

Quiz #4 & 5: Explicating a Poem (50 points; ½ of a paper grade, so you need to take this seriously)

Due: Tuesday, Oct. 23

Below, you will find the poem, "Joshua on the Road." Your task complete an explication of this poem—following the instructions in the handout posted for this week under "Required Background Reading." (I am not expecting perfection, just a reasonable and supported interpretation of this poem.) Don't waste your time trying to find information about this poem on the Internet—I promise you that you will not find any information. Please follow the instructions directly below the poem.

Joshua on the Road

You called yourself a "traveller"
A mystery to us even though you explained it repeatedly.
Off you went--
Out the door and into the life you loved,
Carrying your guitar like your laughter, always in easy reach.

I see you in my mind:
A six year old boy singing; or
Wearing your underwear on your head;
My best photo shows you sitting in the hollow of a tree.
You were fourteen, careless and handsome--a moment distilled in the simplicity of before.

Time passed, and I remember looking for you under railroad bridges
Finding only a chalk drawing you had etched on a wall.
Later, you were back—entangled in the ecstasy and meanness of it all--
Strung out, emaciated, and afraid.
We could only cut your hair, make you bathe, and ask you to stay.

We understood that the impracticality of time was the measure of your steps;
You walked along the glittering edge of revelation,
Following a dissonant reverie,
Seeking a place where stillness and density hail the sky.

Now we have after—a known constant distilled in the complexity of gone;
We travel on--
Dreaming of an invisible hand
Ever-etching your bright reflection
In the chalky haze of the road.

Your Task:

Do an explication of this poem—following the instructions in the handout posted for this week under “Required Background Reading.” If you don’t follow the steps in explicating poems, it will be painfully obvious to your instructor, and you won’t receive credit for the assignment.

In the process of explicating, be sure to answer the questions below. I don’t want to see the answers to these questions; the answers to the questions should inform your interpretation, so the answers are for you. Once you have examined the images, color, sounds, and patterns of meaning in this poem, write 2-4 paragraphs giving a brief interpretation of this poem. Once you have completed your interpretation upload it in the assignment portal.

If you want to see an example of a short explication and interpretation, I am including the explication I did of “Golden Retrievals” below.

1. What is the poem literally saying?
2. What words are key to discerning meaning?
3. What images are key to discerning meaning? Color, images of nature, and so on.
4. What are the key metaphors you find in this poem?
5. How are the following words defined by a dictionary?
 - ecstasy
 - emaciated
 - dissonant
 - reverie
6. What does the title suggest about the meaning of the poem? Why is the poem called “Joshua on the Road”?

Example Explication and Short Interpretation

Golden Retrievals

By Mark Doty

Fetch? Balls and sticks capture my attention

seconds at a time. Catch? I don't think so.

Bunny, tumbling leaf, a squirrel who's—oh

joy—actually scared. Sniff the wind, then

I'm off again: muck, pond, ditch, residue

of any thrillingly dead thing. And you?

Either you're sunk in the past, half our walk,

thinking of what you never can bring back,

or else you're off in some fog concerning

—tomorrow, is that what you call it? My work:

to unsnare time's warp (and woof!), retrieving,

my haze-headed friend, you. This shining bark,

a Zen master's bronzy gong, calls you here,

Notice in this first stanza we have several concrete images: balls, sticks, bunny, tumbling leaf, and a squirrel.

Notice here in the second stanza we have muck, pond, residue of dead thing, and sunk in the past

Notice in this third stanza we have fog, work, unsnare time's warp, woof, haze-headed friend, and shining bark

entirely, now: bow-wow, bow-wow, bow-wow.

And finally in this last stanza we have a Zen master's bronzy gong and bow-wow repeated.

So let's ask a few questions:

First, overall what do the images suggest when we look at them as a pattern. What do we associate with the images?

- ◆ The "bow-wow" and "woof" make it clear that the overriding concrete image is a dog.
 - ◆ Once we surmise that we have a pattern that is consistent with the experience of a dog's life, we look to see if other images fit with the idea that our primary image is a dog.
- ⇒ "Balls and sticks," "muck, pond, ditch and residue" along with "dead thing" is certainly consistent with a dog's experience, even though these images could also relate to other experiences or entities, the "bow-wow" and "woof" limit our interpretation to the idea of a dog as the primary image.

Second, who is our narrator in this poem? Who is speaking to us?

- ◆ We have an "I" voice in the first stanza, so we know this poem is written in first person.
- ◆ Who is the "I"? If we look at the images "bunny, tumbling leaf, a squirrel" we have images not only consistent with a dog's interests, but a voice telling us

“oh joy” the squirrel is “actually scared.” Most human beings would not find such joy in these things—except maybe a child? So let’s see if we have a dog or a child.

Next, who would be most likely to be thrilled by the images that follow?

- ◆ We look at the image of an entity sniffing the wind that loves “muck, pond, ditch” and “dead” things. A child? But children don’t usually bark, and they aren’t allowed to play with dead things. So the pattern of images most logically relates to a dog.

Next, what is the dog saying? What is the dog interested in telling his human?

- ◆ The dog worries that his friend is not aware of the present. The friend is “stuck in the past” and “thinking of what you never can bring back.” The friend is in a “fog” and “stuck in tomorrow.”

Finally, what is the most important idea the dog wants to communicate? What is the dog’s “work” as he sees it?

- ◆ “My work: to unsnare time’s warp (and woof!), retrieving, my haze-headed friend, you. This shining bark, a Zen master’s bronzy gong, calls you here, entirely, now”

- ◆ The concrete images here make clear that the dog's "work" is to ask his friend to live in the present by "unsnar[ing] time's warp"; his bark serving as "a Zen master's bronzy gong" that "calls" his friend to live "entirely, now."

So let's put it altogether in a brief interpretation:

"The poem "Golden Retrievals" by Mark Doty sets forth the primary theme of the importance of experiencing and finding joy in our lives as it is lived in the now.

The poem narrated by a happy and energetic dog drives home this theme through the images associated with a dog's experience. Dogs do indeed live almost exclusively in the present, and they find delight in even the most mundane and, seemingly, unpleasant aspects of daily living. The dog is ecstatic discovering the simple pleasures of his/her real world: sticks and balls, muck and squirrels and dead things. Simply sniffing the air is a cause for joy. The dog, personified through human language, understands and expresses his concern for the human who walks unaware and unresponsive to the world in the present moment. This person is "stuck in the past" or worried about the future. These distractions cause the person to be "stuck in some fog" which the present moment cannot penetrate. Hence, the joy of the concrete present is lost in the abstract thinking about the past and future. The dog defines his "work" as retrieving his "haze-headed friend"

from those abstractions and like a “Zen master’s gong” calling his friend to the vitality of life in its immediacy.”

*There is more to say about this poem, but unlocking the mysteries of poems is a process that hinges on careful reading, marking up a text, and looking for patterns.