

emagazine Close Reading Competition 2020 - Write a 500-word close reading of the passage from *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by Anne Brontë

This passage is about divulging secrets previously withheld. It acts as a prologue, framing the novel's narrative, providing context and setting up a confidential climate. The narrative voice invites our trust and builds a sense of intimacy, while simultaneously planting ambiguities that shall only be resolved if we read on.

At first, the narrative voice is rather formal, speaking of his "acquaintance" with Halford and their "interview", employing long complex sentences that appear carefully constructed and considered. In the second paragraph this measured tone dissolves, becoming more animated with the intimate, even teasing "are you not ashamed, old boy", as though a sort of punctilious barrier has been breached. It is here that we see instances of parenthesis, particularly hyphens, which pepper the text. They seem to convey an organic thought process, as if we have been granted direct access to the writer's mind.

A self-assured narrator, confident in his views, he makes use of emphatic language, "Not being in a story telling humour" and compound adjectives "inadmissible", "uncomplaining", "unparalleled" which lend a sense of finality to his words. The superlative adjective "the smallest return", is juxtaposed with the subsequent "so mighty a favour", creating a dramatic, even sarcastic effect. Though he uses repeated negatives, assuring us that he "did not take up my pen to reproach you, nor to defend myself...but...to atone", there is a feeling of implicit bitterness behind his words, and the end of the following paragraph seems a pointed challenge; "charge me with ingratitude and unfriendly reserve if you can". The letter-writer himself feels injured by Halford's new "semi-melancholy stiffness".

An excerpt about shared confidences, the narrator takes pains to gain the reader's own trust. The repeated mentions of "letters and papers" and "a certain faded old journal", work to assure us that this story shall be "a full and faithful account" and not reliant on "memory alone". What we are reading is epistolary in form, as though we have stumbled across a private letter, a document about real events rooted in history, much more than just a 'story'. This promise of credibility is enhanced by the narrator's declaration that they "will not spare" any "particularities and circumstantial details", pledging eventual satisfaction and full disclosure. This blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction is not unlike Brontë's sister Charlotte's fictional autobiography "Jane Eyre", nor the idea of a story told by many mouths as in Emily's "Wuthering Heights", both published the year before.

An air of mystery is conveyed that sparks our curiosity, by references to "musty old letters" and "musing on past times". This atmosphere is heightened by the almost clichéd pathetic fallacy of a "soaking, rainy day", paired with the unnamed narrator "alone in [their] library". Having settled into this storyteller persona, his words assume an epic-like quality, this "shall be a tale of many chapters.-", the curtailed ending stressing that the end of this passage is but a beginning. The narrator has captured our attention, and we wait to hear of "the most important event of [his] life".

Word count: 505