

# ***emagazine* Close Reading Competition 2019**

*emagazine* editor, Barbara Bleiman, on all the competition entries

We had a bumper crop of entries this year, which suggested the appetite of students for reading and writing about literary texts, as well as their enthusiasm for competitions like this. So many students gave it a really good shot and the best of the entries were truly excellent! The winner, runners-up and shortlisted students all wrote about the text convincingly and with genuine engagement.

As in previous years, we felt that there was quite a big gulf, however, between the best entries and the rest. What distinguished the best close readings was actually quite simple – the ability to convey a good strong sense of what’s most important about the passage, what’s special, and specially significant about it. There were lots of pleasing observations across the board about small aspects of language but often that’s all it amounted to – interesting little comments that weren’t connected to a bigger sense of what was really at stake in this stunning piece of writing by James Joyce. We’d have loved to see students saying a bit less about the sounds and the use of the senses, the use of rhythm in a particular sentence or the imagery and more about important ‘big picture’ understandings about the extract – its attempt to get inside the head and experiences of a child who is at boarding school, longing to go home for the holidays but trapped there by falling ill. Too few students ‘nailed’ these basic facts before talking about the detail. The complexities of narrative voice, the shifts between memory, dream and reality, and the gradual revelations to the reader by implication and suggestion rather than explanation, all make this a very special kind of narration of this set of events. Pinning down what’s happening and the fact that it’s done in this particularly evocative way, has to be at the reason for exploring how the writer achieves this.

## Comments by our judge, Professor Ben Knights

It's a difficult task you've undertaken. You had to make precise observations about the text while exploring their significance - suggesting (but not over-egging) an argument within which your choice of details makes sense to your reader. This requires a level of integration where the reader doesn't feel you are simply listing things you have noticed about the passage. So you have to balance precise observation against thematic argument, without letting one swamp the other. I was impressed by your ability to do this. Sometimes details may jar the smoothness of your attempted interpretation. Then you have to decide whether to pick up on enigmas / mysteries and question their significance: 'It knew': what did the train know? the heavy bird flying low through the grey light; several of you touched on Cardinal Wolsey / Leicester Abbey but could have developed further how 'official', school knowledge like this feeds into Stephen's hallucinatory sense of impending doom – Wolf Hall, anyone?

Generally, I was impressed with the way entries were attuned to questions of style and the significance of stylistic choices. Yet, while some got close, I was surprised that writers didn't say more about the representation of consciousness. One way in might have been via formality / informality: Stephen / Daedalus, given name vs surname. Touches of rhetorical apparatus were awkwardly handled, and I felt that 'polyptoton' and 'epizeuxis' hindered more than they helped.

Again, though some entries started to explore this, I felt that more could have been made of Stephen's dutiful desire to belong, to adopt the camouflage of his peers' vocabulary - ('fellows', 'peach', 'foxing').

A few (including one of the runners up) bravely tackled the question of the narrator: the linguistic trail left by Stephen's implied observer.

Most of the pieces I read recognised and developed the contrast between the two parts of the selected passage, noticing the turning point with 'Noises ... There was a noise of curtain-rings ....' What was particularly good about the more sophisticated readings (especially the winner) was that they acknowledged the contrast between journey / home / school, but then went that bit further. They had a go at integrating what they observed about both home and school scenes - for example by touching on Stephen's compliant desire to fit in, to use the register of his peers, to do as his father advised him. The winner and runners up gave us thoughtful arguments fed by precise observations.

# Winner

## Clementine Read, St Paul's Girls' School, London

All the desperate anguish of growing up is distilled in this passage. Stephen's awakening from a fairytale dream world to his unforgiving real one is heartbreakingly sad, but more so is the idea that they are not as different as they seem.

Joyce's textual idiosyncrasies initially seem due to childlike wonder, in the giddy, ungrammatical repetition and sweet-shop imagery in 'a long long chocolate train with cream facings', and wide-eyed taking in of the balletic movements of the guards 'opening, closing, locking, unlocking the doors ... their keys ma[king] a quick music: click, click: click, click.' But it is these blissful observations, especially the one-word paragraphs, 'Lovely ... ' and 'Noises ... ', which give the dream away. 'Noises of welcome' become 'Noises ... ' become the 'noise of curtain-rings running back along the rods...' The connection of the 'noises' is ironic, even sadistic, as Joyce slowly twists joy into disappointment, and the differences are immediately apparent. The discomfort of Stephen's stockings' 'horrid rough feel' is far from the floating sensations of 'telegraph poles ... passing, passing ... ' Less tangibly, he is now unloved: his former raptures of 'Holly and ivy for him and for Christmas' and cries of 'Welcome home, Stephen', are sharply contrasted with the reaction to the announcement that he's ill – '— Who is?' – and the barked 'Dedalus'. To the end, febrile and hallucinating, he must desperately fight his corner: 'He was not foxing. No, no: he was sick really.'

However, the repetition of 'noises' challenges our temptation to consider Stephen's dream world and real one as opposites. Joyce gives the dormitory eerie, dreamlike shadows, in the 'pale sunlight ... queer and cool' and the sheets' 'tepid glow'. It is decidedly nightmarish, but the hazy confusion remains. Asleep, this is a plush, repetitive stream of consciousness; Stephen describes 'cheer after cheer after cheer ... [people] cheering and cheered.' Awake, it is more disorientation and bewilderment, exacerbated by unattributed speech ('—Tell McGlade. —Get back into bed. —Is he sick?') and disjointed observations: 'It was not Wells's face, it was the prefect's.' He struggles to make sense of his environment; the leaden repetition of 'very hot' in 'his bed was very hot and his face and body were very hot' suggest Stephen's slowness to gain consciousness.

The dream, conversely, is invaded by real-world doubts and desperation to fit in. Stephen's over-use of 'fellows' is noticeable: 'The fellows had told him ... The fellows cheered ... The train was full of fellows'. His cry of 'Hurray! Hurray! Hurray!' stems from two conflicting feelings, which meet uncomfortably here – he wants to join in with the others, but his true 'Hurray!' is in getting away from them. Yet even in the familial reunion, he looks through the lens of the 'fellows' and feels not filial love, but shallow, competitive pride that 'his father was a marshal now: higher than a magistrate.' Meanwhile his mother 'kisse[s] him' and his only reaction is 'Was that right?'. He cannot even enjoy his dream, so preoccupied is he with what others might think. Already school has taken some of his innocence away.

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## **Runner-up**

### **Eleanor Ward, Bristol Grammar School**

This extract is an exploration of the elation of childhood excitement, as well as the equally potent experience of a feverish sickness. They are more similar than one may, at first, believe.

Within the very opening of the text, Joyce explores the exuberance of a family Christmas, as imagined by the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus. The constant repetition of 'cheer', 'cheers', 'cheered' and 'hurray' portrays the excitement of a child, and its simplicity incites nostalgia in the adult reader. A child's focus on the simple joy of school holidays, and seeing one's own family is infectious, if you'll forgive the pun on the latter half of the extract. 'Cheer after cheer after cheer' is a continuous theme. Focusing on the surrounding sounds emphasis the rush and blur of Stephen Dedalus's jubilation for Christmas, a time which all children, surely, relish.

As Stephen wakes from his imaginings, he is in a state of extreme perception. 'The noise of curtain rings running back along the rods' bring him back into the structured world of boarding school, where he is no longer the centre of attention, as he wishes himself to be among 'all the people', but simply one of many other boys, referred to solely by their surnames 'Fleming' and 'McGlade'. Furthermore, unlike his dreams of Christmas at home, there is little to no sympathy, he is, in fact, accused of 'foxing', when he 'was sick really'. This shows the strict honour code at an all boys boarding school. 'His father had told him, whatever he did, never to peach on a fellow'.

When Stephen falls ill, Joyce's use of the heightened senses and erratic, confusing amplified sounds portray the panicked nature of an unknown illness. 'The sunlight was queer and cold' is an oxymoron, and contrasts how 'hot' his bed, face, and body feel. There is also disjointed dialogue, with no confirmation as to who it is accredited to: 'He's sick.- who is? – Tell McGlade.' It also contrasts with the warm nature of his imagined Christmas, with a caring mother and father, who are replaced by a prefect and several fellows, who seem more preoccupied with protecting themselves than caring for Stephen. 'Dedalus, don't spy on us, sure you won't?'

One possible comparison which proves quite interesting is when looking at the quote 'Leicester Abbey lit up. Wolsey died there. The abbots buried him themselves'. This is a metaphor for how, childlike in nature, Stephen Dedalus believed his affliction is just so awful, he may be about to die. This is reiterated in the preceding quotes: 'Afraid that it was some disease.' And the almost immediate jump to worrying about cancer, 'a disease ... of animals'.

In conclusion, Joyce draws parallels between the feverish excitement of imagining returning home for the holidays, the heightened emotions at Christmas, and the very real fever Stephen experiences.

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## **Runner-up**

**Sarah Ojoma Ben-Edeh, London Academy of Tottenham**

In this extract, Joyce creates a stark contrast between Stephen's 'lovely' fantasy cut with an interruption of coarse reality.

Stephen's fantasies create a child-like idealism. The imagery of a 'long long chocolate train' and the repeated motif of 'holly and ivy' evoke a strong sense of Christmas for the reader. The use of his simplistically naive syntax to describe a perfect Christmas allows us to share his romantic expectation and wish for a better time. Yet, this imagery is sharply contrasted with jarring noises of 'curtain rail rings' and 'clapping hands'. The 'noises of welcome' have faded to something unpleasant so we, like Stephen, are rudely awakened from our idealised fantasy to sudden reality.

Adding to this progression from fantasy to reality is Joyce's structure. The very first sentence of informs us of Stephen's desire; he wants to '[Go] home for the holidays!'. The fantasy works its way towards this goal as 'trains [racing] on over flat lands' creates a passive, easy sense about the journey; there is no struggle or difficulty getting there. As the climax of the fantasy is reached, a sense of victory and excitement is evoked by the short sentences of 'welcome home, Stephen' and his parents greeting him. However, the return to the reality creates an abrupt drop from Stephen's idea of heaven to a mundane sort of hell- he is sick, emphasised by the parallelism describing his 'very hot' body and bed. Even the sunshine, a symbol of happiness and warmth, is described as 'queer and cold' showing how this real world acts as a strange, hostile environment in comparison.

Furthermore, Joyce uses free direct discourse to create an ambiguous sense of consciousness about Stephen. The narrative voice asks 'was that right?' as Stephen tries to remember the details of his father's occupation in his fantasy. Here, his attempt to authenticate his imagination with elements of real life are interrupted by the narrator, who may or may not act as an implication of Stephen's thoughts. Later in the extract, the narrator implies the bully is 'afraid it was some disease' that Stephen had caught because of his actions. Again, Joyce does not make it obvious whether this is Stephen's own ideas or that of an omniscient narrator. For the reader, the narrator is made to act as an agent of reality as they not only make us and Stephen aware of the real world, but also imply the thoughts of others.

To conclude, this extract sets us in a fantastical world of a young boy filled with warm perfection. However, we ultimately must return to bitter, unpleasant reality with him in which we are subject to the thoughts of others and the disorientation of the real world.