

# 1 Minute, 5 Minutes, 15 Minutes – Write!

This strategy for developing the skills of close reading borrows from art where students are frequently asked to do a series of timed sketches of a still life or life model, before being given the time and freedom to do a fuller drawing or painting.

For this activity you need a text short enough for you to respond to it in a very limited amount of time – poems work particularly well.

- Before you begin, you might like to read the example on page 39 which shows one reader's developing response to Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem *Pied Beauty*.
- Now work through the sequence outlined in the table, below.

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15 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Read and think about the text again for 15 minutes, without writing.</li><li>• Write about the text for 15 minutes.</li><li>• Read over everything you have written about the text. As you read your work, try to take a step back and notice the way in which you have responded each time, and whether there is any change or development.</li></ul>
45 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• As soon as possible after completing your 15-minute response, write a timed essay on your close reading of the text. (You could do this for homework if you have run out of lesson time.)</li></ul>

## Reflecting on the process

- Look over the sequence of responses, including your timed essay. Then, as a class, share what you have discovered about the way in which your interpretation of the text developed.

## An example, showing one reader's timed responses

### Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things –  
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;  
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
Praise him.

### 1-minute response

Something about this poem really appeals. Like its sound – the alliteration, the bounciness of the rhythm. About nature? Think religious too. Bit tripped up by some of the words though – ‘rose-moles’? ‘brindled’? Why does it work well? In some ways just like a list.

### 5-minute response

This time I read the poem aloud, to hear it. It really is a lovely poem to hear. It's also helped me get to grips a bit with the structure of the poem – I think maybe all of the things in nature it lists are ‘dappled’ – the things God is being praised or thanked for. I've been mulling over why he chose ‘dappled’ things. I can see it gives the poet some beautiful visual images to use – the picture of the fields especially. Autumn or spring though? Plough makes me think autumn. Interesting that so many descriptions come *after* the noun. For rhythm maybe? Building up the description too – not really many things listed, but a real weight of description to paint the picture. Tried to reverse the order. Doesn't work AT ALL. So stupid of me – hadn't noticed the rhyme before I tried that swap. I want to think more about the break between stanzas.

### 15-minute response

It's amazing how this poem has burrowed its way into my head – two lines in particular ‘Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow and plough’ and ‘all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.’

I need to move on to think about the second stanza but just want to think a bit more about these two lines. Most of the first stanza seems to be about natural things – I thought ‘pied’, ‘dappled’, ‘stippled’, all of which have a sense of contrast about them, might be to show the variety of the natural world.

Then in the last line there's a real shift, a move away from nature to ‘trades’, the jobs people do – and even more specifically the tools of the job and everything associated with it. Is God being praised for creating that variety too? It's not a very ‘poetic’ subject but the use of alliteration, the syntax and the rhythm seem to elevate the ‘trades’ into something really worthy of recognition (maybe even part of nature?). I suppose in a sense this move towards ‘trades’ was anticipated in ‘Landscape plotted and pieced’ – this is the way the land looks when it is farmed, not how it looks naturally.

The middle line of this second stanza fits with my idea that this is a poem praising God for variety – even drawing attention to the contrasts, as though both are needed, one only existing because of the other.

What intrigues me most though is the beginning of the stanza: ‘All things counter, original, spare, strange’ – this very much draws attention to the odd, the marginal, things outside of the mainstream perhaps, or against tradition. I wonder why?

The final two lines have a real sense of conclusion – partly, I think, created by the rhyme which draws the poem together.

## **Virginia Woolf: Mrs Dalloway (1925)**

Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, 'Musing among the vegetables?' – was that it? – 'I prefer men to cauliflowers' – was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace – Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished – how strange it was! – a few sayings like this about cabbages.

She stiffened a little on the kerb, waiting for Durtall's van to pass. A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her (knowing her as one does know people who live next door to one in Westminster); a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness. There she perched, never seeing him, waiting to cross, very upright.

For having lived in Westminster – how many years now? over twenty – one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps (drink their downfall) do the same; can't be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.

**You can read a close reading of this text by Professor Judy Simons on page 159.**

## Virginia Woolf: Mrs Dalloway (See page 70)

### Reading by Professor Judy Simons

The opening of *Mrs Dalloway* is one of the most innovative in all English fiction. From the deceptively gentle first sentence, 'Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself', the text rejects the conventions of observational narrative to immerse the reader in the interior consciousness of the central character. Clarissa Dalloway is rapidly and precisely located in time, place and class as a society lady, from a well-to-do country house background, who employs servants and expensive caterers for her party. Yet the social precision is tempered by ambivalence – how far is Clarissa a sympathetic portrait and how far an ironic subject? This ambivalence becomes a hallmark of her portrayal.

Woolf's prose is often compared to poetry, and the text exploits poetic techniques of rhythm, repetition, imagery and circularity to mirror the pulsating motion of Clarissa's thoughts as they drift through time and space, from contemporary London back to her girlhood home. 'What a lark! What a plunge!' – the exclamations capture the linguistic, almost adolescent register of a woman who has led a sheltered and privileged existence. Instinctive mental processes fuse the sublime 'kiss of the wave' with the mundane 'cabbages', just one of the contrasts that pervade the text: between private and public, now and then, joy and sadness, life and death.

These few paragraphs announce both the principal themes of the book and Woolf's experimental approach to character. Long sentences that abandon formal, logical organisation instead present intuitive memories that flow into one another. The effect is impressionistic, based on responsive experience and feeling – 'how fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning' – mingling past and present while retaining the informality of personal style. Working from the inside of Clarissa's mind, the text conveys her irrepressible joyousness, peaking at the upbeat end of the final paragraph with 'what she loved; life; London; this moment of June'.

A brief intervening paragraph interrupts the momentum to offer a totally different view of Clarissa as a thin, drawn, middle-aged woman, glimpsed from the standpoint of her neighbour, Scrope Purvis. This sudden shift of perspective is at the heart of Woolf's technique, emphasising the idea of life as a composition of random moments that create the mosaic of human experience.

For amidst the bubbly imagery of youth and summer, 'fresh as if issued to children on a beach', and the strong, active verbs 'burst', 'plunged', are dark undertones that reflect the aftermath of the First World War. From the eighteen-year old Clarissa's premonition 'that something awful was about to happen' to her present knowledge that 'millions of things had utterly vanished', the buoyant mood is destabilised by images of 'illness', 'solemnity' and 'warning'. The recurring phrases in this section (see how many repetitions you can count) introduce images that reverberate throughout the book. The tolling of Big Ben and the 'leaden circles' that dissolve in the air suggest the sense of doom and presence of death that shadow both Mrs Dalloway and the city she inhabits.

The section gains pace and moves to a climax in the short phrases towards the end of paragraph four, punctuated by semi-colons that create a staccato effect. Packed with verbs, including a preponderance of present participles – 'building, tumbling, shuffling, swinging' – they echo the constant movement and noise of complementary internal and external worlds as Clarissa celebrates the triumph of being alive.

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