

Demonstrating a Way to Analyze Style

Passage for Analysis

Consider the short passage below from Hurston's novel. Pay particular attention to the stylistic elements that are part of the excerpt and the way that Hurston's choices affect the meaning of the passage. Try reading the passage aloud to get a sense of the author's use of idiomatic words and phrases.

Jody must have noticed it too. Maybe, he had seen it long before Janie did, and had been fearing for her to see. Because he began to talk about her age all the time, as if he didn't want her to stay young while he grew old. It was always "You oughta throw somethin' over yo' shoulders befo' you go outside. You ain't no young pullet no mo'. You'se uh ole hen now." One day he called her off the croquet grounds. "Dat's somthin' for de young folks, Janie, you out dere jumpin' round and won't be able tuh git out de bed tuh morrer." If he thought to deceive her, he was wrong. For the first time she could see a man's head naked of its skull. Saw the cunning thoughts race in and out through caves and promontories of his mind long before they darted out of the tunnel of his mouth. She saw he was hurting inside so she let it pass without talking. She just measured out a little time for him and set it aside to wait.

from Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
(Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1978), p. 120.

Demonstrating the Process of Think Aloud

Think aloud is exactly what it sounds like, the process of saying aloud the things that you're thinking as you complete a process. You might think of it as self-narration. When you think aloud, you say all the things that you consider. You can't make a mistake. It's similar to "showing your work" on a math problem: You're showing the work that goes into the conclusions you draw.

This sample shows the think aloud process of someone exploring Hurston's style in the passage above:

It's almost like we hear what someone is thinking -- probably Janie. But the thoughts are in third person (she), not first (I), so there is an outside narrator. The passage uses an informal rhythm with fragments -- "Maybe, he had seen it long before Janie did, and had been fearing for her to see" and "Because he began to talk about her age all the time, as if he didn't want her to stay young while he grew old." are both fragments. They sound like something someone might think. They're not at all formal. The narrator seems to know what everyone thinks, so it's an omniscient narrator.

The paragraph also includes oral speech. The sentences "You oughta throw somethin' over yo' shoulders befo' you go outside. You ain't no young pullet no mo'. You'se uh ole hen now." sound exactly like something I might have heard someone say out loud. The writer dropped letters on words like somethin', yo', and befo' to make the text like something the writer might have overheard. A more formal book relying on standard white dialect might have said, "You should throw something over your shoulders before you go outside." or even "You should put a sweater on before you go outside." The words and phrases that the author uses in these sentences are more realistic for the setting though. A person in the black southern community where Janie and Jody live would hear people talking in the dialect that the writer uses. By using this language, the narrator takes readers into the community. Readers aren't just outsiders; they are part of the community.

The last part of the paragraph compares Jody's head to a cave: "For the first time she could see a man's head naked of its skull. Saw the cunning thoughts race in and out through caves and promontories of his mind long before they darted out of the tunnel of his mouth." The narrator uses the words "race" and "darted" to describe how the thoughts move in Jody's brain. The words "caves," "promontories," and "tunnel" describe the places that the thoughts must travel. The narrator could have just said that Jody had "cunning thoughts" and left it at that. The language that the narrator uses, however, makes me think of the thoughts trapped in a dark place, maybe even a cold, damp, lonely place. When the thoughts come out, they are racing and darting. They have to escape. This descriptive language makes the "cunning thoughts" seem sort of desperate to escape. Just like Jody probably wants to escape his own old age, the words must work to escape from his mind.

Drawing Conclusions

Based on the ideas that were gathered in the think aloud, you can generate a statement that draws all the ideas together:

The informal language, use of dialect and speech, and the metaphorical phrasing in Hurston's passage brings readers into the community and into the mind of the main character, Janie. We know what she thinks and hears. This style brings us closer to Janie and helps us understand her character's choices and reactions to others.