

Asking Questions

pp. 7-15

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Atgoffir staff a myfyrwyr bod hawlfraint ar y darn hwn ac ar y gwaith y cafodd ei gymryd ohono. Gwnaed y Copi Digidol hwn o dan delerau trwydded CLA sy'n caniatáu i chi:

- fynd at gopi a'i lwytho i lawr;
- argraffu copi;

Sylwch bod y deunydd hwn yn UNIG at ddefnydd myfyrwyr sydd wedi cofrestru ar y cwrs astudio fel y nodir yn yr adran isod. Caniateir i holl staff a myfyrwyr eraill ddarllen y deunydd yn unig ac ni ddylent ei lwytho i lawr ac/neu argraffu copi

Mae'r Copi Digidol hwn ac unrhyw gopi digidol neu brintiedig a ddarparwyd i chi, neu a wnaed gennych, o dan delerau'r Drwydded hon, i'w ddefnyddio gyda'r Cwrs Astudio hwn. Gellwch gadw copïau o'r fath ar ôl i'r cwrs ddod i ben, ond at eich defnydd personol eich hun yn unig. Bydd pob copi (yn cynnwys copïau electronig) yn cynnwys y Rhybudd Hawlfraint hwn a bydd yn rhaid eu dinistrio ac/neu eu dileu pan fydd yn galw am hynny.

Ac eithrio'r hyn a ganiateir gan gyfraith hawlfraint, ni chaniateir copio, cadw neu ddosbarthu pellach (yn cynnwys drwy e-bost) heb ganiatâd deiliad yr hawlfraint.

Mae gan yr awdur (ac mae'r term hwnnw'n cynnwys arlunwyr a chrewyr gweledol eraill) hawliau moesol dros y gwaith ac ni all staff na myfyrwyr achosi, na chaniatáu, i'r gwaith gael ei aflunio, ei lurgunio neu ei addasu mewn unrhyw ffordd arall, neu ei drin yn ddiraddiol mewn unrhyw ffordd, a fyddai'n niweidiol i anrhydedd neu enw da'r awdur.

Mae hon yn fersiwn ddigidol o ddeunydd hawlfraint a wnaed dan drwydded gan ddeiliad yr hawl, ac ni ellir sicrhau ei chywirdeb. Cyfeiriwch at yr argraffiad cyhoeddedig gwreiddiol os gwelwch yn dda.

Trwyddedwyd i'w ddefnyddio ar gyfer y cwrs HPHP4902 – Academic Skills (HPHP4902)

Teitl: Ways of reading : advanced reading skills for students of English literature

Enw'r Awdur: Montgomery, Martin., Routledge.

Enw'r Cyhoeddwr: Routledge

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Course of Study: HPHP4902 – Academic Skills (HPHP4902)

Title: Ways of reading : advanced reading skills for students of English literature

Name of Author: Montgomery, Martin., Routledge.

Unit 1 Asking questions

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE READ?

It is common enough to say that we 'respond' to the text we are reading. In the case of a written text, we respond to its wording by identifying the meaning of individual words, and by working out the relationships between words by drawing on our implicit knowledge of grammar (see Unit 3: Analysing units of structure).

But readers do more than simply respond passively to texts. Instead, readers approach texts *actively*, with certain expectations in mind. As we read words and sentences, we look for patterns and develop hypotheses; we establish contexts by making decisions about who we think is making an utterance, and to whom; and we draw inferences about implied meanings, filling in gaps in what is explicitly said. We also establish a relationship between the text and its **genre** (see Unit 17); or we form an idea of the text's relationship to specific places, times and other texts by attending to its explicit references and use of **allusion** (see Unit 16).

In this sense, we creatively interpret not only aspects of the text itself, but also the text's position in society and history. In doing so, we also need to reflect on the context of our own reading. Are we studying the text? Reading it for pleasure? Skimming it for information? Do we intend to try to remember it, enjoy it, write about it, etc.? Such questions suggest that an implicit *agenda* is brought to any act of reading; different situations and purposes for reading will influence the kind of questions you are likely to ask of a text. This will distinguish the way you read on a train or in bed from what you are likely to do in a seminar room (though this does not mean that one kind of reading is necessarily better than another).

AGENDAS FOR READING IN FORMAL STUDIES

But knowing that ways of reading are always goal-oriented does not in itself, however, help you to start reading any given text. All too often little help is given for this problem by the prescribed tasks and examination questions set in institutions of higher education—which are often vague and open-ended invitations for your comments and 'response'.

To engage with a text, therefore, you are likely to have to define your *own* interest in reading it, and to investigate the text through a set of questions you yourself decide to ask. Even if these questions ultimately clash with the expressed or implied directions of your course of study or with published commentary, they will nevertheless enable you not only to engage with aspects of the text which interest you, but also to identify how your own concerns relate to the different notions of reading which you find around you.

The questions you ask of a text need to be as specific as possible. It may seem that there should be one single route for investigation to follow: a search for the text's 'meaning'. But meaning is never singular in this way. Looking for the meaning or meanings of a text involves asking a number of different sorts of question – or, alternatively, blocking these different sorts of question off. Such diversity in the types of meaning which can be found in a text can function productively, however, as a catalyst to discussion and theoretical reflection. We list the main alternative kinds of meaning to illustrate this point.

The intended meaning?

One way of looking for the meaning of a text is to consider what the author meant by it. To speculate about authorial intention, such as Shakespeare's intention in writing *Hamlet*, involves trying to work from what the text actually says into an imagined set of social circumstances possibly very different from your own. In effect, you try to reconstruct the likely meanings or effects that any given sentence, image or reference might have, since these may well be the ones the author anticipated; in doing this, you make the imaginative leap of trying to gauge an author's beliefs, emotions, knowledge and attitudes, as well as guessing what the author 'had in mind' at the time of writing.

But in looking for a meaning of this sort, there are evident difficulties. A persona, or invented voice, might have been deliberately adopted, separating what the text says from the writer's own feelings; and in drama or novels, characters speak as constructs created by the author, not necessarily as mouthpieces for the author's personal voice to come through. In any case, there is no infallible way of verifying an intention, which is why the critics W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley (1946) dismissed the quest to discover what the author 'had in mind' as an 'intentional fallacy', or unwarranted shift from what the words of the text appear to mean to what we imagine the author meant by using them. Language can in any case escape our intentions, producing not only meanings which were not anticipated, but also slippages or failures of meaning which can be carefully exposed to undermine any seemingly intended meaning (see Unit 24: Authorship and intention).

The text's own meaning?

In this view of looking for meaning (which some critics have called 'objective' interpretation), features of the text itself are taken to be primarily responsible for guiding interpretation. How the text you are reading is organized (what words and structures it uses, how images and ideas are patterned) directs you towards a specific meaning. In this framework, what is important is to focus on details of the language and layout – examining choices of expression and the use of stylistic devices (such as figurative language, irony, paradox), or contrasting the ways the text is presented with other, alternative, ways it *might* have been presented (which would have produced different meanings).

If pursued in isolation, however, this search for a meaning which should be predictable simply from the organization of the text runs into difficulties. The fact that texts are interpreted very differently in different historical periods, and by differing social groups or readerships, challenges the idea of such an 'objective' meaning determined by the text alone, and suggests that the social circumstances in which a text is produced and interpreted, and the expectations readers bring to it, crucially affect what it is taken to mean.

An individual meaning?

In this view, the meaning of the text is whatever your personal response is: what the text means to you as you read it. Texts are suggestive, and connect with individual experiences, memories and associations for words and images. What is to be valued, therefore, in this approach is sensitivity in response and direct personal engagement with the text, recreating the text in a new form in the reader's own experience.

But Wimsatt and Beardsley (1949) argued that this sort of reading involves an 'affective fallacy', or overattention to response at the expense of what the words of the text actually say. Concern with personal resonances of the text can displace attention from its structures and rhetorical organization; and it is possible that many of the memories or associations triggered by texts will either be stock responses or idiosyncratic reactions which go off at purely personal tangents.

The general properties of meaning?

In this view, meaning is seen as primarily something produced by processes involved in reading. Instead of investigating in detail what a given text means, emphasis is accordingly placed on *how* texts come to mean anything. Interest lies in the conventions and social institutions of reading, and in theories of reading. Particular readings are valuable as evidence of general reading processes, and any given meaning is only as interesting as the processes through which it was arrived at.

Reading individual texts in this way, however, can become simply an illustration of more general reading processes: reading any text would be equally useful or interesting. But although reading clearly does involve general processes (making inferences, applying idiomatic conventions, etc.), reading a given text also needs to attend to its particular use of language and form and to draw on the specific background knowledge it takes for granted. In addition, readers will bring different expectations and ideologies to bear upon different texts. Thus readings cannot be analysed completely in terms of general codes; our interest in reading texts is hardly reducible to *how* interpretation happens in the mind of a reader. An adequate analysis of reading would also need to take into account the ways our attitudes, values and social priorities affect particular acts of reading.

Shared social meanings?

In this view, what a text means is what it has meant to different readerships in the past, together with the different meanings it will have for different groups of readers today. Readers of texts form diverse groups, and the shared meanings of these groups change over time, and between places. Understanding the meaning of a text therefore involves not only accounting for individual personal responses, but also placing them within the social and historical patterns of reception of that text.

In advertising and market research, groups of readers are classified on the basis of variables such as class, age, gender and income (as As, Bs, ABs, C1s, C2s, etc.). In literary criticism, readers are often distinguished on the basis of their imagined relative taste (elite and mass audiences, for example). But readerships can also be identified on the basis of other considerations, including the function reading a given text serves (for study, as a marker of social accomplishment, as distraction from pain or work, as relaxation, etc.).

Critical social meanings?

What might be called critical social meanings are formed where personal responses and social meanings meet. As an individual reader, you are always also a specific social subject, with an age, gender, ethnicity, class and educational background. So it is possible to locate your personal responses within larger social frameworks of the reception of texts. In doing so, you can ask questions from a critical or polemic position – as an engaged rather than a detached reader. You can examine not only a culture's established imagery (how particular topics such as race, sexuality, work or money are conventionally represented), but also how such images fit in with or diverge from your own sense of how such things might or should be represented.

HOW TO GET STARTED IN WAYS OF READING

These different senses of the 'meaning' of a text are not completely separable from one another. Rather, they form a network of overlapping but distinct viewpoints from which any search for meaning in a text can be seen. Historically, different senses of a text's meanings have been emphasized in different schools of criticism and theories, and embedded in different kinds of reading technique. Listing the main directions of analysis can be useful, if only to forestall a tendency to identify one kind of meaning or approach and assume that this exhausts the interpretative possibilities with regard to a given text.

In practical terms, however, it is often necessary to find ways to get going on a text, especially if it seems to resist the ways of reading we are used to using. As catalysts to reading in any (or any combination) of the directions outlined above, therefore, the following list of more specific questions is offered as an initial checklist. Each of the questions should lead into speculations that finally have to be assessed on the basis of the insights and judgements they make possible about the text you are reading.

Textual questions

Is the piece of text you are looking at the whole of the text?

Does the text exist in only one version, or many different versions?

If in many versions, are there likely to be significant differences between them (e.g. as regards layout, typeface)?

Has the text been cut, edited or expurgated?

Has the text been annotated? If so, who provided the annotations, and do the annotations direct you towards a particular way of looking at the text?

Contextual questions

Was the originator of the text (author or producer) male or female? Professional or amateur? Native speaker of English or non-native speaker?

How old was s/he when the text was produced?

Who was the text originally aimed at? Are you part of that expected or anticipated readership or audience?

When, where and in what circumstances was the text written or produced?

(See Unit 5: Language and place; Unit 6: Language and context: register; Unit 7: Language and gender; Unit 23: Positioning the reader or spectator; Unit 24: Authorship and intention; Unit 25: Judgement and value.)

Questions of voice

Who is supposed to be speaking the words of the text?

From whose point of view is the text (poem, film, etc.) being told?

Who is the text being spoken to?

(See Unit 19: Point of view; Unit 20: Narration in film and prose fiction; Unit 21: Speech and writing; Unit 23: Positioning the reader or spectator.)

Referential questions:

Does the text contain quotations?

Does the text refer to particular social attitudes, facts or suppositions about the world, or to particular interests or geographical knowledge?

Does the text contain specific references to other literary, media, historical, mythological or religious texts, figures or events? If so, do you know what these references refer to?

Would it be helpful to understand the precise meanings of the references or allusions, or merely their general origin and flavour?

(See Unit 5: Language and place; Unit 6: Language and context: register; Unit 16: Intertextuality and allusion.)

Language questions:

Is the text in its original language, or a translation?

Is it likely that all the words in the text mean what you think they mean? (Many words have changed their meanings, and may mean something different now than they have meant in the past.)

What sort of vocabulary do the words of the text generally come from (Latinate or Germanic; elevated or colloquial; technical or non-technical, etc.)?

Were all the words and structures current at the time the text was written, or is it possible that some (e.g. 'thou') are archaisms?

Are the sentences generally of the same length and complexity? If not, is the inequality patterned or distributed in any way that might be significant?

Is a very 'literary' language being used?

(See Unit 4: Language and time; Unit 6: Language and context: register; Unit 11: Parallelism and repetition; Unit 12: Deviation.)

Symbolic questions:

Do names used in the text refer to unique, particular individuals, or are they representative, standing for general characters or character types?

Is it appropriate to look for symbolic meanings of the places (mountains, sea), weather or events (marriage, travel) in the text?

Is the text concerned to relate a specific set of events, or does it function allegorically, representing one set of concerns in the form of a story about another?

Is the text's title a key to its meaning?

(See Unit 13: Metaphor; Unit 16: Intertextuality and allusion.)

Questions of convention:

Should the way you regard the text be guided by conventions about the sort of text it is (e.g. satire, pantomime, sitcom)?

How realistic do you expect the text to be? Is it appropriate to ask such a question of the sort of text you are reading or viewing?

(See Unit 17: Genre; Unit 22: Realism.)

Questions of representation:

Is the text typical in terms of how it represents its selected themes, or is it significantly different from other treatments of similar concerns?

Does the text create images of race, women, industry, money and other socially central themes? If so, are these images problematic: and if so, why?

(See Unit 7: Language and gender; Unit 8: Language and society.)

CONCLUSIONS

As you ask questions of these different sorts, your attention is likely to be drawn to details of the text, which should then stimulate fresh directions for enquiry. Also, your answers to the questions – even provisional or negative answers – are likely to be accompanied by informal kinds of reason or explanation, based on intuitions you have about the text's language, or about how it relates to other texts you are familiar with. (This is especially likely to be the case with questions which begin with 'why?') Patterns of intuition and justification form miniature critical arguments, which can be written down and linked together into larger interpretative or critical responses. (This is the kind of procedure you are asked to follow in many of the activities in this book.)

Generally, what asking these sorts of question shows is that you may already have a wide range of intuitions about any text you are looking at. Not having specific answers to questions (or information relating to them) becomes less of a problem when the reasons for being interested in the particular question have been identified. It is often the case that being aware of what specific answers might or might not contribute to an interpretation enables you to produce an accurate and insightful reading of a text through a process which is both efficient and pleasurable.

ACTIVITY

1 Make a list of questions you feel it would be useful to ask about the following poem. Also list the specific pieces of information you feel it would be helpful to know in order to discuss the text or comment on it. Then arrange the questions and kinds of information in your lists under the various different headings presented in the unit (i.e. 'Textual questions', 'Contextual questions', etc.). Don't worry about *answers* to the questions, or even about where such answers might be found. Focus instead on what *kinds* of questions might be worth pursuing.

Tranquerah Road

1

Poor relative, yet well-connected,
same line, same age as Heeren Street

(more or less, who knows?),
the long road comes and goes –
dream, nightmare, retrospect –
through my former house,
self-conscious, nondescript.

2

There was a remnant of a Portuguese settlement,
Kampong Serani, near the market,
where Max Gomes lived, my classmate.

At the end of the road, near *Limbongan*,
the Tranquerah English School,
our *alma mater*, heart of oak.

By a backlane the Methodist Girls' School,
where my sister studied

See me, mother,

Can you see me?

The Lord's Prayer, Psalm 23.

The Japanese came,
and we sang the *Kimigayo*,
learnt some *Nihon Seishin*.

Till their *Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere*
collapsed, and we had to change
our tune again – God Save the King.
Meliora hic sequamur.

The King died when I was in school,
and then, of course, God Save the Queen.

While *Merdeka* inspired –

for who are so free

as the sons of the brave? –

and so *Negara-ku*

at mammoth rallies

I salute them all

who made it possible.

for better, for worse.

3

A sudden trill,
mosquito whine
like enemy aeroplane
in a blanket stillness,
the heave and fall of snoring sea,
swish and rustle of coconut,

kapok, tamarind, fern-potted.
 where *pontianak* perch
 by the midnight road.

Wind lifts its haunches off the sea,
 shakes dripping mane,
 then gallops muffle-hoofed,
 a flash of whiteness in sparse bamboo
 in a Malay cemetery.

Yet I shall fear no evil
 for Thou art with me
 through the wind is a horse
 is a *jinn* raving free
 Thy rod and Thy staff
 they comfort me
 and fear is only in the mind
 as Mother said
 why want to be afraid
 just say *Omitohood Omitohood Omitohood*
 Amen.

2 When you have completed your list, consult the information about the poem given on page 249, drawn from notes provided to accompany the poem in the author's *Selected Poems*. Consider how far these pieces of information answer the questions you have asked (or indirectly imply answers to them). What difference does it make to a reading of the poem whether you have access to such information? Do all texts rely to some extent on background information in the same way that this poem appears to?

3 Now examine those of your questions which remain unanswered by the information provided on page 249. Some of these may require other pieces of concrete information than those which the notes provide. How many of your questions involve the word 'why?' Is there a difference between questions asking 'why?' and other kinds of question? If so, how would you describe the difference?

READING

Belsey (1980) *Critical Practice*, pp. 1–36.

*Durant and Fabb (1990) *Literary Studies in Action*, pp. 66–78.

Eagleton (1983) *Literary Theory*, pp. 1–16.

Fiske and Hartley (1978) *Reading Television*, pp. 13–20.

Hackman and Marshall (1978) *Re-reading Literature*, pp. 3–17.

W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley (1946) 'The intentional fallacy', in Lodge (ed.) (1972) *Twentieth Century Criticism*, pp. 334–44.

— (1949) 'The affective fallacy', in Lodge (ed.) (1972) *Twentieth Century Criticism*, pp. 345–58.