



Poetry and the Public (FSEM)

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Reflection on Two Sample FSEM Papers

The papers I've chosen to discuss are samples from my FSEM's Assignment #2, an evaluative review of two books of poetry. Imagine something different in content, but not that different in substance or scope, from a smartly written film review for *The New Yorker*: an appraisal of each book's merits and shortcomings, with reference to each poet's past works, pertinent biographical detail, comparisons and contrasts to other poets and poetry movements, along with quoted lines and stanzas to illustrate my students' claims. My hopes in assigning this project were: (a) to gauge my students' engagement with the books; (b) to introduce them to the genre of an 'evaluative review' in contrast to a 'traditional academic essay'; and (c) to observe, however passingly, their ability to locate connections between past course content and the books under consideration. I also wanted (d) to assess their ability to substantiate their claims with evidence from the texts.

In preparation for this assignment, we did several things as a class. We read and discussed both books in detail, which required students to email me responses to a single poem from each collection (which they then shared in class). We also read and analyzed 'typical' book reviews online, discussing their common genre features, asking why such features might appear in relation to intended audience, discussing tone and organization, and scrutinizing the nature and scope of argument within such reviews. We drew parallels between the two books with past course content. Finally, students brought drafts to class for peer review and revision, without direct written feedback from me. Students were invited to share drafts with me during conferences; no students took me up on that offer.

I've isolated here an *A*-paper and a *B*-paper, neither perfect, neither terribly awful, or off base, for reflection.

Both papers did well in (a) demonstrating their engagement with the books under review. The stronger paper immediately conveyed the student's admiration for the book by writing, within the first paragraph, that Vandana Khanna
strikingly illustrates the vibrant culture of India while
subtly incorporating the poet's thoughts, hopes, and

feelings. Khanna's poetry allows the reader to feel her emotions, whether she is jubilant, dismayed, hysterical, or fatigued. Throughout the collection, it's easy to understand and feel these emotions with her.

This indicated to me that the student had read the book steadily and grasped its global appeal upon readers. In contrast, the weaker paper began by claiming that both books contain many great aspects. They differ completely, and are both masterpieces. You genuinely see that both poets put so much thought into each individual word that they used to tell their tales. Each book is special in its own way.

Upon reflection, I see now that I was drawn more to the specificity and vibrancy of language within the stronger paper ('strikingly illustrates,' 'jubilant, dismayed, hysterical, or fatigued') than the weaker paper, which relies upon more general claims of affection ('many great aspects,' 'so much thought,' 'special in its own way'). The weaker paper might have been bullshitting me entirely in its enthusiasm, I realize now, but later in the review, the student writes with greater clarity and discernment: "If I am going to be candid though, I would firstly suggest *Smith Blue*. The writing that Dungy shares within its pages is simply much more relatable to a larger audience." While not entirely specific, such sentences convinced me that the student had done the reading, reflected on it, and arrived at a deliberated judgment of it.

The stronger paper did far better in (b) mimicking the genre conventions of an 'evaluative review' of poetry. Its opening sentence presumes a discrete, knowledgeable audience, and tackles the matters at heart: "*Afternoon Masala*, the intriguing new collection of poetry by prize-winning Vandana Khanna, continues to explore the author's struggles of discovering her US identity in relation to cultural change, coming of age, and family values." Such an opener presumes that readers would be familiar with Khanna's past work (which is true), that she's an award-winning poet (true), and that her thematic concerns would take precedent over other poetic matters to her readers (true). The sentence also captures the tonal qualities of stellar reviews, at once personable but smart. By contrast, the weaker paper (while okay) opens with an overly long paragraph of biographical information about Dungy, as if stolen directly from Wikipedia. (In fact, and I won't check right now, it might have been.) This paragraph also ends with a fairly familiar three-pronged *thesis statement*, promising to evaluate Dungy's book on the basis of "its themes, its images, and how it relates to readers." There's nothing essentially wrong with this student's approach to the book, in scope and depth of analysis, but it was apparent to me that the strangle-hold of "the 5-paragraph theme" was governing her organization and delivery. Later, this paper (the weaker one) ends with a final paragraph that begins "In conclusion..." The stronger paper's final paragraph, more clearly attuned to the genre and its intended audience, reads:

With a hefty price tag of \$18.95 in paperback, *Smith Blue* might not be for everyone, but I recommend it, for it offers a glance into the poet's life by detailing her private life and thoughts, which makes the poetry honest

and raw, including elements that many people can relate to, such as humor and popular references. All of this together makes Dungy's poems not just interesting, but peculiar, at times confusing, but also enjoyable for the reader.

The stronger paper was able to (c) locate sophisticated parallels between the current books and past course content. This student drew meaningful connections between Dungy's book and the Black Arts Movement and the Harlem Renaissance, even while noting how Dungy's book deviates from its African-American history. This student writes, impressively,

Although much of the poetry in this collection is melancholy and "blue," Dungy likes to also incorporate humor into her poems. She's 'blue' in the way Langston Hughes is 'blue,' which makes them more relatable to the typical reader. Yet, she incorporates some of the language play of the high Modernists, too, which expands the reach of her writing to a wider audience. For example, in the poem "It Is," Dungy responds to the final words spoken by Gertrude Stein, by writing...

Such writing and awareness is nuanced, thoughtful, and complex, something we'd prize from a graduate student, let alone an FSEM student who had just recently learned of Stein and Hughes. The weaker paper – and typing this tonight, on my porch with a glass of wine in hand, makes me wince that I'm not just joyful but actually critical – attempts to make similar connections, but often in rudimentary fashion. For example, the weaker paper writes: "Personally I felt as though Khanna's book was a learning experience, much like reading Ezra Pound was for me."

Finally, both papers did very well in (d) substantiating their claims with specific evidence from the texts. There are embedded quotes from illustrative poems within both papers, as well as occasional indented block quotes of entire poems – but not merely as filler, but rather for smart rhetorical effect, either to demonstrate each writer's adoration for the books or to underscore a claim. For example, from the weaker paper, the student writes:

Khanna allows the readers to step into her life completely. She creates all of the five senses in her writing, allowing the readers to entirely get a sense of the memories that she is recalling, the 'shake of gold bangles...lie according / to the alignment / of some distant star.' In these memories, the readers can virtually feel that they were there with her.

This isn't the most profound claim to illustrate perhaps, yet the student writer's point is well taken. The stronger paper perhaps writes with greater subtlety,

Khanna sets the tone of her book by strategically placing "Insignificant Beginnings" as her first poem, where the play on vowels and consonants delivers most of the meaning: 'Before I was born, in a country / that loves vowels,...' The way that she uses words to describe things, and embodies these through assonance, rather than coming

right out and saying what they mean, makes her writing so rich.

In sum, both papers are strong, and I'm tempted to go back and give the *B*-paper a higher grade. What kept the *A*-paper from receiving a perfect *A+* were occasional sloppy errors in punctuation and grammar, ample enough to indicate to me a less-than-perfect attention to proofreading and editing. What gave the *B*-paper its score, despite its clear and various pleasures now, was a lack of specificity within claims and an infidelity to the genre conventions. I really should go back and raise its grade.

