reader is left doubtful as to whether Ryan's 'squared shoulders' and 'strong arms' can push on past these fears, past the 'mangled, skinny limbs'.

Adem Berbic, Watford Grammar School

Extracts from the highly-commended entries

McInerney makes the opening paragraph deliberately ambiguous; the reason for Ryan's 'metamorphosis' not becoming clear until the short sentence 'Karine D'Arcy was her name'. At this point, the reader suddenly understands what is about to happen and why Ryan feels the need to transform into a 'newborn man'; however, we feel little emotion towards his character. This changes as we understand more about him through McInerney's use of the 3rd person limited narrator in which we see behind Ryan's 'boyish bravado' from his own perspective. The quotation 'unrehearsed words from a brand-new throat,' coupled with the fact that 'he couldn't remember how to show-boast,' shows his nervousness and emphasises that this is not only a new experience for him but one of great importance.

Hana Davis, Ashford School

The third person narrative also creates an unstable atmosphere suggesting not only the boy's perspective, but also the tone of the author which seems mocking, but also wistful. After Ryan's 'metamorphosis' - a word which implies that his transformation has an almost magical quality - he appears as a 'brave new man', a phrase which celebrates and gently teases the boy's determination to grow up. Karine's role as the one who 'makes Ryan a man' is summed up in mock grandiose language as 'the sprite guiding his metamorphosis', which makes her sound like a supernatural being. By comparison with this 'sprite', Ryan's naivety seems almost acutely embarrassing.

Helena McBurney, Frances Holland School

Although the boy is soon established as a metaphor for Ryan's childish, younger self, which he wishes to abandon, the initial deliberate ambiguity facing the reader reflects Ryan's own uncertainties - he refers to this part of himself as 'it', as if he is unsure what exactly he wishes to leave behind. Later in the text Ryan admits, 'his adult form wasn't all that different to the gawky corpse he'd left outside', suggesting his attempts at becoming a 'new-born man' are somewhat premature, as he is unsure of what the role entails. Ryan wishes to be a man but does not yet know what this really means. However he is certain of one key element of his 'metamorphosis' - sex. Though never explicitly stated in the passage the reader infers that this is the reason he has brought Karine D'Arcy to his home. Aged '15 and a bit' and someone who 'constantly outclassed' him, there is a sense of the power and sway she holds over Ryan. Through his eyes, sex with her, or the anticipation of it, is presented as physically and mentally transformative. Ryan's descriptions of 'raw' truths, 'stinging...possibilities' and being 'flayed away' by kisses hold connotations of flesh and pain, conveying the physicality and intimacy of sex. In his view he has 'crossed [a] threshold' and now 'everything ha[s] changed' - implying the permanence of his actions or intended actions, and echoing his initial desire to leave a part of himself - 'the boy' behind.

Kate Sparrow, Graveney School