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Using Terminology (or Not) to Write About Texts (emagplus)

In this article, Barbara Bleiman considers the role of terminology when writing about literary texts and puts her views to the test with six paragraphs written in response to a poem from Tennyson's 'In Memoriam'.

*Be near me when my light is low,
When the blood creeps, and the nerves prick
And tingle; and the heart is sick,
And all the wheels of Being slow.*

*Be near me when the sensuous frame
Is rack'd with pangs that conquer trust;
And Time, a maniac scattering dust,
And Life, a Fury slinging flame.*

*Be near me when my faith is dry,
And men the flies of latter spring,
That lay their eggs, and sting and sing
And weave their petty cells and die.*

*Be near me when I fade away,
To point the term of human strife,
And on the low dark verge of life
The twilight of eternal day.*

This is one of my favourite short poems, from one of my favourite sequences of poems, 'In Memoriam' by Alfred Lord Tennyson. I love it because it moves me. It's incredibly sad. It was written after the death of Tennyson's close friend Arthur Hallam, at the age of 22. Imagine losing your best friend at that age. Each poem in the whole sequence is a different moment of grief; each looks for a way of coming to terms with loss. This particular poem is especially moving I think, especially painful and tender towards his dead friend, expressing Tennyson's hope that Hallam might still be close to him, to help him through the difficulties that he currently faces and will face in his future life, including the moment of his own death.

As you can see, I've started talking about this poem in the round. I've said something about what kind of poem it is, how it affects me, how it fits into the bigger picture of the poem sequence as a whole. Already, in a single paragraph, you've (hopefully) found out quite a lot about the poem in a broad sense – what it's about and something about the particular angle that it takes on death, a theme that is often the subject of poetry.

Teachers and examiners all say the same thing – that it's really important to have some big ideas about what's at stake in a poem and then follow through how these ideas 'play out' in the poem – how the poet has conveyed ideas and feelings that you are interested in. This involves looking hard at language, form, structure – the style and approach of the poem – but always in its relationship to the thoughts and feelings the poem has raised for you. It's detail at the service of ideas, not detail for its own sake.

And in exploring 'what's at stake' in the poem, it's far more important that you have strong, valid, interesting and well considered ideas than that you have very few genuine ideas but dress them up in elaborate, complicated terminology to make not very much look flashy and glamorous. Being academic, rigorous and perceptive is more than just 'sounding' academic, without any genuine ideas behind that.

So, having established the big idea of what the poem is about, I can begin to explore the way the poem 'works' – how and why I find it so powerful, what Tennyson is doing that gives this particular angle on grief such a memorable quality. I'm not going to offer a full reading of the poem here, because my object is more to offer some ideas about ways in which one might write about the detail of the poem. Examiners and teachers argue about the finer nuances of what are the best ways of talking about details of style but in general, there is a broad consensus. To recap, this would touch on all of the following:

1. Ideas are most important. Having a good idea, expressed well and explored thoughtfully, is much better than having a feeble or unjustifiable idea that's expressed in elaborate sounding terms.
2. That expressing yourself clearly trumps throwing in terms for their own sake, and ending up sounding garbled and confused
3. That using the 'terms of the subject' well doesn't mean having to use lots of latinate or Greek terms like zeugma, hyperbaton, synecdoche or anadiplosis. Using the more common and generally useful concepts of the subject like voice, point of view, narrative arc, characterisation, metaphor, image, stanza, rhyme and so on, and using them well, is much more impressive. Being led by what's genuinely helpful rather than what sounds good offers a good steer.
4. That exploring the detail of the text should always be at the service of a significant idea, not just for its own sake, as a way of 'proving' to an examiner that you can pick away at a bit of detail.

I'm going to offer several short paragraphs about the Tennyson poem, all of which are expressed in very different ways. In doing so, I want to flag up the difference between working hard to express complex and interesting ideas in the most convincing and direct way, and looking at detail and using terminology for their own sake, simply to prove that I know lots of literary critical language and can identify rhetorical devices. In each paragraph I also select different things to discuss, not just metaphor and simile, the staples of poetry analysis, but also other aspects of style and language.

Look at each paragraph and weigh up for yourself how convincingly and interestingly I write about the poem adopting different approaches and choosing to write about different aspects:

- Which did you enjoy reading most?
- In which paragraphs do I come up with the most interesting and well thought through interpretation?
- Which paragraphs make you think afresh about the poem yourself?
- Which are just going through the motions, identifying techniques, using literary terms, but not really convincing you of the validity of my response?
- Are there any paragraphs where it's not even possible to work out what I mean?

At the very end, I say something very brief about my own thoughts on this. Don't look at these before making up your own mind!

Paragraph 1

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The recurring first line of each stanza, with its opening 'Be near me when' is a plea to Hallam to provide the narrator with comfort, even after death. Though one might expect a turn at some point in the poem, with a significant shift in the recurring refrain, in fact it works more by simply becoming more intense with each repetition. By the last stanza, the narrator is thinking of his own death and pleading with Hallam not to desert him at this moment. The unchanging opening of the refrain shows the constancy of his feelings for his friend and draws attention to the second half of each line, the ever-increasing intensity of his own need – first when he is feeling sad, next when he is in such agony that trust (in God?) is threatened, then when his faith has entirely evaporated and all he can believe is that human beings live and die like flies, and finally when he himself dies.

Paragraph 2

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In this poem, Time is personified as scattering dry, useless dead dust and life is also personified as a 'Fury', spreading destructive fire. The Furies were the daughters of the goddess of the Night, Nyx. They were goddesses of vengeance. By personifying Life as a Fury, Tennyson is saying that it is angry and vindictive, the antonym, or antithesis of life. The use of capitals for Life and Time emphasizes the fact that they are personified.

Paragraph 3

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The use of syndetic listing is noticeable in this poem. It slows the pace of the first three stanzas and makes it elegiac. Interestingly, in the fourth and final stanza, Tennyson stops using syndetic listing at the point at which he thinks about his own death, which he describes as the 'verge' of

life. 'Verge' links with 'twilight'. He's at a moment of liminality, reminiscent of Gothic literature. Here it's the edge between life and death. Interestingly, he uses the word 'twilight' for the moment. This is a paradox, because the 'twilight' is the start of 'eternal day'. Twilight usually comes before day, not night.

Paragraph 4

The poem is full of unnervingly raw and powerful images. In the first stanza, the poet's grief seems physically unbearable. Every part of his body is affected; his blood runs slowly, his nerves are irritated causing heightened, unpleasant sensations and his heart, the seat of both life and emotion, is described as 'sick'. Light is low and everything has slowed down, as if he is almost leading a half-life, a shadowy existence, barely alive. The imagery of the second verse is even more powerful, with the idea of pain that is like torture – his body 'racked' with suffering. Both Time and Life are presented as crazy, violent figures, bringing with them destruction and decay. Time is always associated with mortality but here it is personified as a 'maniac', rather than as it often is, ticking away like a clock, almost imperceptibly. Life, by contrast, is not usually presented as a Fury, a vengeful being that burns everything in its path. For Tennyson, it seems that there is no force for good, not even Life itself. In the third stanza, there is a stepping back, a sense that all humanity suffers the same fate; that life is pointless. He generalizes out to 'men' whom he describes as being like flies, whose life cycle is pitifully short. We are no better than flies, he suggests.

Paragraph 5

The poem is addressed to Hallam. It is a direct, almost, in fact, like a prayer, when his spirits are so low that praying to God now seems like an impossibility – his faith is 'dry'. There is a simplicity about the repeated pattern of the opening line of each stanza: 'Be near me when'. This plain, direct call to his friend is reinforced by the simplicity of the language, the use of colloquial, monosyllabic words and the syntax, with its simple structuring in the form of lists of when he needs Hallam to 'be near' him. In the final stanza however, the syntax becomes more complicated, with 'To point the term of human strife'. The pattern of wanting Hallam near to him 'when'... switches to wanting Hallam near to him 'to'. It's a shift in thinking. Hallam can do something for him. He can show him the way towards death – the 'term' or end of life and human suffering. Perhaps 'point' could mean two things, both pointing the way for him but also pointing out the reasons for human life ending. For Tennyson, it's almost as if his faith rests in Hallam to show him the way towards life after death and show him 'eternal day'.

Paragraph 6

The plosive in 'Be' starting each stanza makes one feel the power of Tennyson's emotions and gives it an elegiac tone. The first stanza is full of plosives 'blood', 'prick' 'Being' and these are echoed in the later verses with 'dust' and 'dry', 'petty' and 'die'. They make use of onomatopoeia to echo the poet's feelings of anger and dejection at being left by his friend, Hallam. The fact that there are so many 'd' sounds, such as in 'dust', 'dry', 'die' and 'day', often ending a line, or in the final stanza ending the whole poem, suggests that death is a strong theme in the poem. The abba rhyme scheme of the quatrains reinforces this in each stanza. For instance, 'low' and 'slow' link to show how bad he feels in the first stanza, and 'fade away' and 'day' are linked in the final one. Fading away and 'day' seem like the antithesis of each other – one about death the other about a new awakening. The rhyme scheme reinforces this and the final line with its regular iambic rhythm suggests a new certainty that death is not the end for human beings.

My Own Thoughts

There are three paragraphs that aren't distracted by academic language, paragraphs 1, 4 and 5. All three stood out for me as genuinely exploring my thoughts and feelings about the poem – a serious response, in which I said things I really feel in the best possible way I could. They were the only ones that I also really enjoyed writing. Paragraphs 4 and 5 had the extra dimension of being the only ones where, while writing them, I discovered more about the poem than I knew before I started. I think my favourite is paragraph 4. Here, I used a very limited number of literary terms: stanza, personified, image/imagery, presented. I didn't find myself needing any more than that. In fact, in some of the less successful paragraphs I was having to force myself to include them.

There seems to me to be a lesson in all of this. It brings us round full circle to my opening – to the need to keep in mind 'what's at stake' in a text, to always write about what you genuinely think, and to use your writing to help you work out what that is.

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