Identifying and Analyzing Key Passages in Literature

The following is excerpted from Close Imagining: An Introduction to Literature by Benjamin DeMott.

Because literature is patterned, writers may “charge” certain passages more than others. These “key passages” deserve reading at a different (usually slower) pace. Because they bring the themes of the text or characters into sharper focus, they illuminate the work as a whole. The question to be asked is “How do the specific details of this passage link up with the work as a whole?” We read these sentences as a comment on the whole action.

A story sets forth a series of events – physical, emotional, intellectual. Its pace is usually steady, seemingly uninterruptable; seldom does a narrator come to center stage with explicit interpretive comment. Yet out of our continuing, close, silent collaboration with writers, we as readers manage to define comprehensive order and meaning and spell it out in our own terms. We often do this by organizing our perceptions after we have read the entire story – into an extended commentary on a single section of the story. The section – a few sentences, a paragraph, sometimes a bit of conversation – is one that we ourselves believe, on the basis of our reading, casts direct light upon every other part of the story. To center our understanding of the story as a whole, we bring the section to life as a key passage.

The choice of the key passage is, obviously, a creative act. Authors compose stories by inserting key passages into their narratives like clues in a treasure hunt. We, as beaters\(^1\), arrive on our own at decisions about what should be treated as a key passage. We settle on a definition of the subject of the story – our own definition expressed in our own terms. In addition, we reorganize the story’s timeframe, singling out a few sentences to be considered at a quite different pace from that at which we originally read them. And we commit ourselves to an especially intensive engagement with the words in question – because what first drew us to the passage was the sense that these particular words, set under concentrated examination, would have the power to eliminate practically every other moment in the text.

\(^1\) beater: one who drives wild game from under cover for a hunter
A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest it! Something of the awfulness, even of Death itself, is referable to this. No more can I turn the leaves of this dear book that I loved, and vainly hope in time to read it all. No more can I look into the depths of this unfathomable water, wherein, as momentary lights glanced into it, I have had glimpses of buried treasure and other things submerged. It was appointed that the book should shut with a spring, for ever and for ever, when I had read but a page. It was appointed that the water should be locked in an eternal frost, when the light was playing on its surface, and I stood in ignorance on the shore. My friend is dead, my neighbour is dead, my love, the darling of my soul, is dead; it is the inexorable consolidation and perpetuation of the secret that was always in that individuality, and which I shall carry in mine to my life’s end. In any of the burial-places of this city through which I pass, is there a sleeper more inscrutable than its busy inhabitants are, in their innermost personality, to me, or than I am to them?

As to this, his natural and not to be alienated inheritance, the messenger on horseback had exactly the same possessions as the King, the first Minister of State, or the richest merchant in London. So with the three passengers shut up in the narrow compass of one lumbering old mail coach; they were mysteries to one another, as complete as if each had been in his own coach and six, or his own coach and sixty, with the breadth of a county between him and the next.