



emagazine Close Reading Competition 2019 – Results and Report

Here are the results of the competition and the winning entry. The emagazine editors compiled the shortlist with Professor Ben Knights choosing the winners and runners up. Barbara Bleiman gives an overview of this year's competition. Ben Knights comments on the shortlist and his reasons for choosing the winner.

THE RESULTS

WINNER

Clementine Read – St Paul's Girls' School

RUNNERS-UP

- Eleanor Ward – Bristol Grammar School
- Sarah Ojoma Ben Edeh – London Academy of Tottenham

SHORTLISTED ENTRIES

- Victoria Atkin – Alder Grange School, Rossendale
- Oskar Bishop – Bristol Grammar School
- Lily Fowler – Marlborough College
- Connie Higgins – St Paul's Girls' School
- Polly Jones – Parkstone Grammar School
- Ellie Smyk – Bristol Grammar School
- Sophie Webber – John Mason School, Abingdon

emagazine editor, Barbara Bleiman comments 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 especially

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 the reason for exploring how the writer achieves this.

Ben Knights comments on the shortlist and choice of winner

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.

Winning Entry

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 fairy-tale 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 stocking's '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.

James Joyce: extract from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916)

Going home for the holidays! That would be lovely: the fellows had told him. Getting up on the cars in the early wintry morning outside the door of the castle. The cars were rolling on the gravel. Cheers for the rector!

Hurray! Hurray! Hurray!

The cars drove past the chapel and all caps were raised. They drove merrily along the country roads. The drivers pointed with their whips to Bodentown. The fellows cheered. They passed the farmhouse of the Jolly Farmer. Cheer after cheer after cheer. Through Clane they drove, cheering and cheered. The peasant women stood at the halfdoors, the men stood here and there. The lovely smell there was in the wintry air: the smell of Clane: rain and wintry air and turf smouldering and corduroy.

The train was full of fellows: a long long chocolate train with cream facings. The guards went to and fro opening, closing, locking, unlocking the doors. They were men in dark blue and silver; they had silvery whistles and their keys made a quick music: click, click: click, click.

And the train raced on over the flat lands and past the Hill of Allen. The telegraph poles were passing, passing. The train went on and on. It knew. There were lanterns in the hall of his father's house and ropes of green branches. There were holly and ivy round the pierglass and holly and ivy, green and red, twined round the chandeliers. There were red holly and green ivy round the old portraits on the walls. Holly and ivy for him and for Christmas.

Lovely...

All the people. Welcome home, Stephen! Noises of welcome. His mother kissed him. Was that right? His father was a marshal now: higher than a magistrate. Welcome home, Stephen!

Noises...

There was a noise of curtain-rings running back along the rods, of water being splashed in the basins. There was a noise of rising and dressing and washing in the dormitory: a noise of clapping of hands as the prefect went up and down telling the fellows to look sharp. A pale sunlight showed the yellow curtains drawn back, the tossed beds. His bed was very hot and his face and body were very hot.

He got up and sat on the side of his bed. He was weak. He tried to pull on his stocking. It had a horrid rough feel. The sunlight was queer and cold.

Fleming said:

—Are you not well?

He did not know; and Fleming said:

—Get back into bed. I'll tell McGlade you're not well.

—He's sick.

—Who is?

—Tell McGlade.

—Get back into bed.

—Is he sick?

A fellow held his arms while he loosened the stocking clinging to his foot and climbed back into the hot bed.

He crouched down between the sheets, glad of their tepid glow. He heard the fellows talk among themselves about him as they dressed for mass. It was a mean thing to do, to shoulder him into the square ditch, they were saying.

Then their voices ceased; they had gone. A voice at his bed said:

—Dedalus, don't spy on us, sure you won't?

Wells's face was there. He looked at it and saw that Wells was afraid.

—I didn't mean to. Sure you won't?

His father had told him, whatever he did, never to peach on a fellow. He shook his head and answered no and felt glad.

Wells said:

—I didn't mean to, honour bright. It was only for cod. I'm sorry.

The face and the voice went away. Sorry because he was afraid. Afraid that it was some disease. Canker was a disease of plants and cancer one of animals: or another different. That was a long time ago then out on the playgrounds in the evening light, creeping from point to point on the fringe of his line, a heavy bird flying low through the grey light. Leicester Abbey lit up. Wolsey died there. The abbots buried him themselves.

It was not Wells's face, it was the prefect's. He was not foxing. No, no: he was sick really. He was not foxing.

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