

emagazine Close Reading Competition 2021 – Results

An overview of this year's competition, the winning entries by emagazine co-editor Barbara Bleiman

This year we had nearly 200 entries, from every kind of school across the UK. The extract we chose seemed to speak strongly to students and we saw a real engagement with the subject matter of Yaa Gyasi's brilliant novel. As co-editors of *emagazine*, Lucy Webster and I read all the entries, before sending a short list to Jenny Stevens, an A Level teacher herself. She chose a winner and two runners up and highly commended one student. The rest of the shortlist is commended for their work. When she told us her choices, we were delighted. They would have been ours too!

Her report comments on the shortlist and the reasons behind her choice of winner. However, as usual, I would like to say something about the entries as a whole. When reading such a large number of pieces of writing some patterns emerge – aspects of writing about texts that one can identify as particularly successful. We very much appreciated those entries that were written in a simple and direct style, not over-written or exaggeratedly 'academic' in uses of language and style. The way literary terms were used (or not used) often distinguished those we considered carefully for the shortlist from others. We read a lot of entries that talked about 'anaphoric tricolons', 'personification' or 'sibilance' but it was rare for these to be discussed in convincing ways. Sibilance featured a huge amount, yet how justifiable is it to claim that an 's' sound is harsh or sinister, comforting, solemn, gentle or satisfying? All of these were offered as possible effects. Students who looked at the bigger sweep of the extract – for instance, its use of time and how that relates to memory, the way the passage moves between the past and present, the importance of story and storytelling, or the wonderful imagery of stone and rock, used to convey Esi's strength – offered insightful readings of the piece. Some students gave glimpses of the kind of fresh, original thinking they were capable of in part of their entry, then

lapsed back into more formulaic writing, of the kind that perhaps they thought was expected of them. If only they'd trusted their instincts more!

Finally, I just want to mention a couple of pieces that couldn't make it onto the shortlist because they didn't do what we'd asked them to do. The two students from the same school, Chinaza Iwe and Mariah-Rosaire Nimo, wrote much more personally about the extract, one in the form of a poem and the other in a more personal, emotional response to the piece. Though we couldn't shortlist them, we did want to recognise the power of their responses, and the way they'd related the extract to their own lives and concerns, so we are giving them a special mention.

A report by Dr Jenny Stevens on the selection of the winning entries

Judging this year's *emagazine* Close Reading Competition has been a thoroughly heartening experience thanks to the assured and perceptive responses that entrants managed to craft in just 500 words. Encountering Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* for the first time, my initial reading of the set extract was free from any preconceptions formed from a whole-text reading, helping my evaluative focus to stay firmly on the skills of close analysis.

From the carefully selected passage, we can establish that the *Homegoing* is an intergenerational exploration of the lingering impact of the transatlantic slave trade, a period that many sixth-formers will have studied in various areas of the curriculum and perhaps considered in relation to an A Level English text. One distinguishing factor for me as I read through the shortlisted entries was how effectively writers had employed this contextual knowledge so as to balance what literary theorists sometimes label 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' readings. As Professor Bob Eaglestone explains in *Doing English*, an intrinsic interpretation is concerned with 'the form of the text, its structure and language', whereas an extrinsic interpretation moves 'out from the text to the context'. For the most part, the finalists brought what they already knew about slavery to bear meaningfully on their analysis, often focusing on issues such as the formation of selfhood, cultural identity and the 'dehumanisation' of the enslaved. The winning piece, though, shone out in the way it dealt with these

'big picture' ideas through keen attention to structure and language. Especially praiseworthy was its succinct discussion of the temporal narrative shifts in the passage and its sophisticated grasp of Gyasi's treatment of the relationship between language and power.

While a successful competition response inevitably requires strong reading skills, it also requires strong writing skills. All of the interpretations I read were lucidly and accurately expressed (give or take a few minor slips). What put some writers ahead of others, however, was their ability to condense an idea or comment on stylistic technique into a telling phrase of their own, without relying on an armoury of literary terms. The winning entrant's observation that the third-person narrative was 'repeatedly slipping away from the present and into [Ness'] memory' was a notable case in point.

The engaging and fluent critical prose I had the pleasure to read as this year's judge certainly convinced me that I should put *Homegoing* at the top of my reading list. Congratulations to all the shortlisted entrants and thank you for providing me with some thoughtful ways into reading Gyasi's debut novel.

Winner:

- Alistair McLelland from Wyke College, Hull.

Runners-up:

- Bahira Malak, Bradley Stoke Community School
- Georgia Jackson Jessel, Oxford High School

Highly commended:

- Sophie Sargent, City of Norwich School

Commended:

- Livia Mason, Portsmouth College
- Jessica Gilbert, Godolphin & Latymer
- Lydia Brown, Colyton Grammar School
- Joseph Robinson, King Edward VI, Stratford-upon-Avon

emagazine Close Reading Competition 2021 – Winning Entry

Alistair Mclelland, Wyke College

This passage from *Homegoing* works to show how being enslaved alienates the character of Ness from her world. Gyasi builds Ness's character largely through the retelling of her past, the narrative repeatedly slipping away from the present and into her memory. This preoccupation with the past indicates hopelessness towards the future, not once mentioned, and a wish to escape the stagnation and pain of the present. The narrator seems almost not to be able to bear linearly recounting events but instead to be trapped by the past, constantly looking backwards in search of answers.

Ness remembers being told stories as a child about a slave ship and 'men being thrown into the Atlantic Ocean'. Here Gyasi employs the childish alliteration of 'the Big Boat' in painful contrast to the horrors of the slave trade. Gyasi presents the slaves' culture, right down to children's stories, as being pervaded by their transportation from Africa. This fact of being displaced and uprooted, left with 'no land, no people, no worth', defines how Ness has from childhood perceived her identity. Their masters force them to speak English, but Ness feels that it sounds accidental and clumsy when spoken by the slaves, imagining that it '[spills] out of the lips of black people'. We see how they are compelled to abandon their own language and to speak instead in their oppressors' tongue, distancing them from their culture and leaving them alienated even from the words that they say.

Gyasi demonstrates Ness's alienation through her distrustful view of the world, feeling oppressed even by nature. The sun itself is described as a 'punishing eye', a description more obviously applicable to a slave owner but here suggesting that the feeling of being constantly watched has been conditioned into an inescapable truth for Ness. We see through an inversion of the life-afterlife relationship that Ness feels even God has abandoned her. Coming at the end of a short passage of reverse chronology and being thus presented as a sort of beginning in Ness's life, a place is mentioned that 'she would only ever describe as Hell'. She feels that God has punished her merely for existing.

The character of Esi, Ness's mother, is presented through her daughter's memories as a figure of stability and calm. Gyasi describes Esi to suggest physicality: she is 'solid', 'solemn', and 'strong', and therefore appears sure and definite in contrast to her daughter's rootlessness. The memory of Esi's strength provides for Ness a rock against her alienation from the world. '[Esi's] hardness of spirit' suggests her love has a palpable quality, hence it is for Ness the only 'real love'. Her absence from the main narrative set against her persistent appearances in Ness's memory creates a cruel tension between her importance to Ness and their separation, made all the more distant by being temporal: within the narrative, Esi exists only in the past. This tension drives our curiosity to discover whether they will be reunited, bringing some surety back into Ness's life.

emagazine Close Reading Competition 2021 – Runner-up

Georgia Jackson Jessel

This passage of Homegoing acts not only to introduce Ness, but also to depict the harshest effects of slavery, including relentless labour, subjugation, loss of family, and indeed, the loss of all connection to heritage and to identity itself.

The novel is a harrowing portrayal of the impact of the slave trade down the generations and across two continents. Ness only knows her history from her mother Esi's 'solemn' stories of the triangular trade; 'never known to tell a happy story', Esi's stoicism is a silent shield against her despair. Dispassionate, devoid of drama or emotion, the stories of dead slaves 'pressed like garlic' upon one another speaks both of the tragedy and their numbing acceptance of it. Esi cannot offer lullabies to Ness, but instead her narratives are of 'images of men being thrown into the Atlantic Ocean like anchors attached to nothing: no land, no people, no worth'. They illustrate the erasure of identity, and of any value except as a commodity – and even then a cruelly disposable one. Even the introduction of TimTam, whose good humour offers a flicker of relief, only serves to show the slaves' subjection to this value chain. Any 'worth' in these conditions could only be achieved by mastered slaves, such as TimTam, described as 'the best gift [Tom Allan] ever received, better even than the gray-tailed cat... or red wagon'. The word 'even' betrays an incredulity on the slave's part that he could be a better gift than an animal or an object. In the hierarchy of the dispossessed, even the relatively privileged -those with a 'good master'- share the same subhuman status.

Ness and Esi are further distanced from their heritage when they are forbidden to speak their native language, Twi, whose use is punished by beatings. Ness becomes 'too scared to speak', the fear of beatings depriving her of her very voice; the ultimate denial of self-expression. Even her name, Maame, the only link to her family (it was her grandmother's) is stripped from her after the Twi name is forbidden. Indeed, 'Ness' owes her new name to her mother's pained blurt of the alien language, extracted under duress – the exclamation of 'goodness' ironically extracted under the whip in a moment of evil.

Esi's rage finds a focus in the loss of her mother's familial stone, a symbol of her loss of heritage; Ness' loss of her name is paralleled by Esi's loss of the real Maame. Poignantly, the unimaginable scale of the slaves' loss of home, freedom, youth, history and family -including Ness' loss of her own son Kojo- can only be encompassed and made comprehensible in the tangible dimensions of this lost piece of rock. Yet for all the horror in this extract, apart from Esi's anger at being 'cursed', the tone is eerily dispassionate, the descriptions flat, matter-of-fact. The voice is that of Ness herself; everything has been stolen from her, including her very capacity to feel her loss.

For Ness, this anaesthetic of her soul may be as much a mercy as a curse.

emagazine Close Reading Competition 2021 – Runner-up

Bahira Malak

This passage explores how the loss of identity can break the pride and spirits of people.

Acting as a prologue, the first lines introduce the idea of a 'broken spirit' which cannot be healed with anything – 'no drinking gourd, no spiritual soothing', the repetition of 'no' emphasizing the futility of such beliefs. Even the 'Northern Star' which was used by travellers to discern direction, a symbol not rooted in superstition, is a 'hoax', revealing the extent to which the subjects of this narrative have lost hope.

Picking cotton under the 'eye' of the sun, Ness remembers how she was 'plucked' from her mother, the verb perhaps presenting Ness as a cotton plant herself – a commodity to be disposed of. The image of a constantly watching sun creates a sense of endless time that separates her from Esi, who told stories of men being thrown like 'anchors' with 'no land, no people, no worth', echoing the first lines, and thereby revealing the reason why the slaves' spirits have broken – because their identities have been erased. The fact that they are clueless as to where they are heading links it to the Northern Star, proving that it was not able to provide guidance to these people.

Esi had 'stood solid and strong' as Ness was taken, bewildering the reader as she does not display any emotion at the loss of her child. Esi mourned the loss of her mother's 'stone' – a reminder of her identity, and perhaps because she could not pass it on to Ness, she ensured that she would still learn from the 'gray rock of her heart'. Though stones have connotations of harshness, they could be symbolic of a 'hardness of spirit' as they stand the test of time and are unbreakable, inextricably linking identity with spirit – if the first is lost, the latter is 'broken'. Despite how their identities are being removed, Esi still manages to find an 'anchor' to her homeland by passing on her language and experiences to her daughter, creating a link to her origins.

By telling 'nice stories' and being 'warm', it seems the slaves have managed to keep their morale high – after all, TimTam finds Ness's bitter comment amusing. However, the verb 'expelled' suggests that his laughter is forced, the 'thunder' only the beginning of suppressed resentment that will follow as a storm from the 'cloud' of his gut. The slaves are burying their pain, unlike Esi who believed that her past would strengthen Ness for future challenges. Even their languages, something that Esi attempted to make Ness hold onto, have been suppressed. Ness's Twi name was changed through torture, providing an insight into the slavers' brutal mentality – by removing any remnant of identity, the slaves' spirits will not be sustained, preventing them from rebelling. Though the new name comes from 'goodness', the irony is that it was forged from Esi's pain – a reminder to Ness that she will remain strong only by searching for hope in her struggles.