Thomas Hardy: the Objective Comment Game

My thanks to Bob DiYanni from the New York College Board for reminding me of the possibilities of this approach.

Applying it to ‘The Five Students’

Hardy’s poetry provides rich material for those wishing to practise their analysing annotating skills.  Although we often dissuade students from going on an alliteration/metaphor/rhyme-spotting rampage, sometimes it’s good for them to see what they can find.

Delay interpretation for the time being and play the **Objective Comment** game.

This is a group activity (four or five in a group) where everyone must, in turn, to add a new comment about the poem in the form of a factual statement which can be supported by evidence.

This could be as obvious as saying that there are five verses. (It might be obvious but it’s not irrelevant.)  As the game goes around the group, students will have to look closer and closer to find new statements, as the first one to fail to come up with a satisfactory comment is out. Students must keep a note of statements as they are made.

The teacher can adjudicate disputes: which might comprise **repetition**(“she already mentioned that”), **deviation** (something pointless “There’s a comma at the end of line one” – though a more generalising comment about commas or punctuation would not be ruled out) and of course, **hesitation**– you can’t take all day over it. Getting into *meaning* at this stage counts as deviation. (Save it till later.)

Then you can share the fruits of each group’s labours, see who ‘won’ and which group came up with the most statements.

Only now move on to **interpretation**.  You may want to continue this as a group activity or make it a whole class one, as disputes may be more common.  Try it and see. Comments might include, “It’s about time passing / people dying”; “He uses a journey as a metaphor for life”.  Where students can tie an objective statement to an interpretation they get a special commendation!

The following documents provide a blank template as one way of recording comments, plus a partially completed example.

Variations or developments:

* compare the first and last verses only (see below);
* ask some groups to work on this poem and others on, for example, ‘During Wind and Rain’.
* this might be a good opportunity to use text-mapping techniques (or Insert Comment) if working at a computer.

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| The sparrow dips in his wheel rut bath,The sun grows passionate-eyed,And boils the dew to smoke by the paddock path,As strenuously we stride, -Five of us; dark He, fair He, dark She, fair She, I,All beating by. | Icicles tag the church-aisle leads,The flag rope gibbers hoarse,The home-bound foot-folk wrap their snow-flaked heads,Yet I still stalk the course –One of us…Dark and fair He, dark and fair She, gone:The rest – anon. |
| Notes   |

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| **The Five Students** | **Objective Statements** | **Interpretations** |
| The sparrow dips in his wheel rut bath,The sun grows passionate-eyed,And boils the dew to smoke by the paddock path,As strenuously we stride, -Five of us; dark He, fair He, dark She, fair She, I,All beating by. |  |  |
| The air is shaken, the high-road hot,Shadowless swoons the day,The greens are sobered and cattle at rest; but notWe on our urgent way, -Four of us; fair She, dark She, fair He, I, are there,But one – elsewhere. |  |  |
| Autumn moulds the hard fruit mellow,And forward still we pressThrough moors, briar-meshed plantations, clay pits yellow,As in the spring hours – yes,Three of us; fair He, fair She, I, as heretofore,But fallen one more. |  |  |
| The last leaf drops: earthworms draw it inAt night-time noiselessly,The fingers of birch and beech are skeleton-thin,And yet on the beat are we, -Two of us, fair She, I. But no more left to goThe track we know. |  |  |
| Icicles tag the church-aisle leads,The flag rope gibbers hoarse,The home-bound foot-folk wrap their snow-flaked heads,Yet I still stalk the course –One of us…Dark and fair He, dark and fair She, gone:The rest – anon. |  |  |

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **The Five Students**partially completed | Objective Statements | Interpretations |
| The sparrow dips in his wheel rut bath,The sun grows passionate-eyed,And boils the dew to smoke by the paddock path,As strenuously we stride, -Five of us; dark He, fair He, dark She, fair She, I,All beating by. | Present tense.Close observation of nature.Passionate, boils…smoke, strenuously, stride, beating – connected by strength / powerA list of pronouns | Use of present tense while poem is about the passing of time brings out the point that the present time is always passing.Language evokes life and vivacity.The people are anonymous |
| The air is shaken, the high-road hot,Shadowless swoons the day,The greens are sobered and cattle at rest; but notWe on our urgent way, -Four of us; fair She, dark She, fair He, I, are there,But one – elsewhere. | Regular rhyme scheme and regular rhythmic pattern.Shaken, swoons, sobered, urgent… these are troubled words.The last line is interrupted | Although there is a pattern, the rhythm is jerky. Life has a natural rhythm, but it is not smooth and it includes lossThere is a shock. We don’t know he has died but the implication is of something negative. |
| Autumn moulds the hard fruit mellow,And forward still we pressThrough moors, briar-meshed plantations, clay pits yellow,As in the spring hours – yes,Three of us; fair He, fair She, I, as heretofore,But fallen one more. |  |  |
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