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**CLOSE READING  
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Edited and compiled by Jeffrey Norton

## Critical Reading Strategies

### Levels of Questions

A challenge all students face is how to make sense out of new material. Without a dependable method for dissecting the text, students may lose confidence in their ability to understand it. Therefore, it is important that they develop certain habits of mind that they can readily apply. For instance, they must learn to ask themselves questions about, and then draw inferences from, the material at hand.

The skill of asking questions is fundamentally different from the skill of answering them. When students wait for questions to be asked of them, either by the textbook or the teacher, they assume an essentially passive role. They read the piece of literature or the passage from history, and then they are "off the hook," mentally speaking, until the question is posed.

However, when students themselves ask questions, their relationship with the material is profoundly different: they assume an active role, the material is important to them at that moment, and they want to know the answer. Moreover, the questions asked by students frequently serve to illuminate a text in ways the teacher had not envisioned. It is a rare discussion in which some student does not pose an idea that is, in some way, different from what the teacher had previously considered.

It has long been recognized in the sciences that the formulation of questions contributes enormously to problem solving. Einstein put it well when he said, "The mere formulation of a problem is often far more essential than its solution, which is often merely a matter of mathematical or experimental skill. To raise new questions, new possibilities, to regard old problems from a new angle requires creative imagination and marks real advances in science."

In literature and the social sciences, too, learning to pose questions is a critical element of investigating a discipline. Through posing interesting questions under the direction of a teacher, and through hearing the questions of others, students gradually come to appreciate the questions that are worth asking and answering. They learn the outstanding issues in a discipline and the kinds of questions that yield discussions of value.

For example, when students ask why Hamlet and Laertes use different methods to solve the same kind of problem they are considering personalities and responses. When they question the inconsistencies in the historical report that Richard III killed his nephews, they are examining the nature of "fact."

Similarly, drawing inferences is a critical skill within the disciplines. When students draw inferences, they go beyond the stated text and formulate hypotheses about history or literature that are based on, but not directly stated in, the text.

Inferences must, of course, be supported by accepted data. That is, an inference is not a proposition drawn out of thin air but a conclusion based on ideas presented in a text or by a teacher. However, students will almost certainly have gone beyond the face value of the text. They may, for example, have made connections between several different sections in a document.

Whatever the techniques used by students to draw inferences, they will certainly have had to be mentally engaged in their reading. They cannot be passive. **THEY MUST BE THINKING ABOUT WHAT THEY ARE READING** (emphasis added) and relating it to other things they know – other things they understand about the topic at hand. They must also draw on their own experience in terms of human emotion and motivation.

For instance, students recognize the intricate complication of Hester Prynne's moral dilemmas: the collision between an unhappy marriage and an adulterous love; the conflict between social

Critical Reading Strategies  
SOAPSS

What is the **SUBJECT**?

The general topic, content, and ideas contained in the text. Students should be able to state the main subjects in a few words.

What is the **OCCASION**?

The time, place, context, or current situation of the piece. It is particularly important that students understand the context that encouraged the writing to happen, but don't confuse occasion with purpose. Also think of it as the "genesis" or "exigence" of the writing, or what possibly got it started.

Who is the **AUDIENCE**?

The group of readers to whom this piece is directed. The audience may be one person, a small group, or a large group. Try to be as specific as possible in your description. Authors do not just write and hope someone will read; they write for a specific audience and hope for a possibly broader audience than intended. Imagine the author having a conversation. Across from whom is he sitting?

What is the **PURPOSE**?

The reason behind the text. This is especially important for examining rhetoric. You can not examine the logic or argument of a piece until you know the reason for the piece, or what the author is trying to tell you.

Who is the **SPEAKER**?

- What is his **ATTITUDE**?
- What is his **TONE**?

The voice which tells the story. When students approach a piece of fiction, they often believe that the author and the speaker of the piece are one and the same. They fail to realize that in fiction the author may choose to tell the story from any number of different points of view, or through different methods of narration and characterization. Students also need to be able to differentiate between the author and the narrator, understanding that what the narrator believes may not be true for the author. In nonfiction it is important that the student not just identify the author, but also analyze the author's attitude toward the subject and audience and the "tone of voice" that is used in the selection.

What is the author's **STYLE**?

The individuality of the author. Given the choice of many different options in regards to diction, syntax, figurative language, rhetorical strategies, etc. which does the author choose to use and what effect does the author's selections have on the piece?

SOAPSS  
Views on Indian Policy

Below are statements reflecting different viewpoints concerning the Indian policy in the United States during the nineteenth century. After reading them, answer the questions that follow.

When you first came we were very many, and you were few; now you are many, and we are getting very few, and we are poor. You are here told that we are traders and thieves, and it is not so. We have given you nearly all our lands, and if we had any more land to give we would be very glad to give it....

At the mouth of Horse Creek, in 1852, the Great Father made a treaty with us by which we agreed to let all that country open for fifty-five years for the transit of those who were going through. We kept this treaty; we never treated any man wrong: we never committed any murder or depredation until after the troops were sent into that country, and the troops killed our people and ill-treated them, and thus war and trouble arose...

I have sent a great many words to the Great Father, but I don't know that they ever reach the Great Father. The words would never come to him, so I thought I would come and tell you myself.

(from speech of Chief Red Cloud in New York on July 16, 1870)

If they – the Indians – stand up against the progress of civilization and industry, they must be relentlessly crushed. The westward course of population is neither to be denied nor delayed for the sake of all the Indians that ever called this country their home. They must yield or perish...

Whenever the time shall come that the roving tribes are reduced to a condition of complete dependence and submission, the plan to be adopted in dealing with them must be substantially that which is not being pursued in the case of the more tractable and friendly Indians.

(Adapted from *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, Washington, 1873, pp. 391-401)

To recognize the Indian ownership of the limitless prairies and forests of this continent – that is, to consider the dozen squalid savages who hunted at long intervals over a territory of 1000 square miles as owning it outright – necessarily implies a similar recognition of the claims of every white hunter, squatter, horse thief, or wandering cattleman...

In fact, the mere statement of the case is sufficient to show the absurdity of asserting that the land really belonged to the Indians. The different tribes have always been utterly unable to define their own boundaries.... Their claims all conflicted with one another... They were always willing to sell land to which they have merely the vaguest title.

(Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, Vol 1, New York, 1910, Appendix A)

## Dialectical Journal

Reading is too often a passive experience for many students. They sit down with a book or article, pass their eyes over the words, and say that they have done the reading assignment hoping that the most difficult post-reading task they'll encounter will be a short quiz primarily composed of recall questions. One way to get them involved is through the use of the dialectical journal. The term indicates the tension between reader and text that occurs when students struggle to derive meaning from a difficult or unfamiliar work.

What is it?

The journal is a double-entry, note-taking process done while reading any genre of literature. It is an attempt to transfer a reader's interior monologue on paper by providing two columns which are in dialogue with one another, not only developing a method of critical reading but also encouraging habits of reflective questioning/thinking.

Why is it important?

In the right-hand column, the reader "owns" or "comments" on important text that has been identified. The dialectical journal helps readers critically think about the text they are reading. By keeping a dialectical journal, students are brought to think "for themselves" about a text and offer their own interpretations.

How is it done?

Draw a line down the middle of a piece of notebook paper, thereby making two columns. The left column, labeled "text" or "note taking" is used for traditional not forms of direct quotations and citations or summaries. Thus, when they finish they have a summary of the material they have read.

The right column is used for commenting on the left-column notes. Here students record their questions, comments, and ideas next to the text that has piqued their interest. As students take notes, regularly re-read previous pages of notes and comments, drawing any new connections in a right column summary before starting another page of note-taking/note-making. The top 1' margin of the page is reserved for biographical information, teacher directed comments, or any pre-reading information that might help the reader better understand and appreciate the text.

## The Deadliest Storm

In a gripping new book, Erik Larson recounts the fury and folly around the turn-of-the-century hurricane that destroyed Galveston.

It has been awfully quiet in the deep salt — until now. Hurricane season officially started on June 1, but till last week, the Atlantic produced only one tropical storm — a humble one named Arlene. Last weekend, however, the hurricane named Bret appeared on the Gulf of Mexico, and the tropical storm called Cindy gained intensity in the eastern Atlantic, off the Cape Verde Islands, where many storms are seeded. The dangerous Cape Verde season is now under way, and from here on the odds of hurricanes forming will increase daily until Sept. 9, historically the day of greatest hurricane activity. As in past years, most of us will watch the approach of these storms snug in the belief that satellites, reconnaissance aircraft and computers have so defanged hurricanes that none can ever again cause large-scale death.

Ninety-nine years ago, a weatherman named Isaac Monroe Cline, the chief meteorologist in Galveston, Texas, espoused a similar view regarding the threat hurricanes posed to Galveston, which in his day was a lovely, gleaming city that seemed destined to become the New York of the Gulf. Cline, the lead character in *Isaac's Storm*, a new book by TIME contributor Erik Larson, embodied the hubris of the past turning of the century. A pioneering weatherman, he thought he knew all

there was to know about the behavior of storms. In an article in the *Galveston News*, he told readers no hurricane could ever seriously harm the city. To believe otherwise, he wrote, was to entertain "an absurd delusion." Early on the morning of Saturday, Sept. 8, 1900, Cline had a change of heart. He stood on the Galveston beach timing the arrival of deep-ocean swells larger than anything he had seen before. He did not fully understand their meaning, just that something extraordinary seemed about to occur. He was correct.

Before the next dawn, a monumental hurricane would kill 8,000 people in Galveston alone, and become the nation's deadliest natural disaster, its death toll far greater than the combined tolls of the Johnstown flood and the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Yet, incredibly, the storm would fall from national recollection and take up residence mainly in the nightmares of hurricane experts, many of who believe that someday, maybe next month, maybe next year, an intense hurricane will again kill in a grand scale. The Galveston hurricane, the experts agree, is a storm to remember.

It began as a platte of tortured air slipping from West Africa. Scores of such "easterly waves"

exit the continent every summer. Most fail to intensify, but a few become carousels of "deep convection," huge thunderstorms, rotating counterclockwise over the sea.

For the first week of its existence, the hurricane was barely a tropical storm. A few ship captains spotted it as it moved along a shallow arc just below the Tropic of Cancer, but none saw it as terribly ominous. In the absence of radio or wireless telegraphy, captains knew only the weather in their immediate vicinity. None could know that just a few hundred miles away, the wind was blowing in exactly the opposite direction, a juxtaposition that any captain today would recognize as the early dance of a tropical cyclone.

The seas were hot. The land was hot. Throughout much of the U.S., temperatures had risen into the 90s and often broke 100. Heat suffused a vast swath of country from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada, territory that in that time encompassed most of American's population. There was no air conditioning. Everyone suffered. Suits were black wool. Carriages had black canvas tops, black-enameled bodies. Trains were ovens. Passengers roasted. In New York City, three children died when they fell from fire escapes where they had hoped to find a breeze. A strange migration of crickets

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producing waves that moved 50 m.p.h. and reached the Texas coast long before the storm itself. They rose within the storm as jagged ship killers, but once beyond the storm's circle of influence, they settled into long, slow undulations of the kind that startled Columbus on his very first voyage to the Indies. Although they lost their jagged shape, they retained the energy originally transferred to them by the wind. As they met the gradual slope of the Texas coast, their leading edges slowed and the trailing water piled up, creating waves of incredible height.

Upon leaving the beach, Cline drove his sulky to his office at the center of town. He checked the station's instruments and found only a slight decline in barometric pressure. "Only one-tenth of an inch lower," he wrote. The bureau's Central Office had at last sent orders to hoist a storm flag, but this telegram gave no cause for alarm. Such warnings in August were routine. There was nothing routine about the sea, however, or the ominous feel of the morning. Isaac drove his sulky back to the beach and again timed the swells. They were heavier now and pushed seawater well into the neighborhoods nearest the beach. He returned to his office and composed a telegram to Willis Moore, chief of the bureau in Washington. He ended the telegram: "Such high water with opposing winds never observed previously."

According to popular legend and his own memoirs, he raced to the beach and warned thousands to flee. There is evidence, however, that his response may have been more ambivalent. Saturday morning, for example, a sea captain, George B. Hix, stopped by the

weather station to ask about the strange weather, and was told by one of Cline's colleagues "there was no cause for uneasiness." The storm was only a harmless "offspur" of a storm that had struck Florida a few days earlier. "Well, young man," Hix snorted, "it's going to be the damndest offspur you ever saw."

The rest of the city did not share the captain's anxiety. Adults and children alike greeted the storm with delight and converged on the beach, some in bathing suits. The surf rocketing off the streetcar trestle was easily as good as a fireworks display. A great crowd gathered at the Midway, a 10-block stretch along the beach with cheap restaurants and souvenir stores. The sea began to climb into the city. "As we watched from the porch," one woman wrote, recalling her childhood experience, "we were amazed and delighted to see the water from the Gulf flowing down the street. 'Good,' we thought, 'there would be no need to walk the few blocks to play at the beach; it was right at our front gate.'" It was a wonderful spectacle, until the waves began tearing apart the bathhouses and the shops of the Midway. Suddenly, one mother recalled, "it wasn't fun anymore." A visiting businessman who had taken shelter in a train station wrote that he first realized the true extent of the disaster "when the body of a child floated into the station."

Telegraph lines fell. The city's telephones went dead. With all communications with the mainland cut off, Isaac went home. He walked to his house, a big frame structure on stilts five blocks from the beach. Despite his anxiety, he

planned to ride out the storm at home with his pregnant wife Cora and his three young daughters. He believed the house capable of withstanding any storm the Gulf could deliver. Others apparently felt likewise, for when he arrived, he found 50 storm refugees had taken shelter inside. His brother Joseph soon arrived. He lived in the house and worked for Isaac as an assistant observer. Over the years a rivalry had developed between them. Now Joseph urged everyone to evacuate and head for the center of the city. Isaac, ever confident, insisted his house was the safest place — far safer, certainly, than venturing out into the accelerating winds.

Throughout that Saturday morning, a north wind blowing along the storm's left flank had raised a storm surge along the 30-mile ellipse of Galveston Bay. The surge slowly overflowed the wharf along the north end of the city and began filling the streets of the business district with water. The same north wind, however, held another and far more dangerous surge out at sea. That afternoon, however, the wind shifted, as it must in a tropical cyclone. The Gulf sprang forward as if propelled by an uncoiling spring. A dome of water at least 20 ft. high surged ashore under rapidly escalating winds. The waters of the sea and the bay met over the city and turned rooftops into islands.

No one knows what velocity the wind reached. The bureau's anemometer blew away at 100 m.p.h. The wind neatly sliced off the top floor of a bank, leaving the rest of the building intact. It stripped slate shingles from houses and turned them into scimitars that disembodyed men where they stood.

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## BOOK EXCERPT

near her house. As one body entered the fire, an arm shot up as if pointing into the sky. Emma screamed, but kept watching, and paid for it with nightmares that left her writhing in the dark.

Isaac survived Saturday night – although barely – and only after experiencing his own unbearable loss. He found his daughters alive in the waters, but his wife Cora had vanished in the storm surge. While the children prayed for their mother's return, he knew his wife had perished. Each evening he toured likely places where her body may have lain. But he would not find her till Sept. 30, when relief workers discovered a dress tangled in the debris of what

they concluded was Isaac's house. Within the clothing were the remains of a woman. He recognized her only from a wedding ring and the diamond he had given her at their engagement.

For a time the message of the storm seemed to have been heeded. Galveston built a seawall, then raised the elevation of its streets and surviving buildings, even its cathedrals. But memory faded quickly. Today grand new houses rise on stilts on the island's West End beyond the protection of the seawall. The once barren sea-level prairie that stretches from Galveston through Houston is now home to

about 3 million people. To hurricane experts, it is one of the most vulnerable regions in America, where even today an intense hurricane could cause megascale death.

Today's meteorologists know a lot more about hurricanes than Isaac Cline did in 1900, but this knowledge, far from conjuring the hubris expressed by Cline, has led them to recognize that hurricanes remain inscrutable giants capable of tricks that can defy even satellites and computers – tricks like suddenly intensifying in the hot waters off Cuba and catching a city by surprise.

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TIME, AUGUST 30, 1999

## Close Reading Passage

Title: *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt, a memoir

Passage: Chapter 1

My Father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born. Instead, they returned to Ireland when I was four, my brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and my sister, Margaret, dead and gone.

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.

People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years.

Above all – we were wet.

Out in the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly up the River Shannon and settle forever in Limerick. The rain dampened the city from the Feast of the Circumcision to New Year's Eve. It created a cacophony of hacking coughs, bronchial rattles, asthmatic wheezes, consumptive croaks. It turned noses into fountains, lungs into bacterial sponges. It provoked cures galore; to ease the catarrh you boiled onions in milk blackened with pepper; for the congested passages you made a paste of boiled flour and nettles, wrapped it in a rag, and slapped it, sizzling, on the chest.

From October to April the walls of Limerick glistened with the damp. Clothes never dried: tweed and woolen coats housed living things, sometimes sprouted mysterious vegetations. In pubs, steam rose from damp bodies and garments to be inhaled with cigarette and pipe smoke laced with the stale fumes of spilled stout and whiskey and tinged with the odor of piss wafting in from the outdoor jakes where many a man puked up his week's wages.

The rain drove us into the church – our refuge, our strength; our only dry place. At Mass, Benediction, novenas, we huddled in great damp clumps, dozing through priest drone, while steam rose again from our clothes to mingle with the sweetness of incense, flowers and candles.

Limerick gained a reputation for piety, but we knew it was only the rain.