



# Critical Reading and DSE

**Beneath the surface of words is a rich world of deeper meanings just waiting for you to explore. All you need is the proper mindset to detect this hidden realm of subtlety and subtext, which takes practice and guidance**

**T**HERE is a popular meme that surfaces on Facebook newsfeeds every now and then, in which a teacher takes the mention of blue curtains in a scene of a book as representative of the main character's sadness and depression – to which the author is shown to say, “No, you idiot, I meant that the curtains *were* blue!” We have all poked fun at how literature is usually portrayed as being incredibly difficult to understand – and true, literature need not be complicated – but it is not enough to just understand the literal meaning of words; we have to try to go deeper in

order to fully appreciate the many layers of stories, and by extension, the heart of human existence.

## Reading between the lines

**PICTURE** this: you have just received the results of a maths test, in which you only got forty marks out of a hundred. “Wow, congratulations, you did really well!” your classmate laughs when he knows of your score. “I only got ninety marks.”

Now, judging by the words spoken by your classmate alone, you would consider your classmate an encouraging peer, who gives praise where it is due. However, taking into consideration that you got fewer marks than he did, the phrase “you did really well” immediately turns into mockery instead. Context – the circumstances in which words and phrases are put together – is therefore very important, as it lends deeper meaning to sentences, enriching language and avoiding misunderstandings. This can not only be applied to all events that happen in life, but also to reading and comprehending texts.

Let us consider another example, one from the acclaimed book *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* by Kate DiCamillo. The main character, a beautiful china rabbit named Edward Tulane, is self-absorbed and selfish, never appreciating the love and care his owner Abilene showers upon him. One day, Abilene's grandma tells them both a story about a princess who loved no one but herself, and who ended up suffering a horrible fate because she refused to open her heart to anyone.

Without considering the context, we

would not think that the grandmother story is of any major significance, but here we can immediately see that since the princess acts like Edward, the grandma is trying to warn Edward that selfishness and lack of concern for others will lead to a sad fate. We often talk about “reading between the lines”; this is such an act. All of these facts are given in the passage, and it is up to the reader to correctly assign significance to the sentences.

## So what?

**UNDERSTANDING** the deeper meanings of language is a skill that permeates the whole of our existence – a somewhat low-brow example being the mockery that we have discussed above – and thus is one of the most important skills that the education system seeks to test its students on. The HKDSE English exam expects its candidates to be able to interpret and identify the purposes, themes, and arguments of a broad range of texts – from the brochures found in the Data File of the Listening and Integrated Skills exam, to the articles printed in the Reading paper. In other words, you need to be able to read critically in order to score well on the exam.

Critical reading is a mindset that one gets into, and it takes proper guidance and a lot of practice. “At first, there were a lot of things I didn't understand,” says Katrina, a student taking a critical reading course, “but as we worked through the book, there were more and more hidden meanings to be discovered and there was a lot more to the book than I initially thought.” Books and texts, by being examined critically, will become more and more interesting – and so will life.