

Interpreting a Poem

Strong Student Model

Response to “Scaffolding”

“Scaffolding,” by Seamus Heaney, is a poem that touched me deeply. It is a poem about the bonds of love and friendship that tugged at my heartstrings, reminding me of the friendships that are important in my life. It is a poem that is bound to bring out strong emotions because of its clever—and true—construction.

“Scaffolding” takes a simple metaphor, scaffolding, and extends it for ten lines, the length of the poem. While the poem never explicitly states that it’s about love and friendship, this idea comes through loud and clear. Heaney starts with a literal description of scaffolding in the first six lines, beginning “Masons when they start upon a building,/Are careful to test out the scaffolding;”

But even this description carries a deeper meaning. For example, the next couplet reads, “Make sure that planks won’t slip at busy points,/Secure all ladders, tighten bolted joints.” On my second reading, I interpreted a deeper, not so literal meaning: Just as weight puts stress on a structure, many stresses test our friendships time and again. I could tell that when Seamus Heaney chose what to describe about scaffolding, he first thought: What about scaffolding is like a friendship?

When I first read this poem, my emotional reaction didn’t happen until the last four lines, when the speaker begins, “So if, my dear, there sometimes seems to be/Old bridges breaking between you and me . . . ” Here Heaney makes the link between constructing scaffolding and building a friendship. The last couplet knocked the breath out of me: “Never fear. We may let the scaffolds fall/Confident that we have built our wall.” This rang so true—that good friends don’t need outside help when they’ve taken the time to build a strong foundation.

Immediately, I thought about my best friend Tess, and the hard times we went through last year when we both liked the same guy. I also felt sad about my cousin Julie, because we seem to have grown so far apart recently. The poem made me feel better, because I saw I wasn’t the only one who cared about these things.

“Scaffolding,” by Seamus Heaney, can appeal to anyone, because we all experience meaningful friendships. The ending lines add to the strength of Heaney’s simple words and universal theme, but the real power in this poem is the power of metaphor.

Writing Workshop

These writing models are also available in Assessment Masters.

1. The writer names the poem and author and immediately states a reaction.

2. The writer clearly states a detailed response to the poem.

3. The writer tells enough about the poem so that readers who are not familiar with it can understand his or her response.

4. The writer explains the use of the metaphor and gives a thesis about why the poet’s technique is effective.

5. The writer supports his/her response and thesis statement with details and quotations from the poem .

6. The writer explains a personal reaction that the poem elicits and tells why the reaction is personally meaningful.

Another option:

- Weave personal examples throughout the essay.

7. The writer summarizes his or her response in the conclusion.

Interpreting a Poem

Average Student Model

My Interpretation of "Scaffolding"

"Scaffolding," by Seamus Heaney, is a poem that I related to instantly. That's because it is about friendship.

When I first read it, "Scaffolding" seemed to be about why it's important to put up scaffolding when you construct a building. But when I got to the end, I saw that it had a deeper meaning. So I had to go back and read it again to see what the beginning was all about.

The poem starts out, "Masons when they start upon a building, / Are careful to test out the scaffolding;" I interpret this to mean that people who begin a friendship first take the time to get to know each other. The next four lines continue to describe scaffolding, but I know they're really saying more. The rhymes at the end of each pair of lines added to my enjoyment.

The poem turns a corner at line seven, which says, "So if, my dear, there sometimes seem to be . . ." Now the poem is talking directly about a friend. Right away, I thought about my sister and I: We've always been great friends, but now we seem to get in arguments all the time. So I related to the next line, "Old bridges breaking between you and me . . ."

The last two lines of the poem suggest that solid friendships don't need extra things to hold them up because "we have built our wall." This is good advice. Lots of times, people (including myself) don't trust their friends. They think that if a friend enjoys someone else's company, they don't like them anymore. I once thought that just because a friend decided to go to a ballgame with another friend, that proved he didn't like me anymore. Then I was really cold to him and that was what actually hurt our friendship.

I also liked this poem for the way Seamus Heaney expressed some very important and emotional ideas in only ten lines. He was able to do this because of the way he used scaffolding as a simile for the bonds of friendship. This technique let him double the power of his words.

In conclusion, "Scaffolding," because of its broad message, is a poem that most people can identify with and enjoy.

Writing Workshop

1. The interpretation immediately names the poem and author.

2. The writer states a response to the poem, but use of a generality weakens this introduction.

3. This general statement doesn't tell enough about the poem so that readers who are not familiar with it can understand the writer's response.

4. These two statements are not supported by quotations or details and are too vague to help the reader understand the writer's intention.

5. This section gives both interpretation and personal response. The phrase "turns a corner" helps the reader envision that the writer considers this a pivotal section of the poem.

6. Statement is weakened by the writer's confusion of *simile* with *metaphor*.

7. The conclusion uses a generalization and lacks a summary of the writer's own personal response.

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Weak Student Model

Poetry Assignment

I am writing about a poem by an Irish author who won a prize for his poetry. His name is Seamus Heaney. ("Seamus" is pronounced "Shay-mus.")

In this poem, Seamus Heaney talks about scaffolding, which is all those bars and wooden planks that construction workers use when they're putting up a building, they also use them when they're cleaning or painting a large structure. He goes on about scaffolding for six lines, which is three-fifths of the poem. (You should have figured out by now that there are a total of ten lines in the poem.)

When you get to line seven, all of a sudden the speaker goes, "So if, my dear . . ." To which my first reaction was: What does this have to do with scaffolding? I kept reading, which I've learned is a good strategy to use when you're confused about something. Which I was. Because the poem starts out, "Masons when they start upon a building,/Are careful to test out the scaffolding;" So the poet is being dishonest in a way by fooling me, the reader, into thinking the poem is about one thing when it's really about another thing.

Which brings me back to the other point, which is what happens at the end. I was still confused when the poem started talking about bridges breaking between people. Then a light went on in my brain. He didn't mean actual bridges, but something else that happens between people. So the poem is really about what happens between people. After I had this brainstorm, I read the whole ten lines again. Now I actually liked the poem.

So what was Seamus Heaney saying about what goes on between people? That's a good question. What I think is that he means building a friendship is a lot like construction work. Which I can relate to entirely.

I think that kids in middle school think a lot about friendships. You might think that they're listening to the teacher, but they're probably thinking about the friend who lied to them, or who has a crush on who, and so on. Believe me.

So in conclusion you should never think that a poem means what it says it means at the beginning. "Scaffolding" can mean "friendships." You never know. That's my interpretation.

Writing Workshop

1. Introduction never names the poem or states the writer's response.

Information about the pronunciation of the poet's name is extraneous.

2. Essay lacks a clear explanation of the poem that can enable readers to understand the writer's response. Digression, misspellings, and run-on sentences add to confusion.

3. The writer doesn't support this statement with quotations.

4. The essay's rambling structure obscures the writer's response.

5. The writer draws conclusions without supporting quotations or details.

6. The writer's reaction is generalized to a group-at-large (students), rather than focusing on his/her personal reaction.

7. Weak conclusion reflects unclear, unorganized nature of the writer's response.

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Writing Workshop

Rubric for Evaluation

Ideas and Content	Weak	Average	Strong
1. Names the literary work and title in the introduction			
2. Clearly states how the writer feels about the work in the introduction			
3. Tells enough about the poem so that readers who are unfamiliar with it can understand the writer's response			
4. Gives specific reactions and responses to the work			
5. Supports statements with quotations and details			
Structure and Form			
6. Has a clear organizational pattern			
7. Summarizes the writer's response in the conclusion			
Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics			
8. Contains no more than two or three minor errors in spelling, capitalization, and punctuation			
9. Contains no more than two or three minor errors in grammar and usage			

Writing Progress to Date (Writing Portfolio)

The strongest aspect of this writing is _____

The final version shows improvement over the rough draft in this way: _____

A specific improvement over past assignments in your portfolio is _____

A skill to work on in future assignments is _____

Additional comments: _____
