

## Close reading.

On your take-home exam, I'd like to see a balance of detailed close reading with awareness of how the details and general tenor of the passage intersect with larger narrative threads and connections, larger themes and problems in the poem. We haven't done a lot of close reading recently, so just as a reminder here are some notes *towards* a close reading of the passage on p. 149 that we discussed in more general terms May 10<sup>th</sup>. (I've focussed on details we *didn't* talk about).

“...So, when you see burnt branches riding the swell,  
Trying to reclaim the surf through crooked fingers,  
After a night of rough wind by some stone-white hotel,  
Past the bright triangular passage of the wind-surfers,  
Remember us to the black waiter bringing the bill.”

The burnt branches “are” also the bodies of men thrown overboard after dying during the Middle Passage voyage from Africa, and yet they are also – supernaturally – able to speak across the barrier of time and death. Their complex identity as tree-trunks/human bodies/ghostly spirits recalls the figure that emerges from the sea to summon the narrator on a journey of atonement at the opening of VII:  
he seems first a log or coconut, then Seven Seas standing up in the surf, then the marble bust of Omeros, and these three identities seems to flow into one another as he strains to distinguish them.

Locally, the passage sets the burnt branches/dead trunks wallowing in the surf against two opposing figures or images: the “stone-white hotel” and the “bright triangular passage” of windsurfers. The passage is structured by sharp contrasts between e.g., white hotel and black (burnt) branches, and things that are on or above the water (hotel, windsurfers) vs. unable to get out of it (tree trunks).

The juxtaposition of the tree-trunks with the wind-surfers contrasts free, easy, pleasurable movement along the surface with difficult, involuntary movement. The trunks are at the mercy of the waves, are “trying” to reach the edge of the surf but can't quite get there; they are not the canoes paddled by human beings that they become elsewhere in the poem. By contrast, the windsurfers (as vessels or persons) go wherever they like, although their easy movement will probably not take them as far as the distance the tree trunks have come to arrive in the surf here. The line describing the wind-surfers, however, obviously invokes both the *triangular* trade between Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean, and the middle *passage*, which specifically linked Africa to the New World. The line suggests that even a superficial, escapist, or “skimming” relation to history will not entirely disentangle us from its consequences and legacies.

The juxtaposition of “stone-white” hotel with water-logged, burnt trees opposes something bearing the marks of damage to something that, in material terms, can't be damaged easily or does not show damage. The trees register the history of violence that has produced the Caribbean present; the hotel, a place for escape vacations, suggests the “blank page” resulting from amnesia or erasure of the past. However, the narrator also

*stays* in this hotel – he certainly remembers -- and there are also many indications that the image of the blank page has *positive* connotations in this poem. Just as the windsurfers have some connection to the tree trunks, the image of the stone-white hotel, looming over the surf where these bodies wash up, has more complex relations to memory than may be immediately apparent.