



English II: Reading: Module 3: Lesson 6: Section 5

Syntax

Graphic Organizer: Virginia Woolf's "Death of a Moth"

Instructions: Write your responses to each question or statement in the spaces provided. Mouse over the checkmarks to read some sample responses to the questions and observations about the essay.

From "Death of a Moth," Virginia Woolf, 1942

After a time, tired by his dancing apparently, he settled on the window ledge in the sun, and, the queer spectacle being at an end, I forgot about him. Then, looking up, my eye was caught by him. He was trying to resume his dancing, but seemed either so stiff or so awkward that he could only flutter to the bottom of the window-pane; and when he tried to fly across it he failed. Being intent on other matters I watched these futile attempts for a time without thinking, unconsciously waiting for him to resume his flight, as one waits for a machine, that has stopped momentarily, to start again without considering the reason of its failure. After perhaps a seventh attempt he slipped from the wooden ledge and fell, fluttering his wings, on to his back on the window sill. The helplessness of his attitude roused me. It flashed upon me that he was in difficulties; he could no longer raise himself; his legs struggled vainly. But, as I stretched out a pencil, meaning to help him to right himself, it came over me that the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death. I laid the pencil down again.

Virginia Woolf is a master of writing intricate sentence patterns. Let's look at Woolf's syntax. Read the first paragraph in the excerpt and notice Woolf's first sentence about the moth:

After a time, tired by his dancing apparently, he settled on the window ledge in the sun, and, the queer spectacle being at an end, I forgot about him.

What are the two independent or main clauses in the sentence?



Find three phrases in this sentence. There are actually six in all!





Woolf follows this very long sentence with a much shorter one: "Then, looking up, my eye was caught by him." Find another example of a longer sentence followed by a shorter sentence toward the end of this paragraph and write the longer sentence below:



Next, write the shorter sentence:



Not only does Virginia Woolf include intricate sentence patterns, she also enhances her syntax with **figurative language**.

Reread the first paragraph above and find an example of **onomatopoeia**.



Next, find an example of **alliteration** in the paragraph.



Now find a **simile** in the first paragraph.





From "Death of a Moth," Virginia Woolf, 1942

...Stillness and quiet had replaced the previous animation. The birds had taken themselves off to feed in the brooks. The horses stood still. Yet the power was there all the same, massed outside indifferent, impersonal, not attending to anything in particular. Somehow it was opposed to the little hay-colored moth. It was useless to try to do anything. One could only watch the extraordinary efforts made by those tiny legs against an oncoming doom which could, had it chosen, have submerged an entire city, not merely a city, but masses of human beings; nothing, I knew, had any chance against death. Nevertheless after a pause of exhaustion the legs fluttered again. It was superb this last protest, and so frantic that he succeeded at last in righting himself. One's sympathies, of course, were all on the side of life. Also, when there was nobody to care or to know, this gigantic effort on the part of an insignificant little moth, against a power of such magnitude, to retain what no one else valued or desired to keep, moved one strangely. Again, somehow, one saw life, a pure bead. I lifted the pencil again, useless though I knew it to be. But even as I did so, the unmistakable tokens of death showed themselves. The body relaxed, and instantly grew stiff. The struggle was over. The insignificant little creature now knew death. As I looked at the dead moth, this minute wayside triumph of so great a force over so mean an antagonist filled me with wonder. Just as life had been strange a few minutes before, so death was now as strange. The moth having righted himself now lay most decently and uncomplainingly composed. O yes, he seemed to say, death is stronger than I am.

Woolf makes a final comparison of the moth to life in the final paragraph. Write the **metaphor**.



The writer is amazed by the power of death over the moth when she writes what antithesis?





At the end of the essay, Woolf writes about life and death as parallels. Find this example of **parallel structure**.



Now, think about how the two paragraphs made you feel. What effect did the writer's syntax and figures of speech have on your experience as a reader? Think also about the writer's tone or attitude. How did her tone affect you?

