

## ***emagazine* Close Reading Competition 2020**

**Professor Peter Barry, English & Creative Writing, Aberystwyth University**

The item set for the close-reading competition set a stiff challenge, and the quality of all the shortlisted entries was very high. I close-read them 'unseen', without looking at students' names or the names of their schools. Also, I did not make any formal list of required points, approaches, or criteria beforehand. But as I carried on reading, I realised that I was thinking about three broad areas, which can be 'thumb-nailed' as Content, Shape, and Language. To expand each of these in turn, I asked myself: (a) Are there unique or very strong insights here, and if so, how well is their full significance brought out? (b) Is the piece effectively structured, with succinct identification of issues in the earlier part and some rounding off or pulling together of material towards the end? (c) Is the language of the response clear and precise, is it accurate when technical terms are used, and is it appropriate and effective in tone?

The winning entry stood out from the others on the shortlist, so it wasn't a photo-finish and many congratulations are due for that performance. I was asked to decide on a second and a third, and these two also stood clear of the remainder. But having spent a long time trying to decide which of them was second and which third, I realised (while unloading the washing-machine) that the result was obvious – they are the Joint-Runners-Up, and much credit is due to them too. I was also asked to identify any entries that deserved to be 'Highly Commended', if I thought there were some who merited this, but no number was specified. I identified four entries in this category, a compact group running close behind the leaders, and deserving extra credit and recognition. The remaining shortlisters are all placed in the 'Commended' category to recognise their achievement in being in the top six percent of the total competition entry. Our congratulations, of course, also go to the schools and teachers of all these high achievers.

Finally, what I liked most about the shortlist as a whole was the 'joined up' quality of the responses to the passage. The students didn't just identify literary tropes or explain isolated details – they joined up the dots of individual points to build a 'reading' of the passage. They were confident in using the technical terms associated with close reading, but not over-awed by them, so that they were integrated into lively and fluent accounts of the significance and power of the text.

# WINNER

## DEIA LEYKIND, FRANCIS HOLLAND SCHOOL

This passage is about divulging secrets previously withheld. It acts as a prologue, framing the novel's narrative, providing context and setting up a confidential climate. The narrative voice invites our trust and builds a sense of intimacy, while simultaneously planting ambiguities that shall only be resolved if we read on.

At first, the narrative voice is rather formal, speaking of his 'acquaintance' with Halford and their 'interview', employing long complex sentences that appear carefully constructed and considered. In the second paragraph this measured tone dissolves, becoming more animated with the intimate, even teasing 'are you not ashamed, old boy', as though a sort of punctilious barrier has been breached. It is here that we see instances of parenthesis, particularly hyphens, which pepper the text. They seem to convey an organic thought process, as if we have been granted direct access to the writer's mind.

A self-assured narrator, confident in his views, he makes use of emphatic language, 'Not being in a story telling humour' and compound adjectives 'inadmissible', 'uncomplaining', 'unparalleled' which lend a sense of finality to his words. The superlative adjective 'the smallest return', is juxtaposed with the subsequent 'so mighty a favour', creating a dramatic, even sarcastic effect. Though he uses repeated negatives, assuring us that he 'did not take up my pen to reproach you, nor to defend myself...but...to atone', there is a feeling of implicit bitterness behind his words, and the end of the following paragraph seems a pointed challenge; 'charge me with ingratitude and unfriendly reserve if you can'. The letter-writer himself feels injured by Halford's new 'semi- melancholy stiffness'.

An excerpt about shared confidences, the narrator takes pains to gain the reader's own trust. The repeated mentions of 'letters and papers' and 'a certain faded old journal', work to assure us that this story shall be 'a full and faithful account' and not reliant on 'memory alone'. What we are reading is epistolary in form, as though we have stumbled across a private letter, a document about real events rooted in history, much more than just a 'story'. This promise of credibility is enhanced by the narrator's declaration that they 'will not spare' any 'particularities and circumstantial details', pledging eventual satisfaction and full disclosure. This blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction is not unlike Brontë's sister Charlotte's fictional autobiography 'Jane Eyre', nor the idea of a story told by many mouths as in Emily's 'Wuthering Heights', both published the year before.

An air of mystery is conveyed that sparks our curiosity, by references to 'musty old letters' and 'musing on past times'. This atmosphere is heightened by the almost clichéd pathetic fallacy of a 'soaking, rainy day', paired with the unnamed narrator 'alone in [their] library'. Having settled into this storyteller persona, his words assume an epic-like quality, this 'shall be a tale of many chapters.-', the curtailed ending stressing that the end of this passage is but a beginning. The narrator has captured our attention, and we wait to hear of 'the most important event of [his] life'.

### Professor Peter Barry comments

**Very good opening paragraph, and same is true of the second – apt, concise exemplification of well specified points. Third has many of the same kind of pinpointed delineations. Fourth stresses contrast between a 'faithful account' and 'memory alone', as addressed to the reader more than the addressee – apt parallels with other Brontëan stories. Fifth has very good rounding off. Very good integration of technical terms into the flow of wider argument.**

# JOINT RUNNER UP

## MOLLY ELLIOTT, HALL CROSS ACADEMY

*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is an epistolary novel; the disclosure and the framing of Helen Graham's accounts are under the control of Gilbert Markham. Thus, the narrator is an essential component in this novel, his temperament established clearly in this initial passage to indicate his coloured perspective upon the events related.

Brontë presents Markham as incredibly defensive, even hostile, to remove any neutrality from his storytelling. His voice is strikingly resentful and accusatory towards Halford (the recipient); the pronouns 'you' or 'your' appear eighteen times in comparison to just twelve personal pronouns. This creates an immediate, relentless sense of self-righteousness within Markham, reinforced through his noting Halford's 'comparative closeness and taciturnity'. The specification of 'comparative' here is important; Markham is quick to blame, and must address Halford's faults before atoning for his own. He is also somewhat melodramatic, shown in his hyperbolic use of 'so mighty a favour' and the challenge of 'charge me with ingratitude and unfriendly reserve if you can'. Markham feels contempt strongly, and this will influence his narration greatly throughout the novel.

Further to this sense of injustice, Brontë exposes Markham's volatile nature to heighten Helen's powerlessness in this narrative. He attributes his refraining from telling his story to 'not being in a story-telling mood at the time', implying that our narrator's humours are highly changeable and manifest strongly in his actions. This also implies Markham's power; his telling of this story, made up mostly by that of his wife, is subject entirely to his prerogative, and his selectiveness in choosing when to reveal it is a considerable expression of this power. This volatility also affects the composure of this narrative, Markham's 'own patience and leisure [being] his only limits'. Once again, Markham exercises power; he will choose exactly what to include or omit based upon his own 'leisure'. This word in itself implies that this relation is merely a source of amusement for him; he is not the one affected by its contents.

Evident in this passage is also a sense of instability within Markham. He notes a certain 'air' surrounding Halford, describing his face as being 'overshadowed with a cloud' when he last saw him. These attributes, including 'shadow' and 'cloud', are intangible; Markham works heavily on interpretation and appears paranoid in doing so. He is also anxious to validate himself, noting his old journal 'by way of assurance that I have not my memory alone'. This is both indicative of his generally resentful nature but also a need to assert himself, borne of that same paranoia which flavours his perception of others so strongly.

Brontë shapes this character such that he is unlikely to relate any account in a neutral, unbiased manner. Markham is the embodiment of an unreliable narrator, controlling a sensitive tale which sometimes colours Helen negatively. Her story, already plagued by controlling, malignant male characters, is about to be told by an equally controlling and flawed voice, perpetuating a bleak patriarchal stereotype of this society.

### Professor Peter Barry comments

**Good opening, and strong point that the male narrator recounts the experience of a female protagonist. Paragraph two is also very good on the evidently combative nature of the writer, and paragraph three emphasises the anxiety and subjectivities behind this self-assertion. Neat summary that the effect is to create a narrator to whom we should not give unquestioning trust.**

# JOINT RUNNER-UP

## EMILIA WARR, CAMDEN SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

In this opening letter Brontë introduces the narrator, the person to whom the story is being told and the relationship between the two. The writer has a candid tone; the letter is rife with dashes and winding sentences made up of numerous clauses (the second paragraph only amounts to two sentences but more than ten clauses and five dashes). This structuring gives the writing the jagged rhythm and impulsiveness of honest and intimate speech. The writer also has a humorous tone which lends even further to the informality and friendliness of the letter- he points out the recipient's 'stiffness and reserve' in a blunt manner which could be interpreted as hostile and accusatory in another voice, but their following admission that it would have been 'very affecting' reveals an underlying humour. The playfulness and forthrightness that Brontë gives the writer not only serves to convey their frank and liberal personality but also the closeness of their relationship with the recipient.

Brontë also introduces us to the intended reader through the eyes of the writer. He is referred to casually, greeted as 'Halford' in the initial address, and later fondly called 'old boy', revealing that his social status is equal to that of the writer- or that they are close enough that status is irrelevant. Either way, the writer does not see Halford as a superior. The writer then goes on to describe the 'taciturnity' of Halford, how he is not 'naturally communicative', and we understand the Halford is the more reserved of the two, but his opinion is still valued by the writer, or else they would not bother to 'atone' for their past offences. This shows that Halford is held in high esteem and deemed to have good judgement by the writer.

All of this construction of the writer and Halford's relationship serves to frame the introduction to the story and to make it enticing to the readers- the promise of 'frankness' and 'confidence' makes us feel as if we are being let in on a secret so scandalous or shameful that it can only be shared between the closest of friends. Brontë's description of the setting in which the story is being told also increases the feeling of intimacy and prepares the readers to enter a world of mystery. The writer describes the stark contrast between the 'rainy day' outside and his 'well roasted feet', conveying the warmth of the room coming from the fireplace. This sensory division between the writer and the outside world creates a feeling of separation from reality for the readers; we are engulfed in the inviting warmth of fantasy and do not wish to depart into the 'soaking' rain.

This letter draws the readers into the novel by placing us inside an intimate friendship where they can be given the honesty and intrigue that is generally confined to those at the heart of the story and their most trusted acquaintances, which fascinates us and makes us feel **involved**.

### Professor Peter Barry comments

**Very good opening paragraph, then accurate and specific throughout on tone and form. Second, again good and specific, and homes in on the import of the word 'atone'. Third, very good on inner/outer contrast. Final focus is on the constructing the sense of the reader's 'privileged intimacy' with the two men.**