Close Reading

Michael Drayton, “Since There’s No Help”

Helen Vendler, in Poems, Poets, and Poetry, argues that “There is no linguistic ingredient too small to attract the poet’s interest.” Even seemingly minor items such as the difference between “the” and “a” may result in a radical shift in our understanding of the poem’s meaning and function.

Step I: Analysis

With that idea in mind, examine Michael Drayton’s Tudor-era poem, “Since There’s No Help.” The poem’s speaker is a young man who has just learned from his beloved that their relationship is through.

Since there’s no help, come, let us kiss and part,
Nay, I have done, you get no more of me,
And I am glad, yea, glad with all my heart,
That thus so cleanly I myself can free.
Shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows,
And when we meet at any time again
Be it not seen in either of our brows
That we one jot of former love retain.
Now at the last gasp of Love’s latest breath,
When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies,
When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death,
And Innocence is closing up his eyes,
Now, if thou wouldst, when all have giv’n him over,
From death to life thou might’st him yet recover.

1. What are the main independent clauses of the poem’s first sentence? Identify the pronouns and the predicates. The first clause is done for you, with the pronouns in boldface and the predicates italicized.
   a. Come let us kiss and part

   Hint: There are six more.

2. Track how the pronouns change over the course of the sentence.

3. What do the changing pronouns indicate about the speaker’s state of mind, and why do they indicate such a thing?

4. Identify the main clauses of the sestet (the last six lines). It has only one main clause (“Thou mightst him recover”) and five adverbial clauses strung from that one. Find those clauses.

5. Where does Drayton place the main clause?

6. Why does Drayton construct the sentence in this way, and what is the effect of this arrangement?

7. The speaker speaks about himself in the first person in the octave, but in the sestet, we see a change in language, specifically in point of view. How does the point of view change?

8. Why does the speaker emotionally or psychologically need to change that point of view here?

9. The speaker introduces a little tableau, like a little play starring four characters: Love, Passion, Faith, and Innocence. What is going on in this little mini-play? Why is the action of the mini-play relevant to the rest of the poem?

10. Why does Drayton’s speaker introduce this little mini-play instead of speaking of his emotional state more straightforwardly?
Step II: Organize

Now that you have performed this act of close reading, you need to group your thoughts and answers into a logical pattern for the paper you will write. Ideas that are about similar concerns should be grouped together first, then placed in chronological order.

1. For example, in your close reading above, you performed extensive pronoun analysis, so one logical grouping for your paper would be under the general category of “pronouns.” In your organization of this section, you would discuss the pronouns in the poem beginning with the first ones and ending with the last ones.

Please group your thoughts into logical categories below. The first has been done for you.

- Category 1: Pronouns
- Category 2:_________
- Category 3:_________
- Category 4:_________

2. When you have done that, summarize the main idea or insight that Drayton’s use of language or poetic technique in each of the categories you identified above communicated about the mind of the speaker and/or Drayton’s larger point about failed relationships. The first one has been started for you. The blanks are there for you to supply missing information and to provide you with an essential structure you may use in composing your own sentences.

**Category 1: Pronouns:** Though initially, the speaker of Michael Drayton’s sonnet begins with the pronoun...he ends by using pronouns suggesting______, a change of approach which reveals _______ about the speaker’s mindset: that it is essentially______.

You do the rest. This will give you a “skeleton outline” of four strong topic sentences you can use in writing your essay.

Step III – Write the Essay

Using the skeleton outline above, compose your essay. Obviously, you will build on the work you performed in close reading, “recycling” the ideas you came up with when you answered the questions on the first page. You will obviously use quotations to support your ideas and obviously tell me HOW COME the words you chose prove your point.

If necessary, please consult the class website or make an appointment with me to discuss strategies for developing an essay.

Note: This assignment is based on Helen Vendler’s discussion and analysis in *Poems, Poets, and Poetry*, pp. 161-165.