

Additional help for those who want it ...

## **CLOSE READING**

Advice from the University of Warwick, UK

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A close reading is not a description of a poem from beginning to end: it is a view on a poem that sees it whole, and has an opinion about it.

### **Basics**

- The process of close reading is twofold: first, read the text; second, interpret your reading.
- Interpretation is a kind of inductive reasoning: you should move from the observation of particular facts and details to a reading based on those details.
- A close reading does not mean a close description – the reading element indicates activity on the part of the reader.
- This activity should be thought of in terms of the analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of the poem's formal features.
- 'Formal' features (the 'form' of a poem) includes the poem's shape on the page, language used, rhythm, metre, sound, tone, voice.

### **What to do**

- As you read the text, annotate it: 'annotating' means underlining or highlighting key words and phrases – anything that strikes you as surprising or significant, or that raises questions – as well as making notes in the margins.
- Focus on particulars and specifics: who is speaking? where is the poem located? at what time of day? what kind of language is being used? what allusions are made? what kind of punctuation is employed?

- Any word you are unsure of, or which looks strange in the context given, look up in the *OED*.
- When you have a list of particulars you've noticed about the text and have looked up all words you're not sure of, you need then to formulate this list into an essay.
- Don't state the obvious: anyone can spot that one word rhymes with another; close reading requires that you account for why that word rhymes with that word, this word with this word.
- Similarly, formal features do more than set a mood: you need to think about why a particular mood has been evoked.
- Many of you are good at spotting when a poem becomes odd, uncomfortable, strange or tense, and note how these moments are indicated by the text, such as broken rhythms; but you must move this observational, descriptive detail on and stop and ask yourself what the implications are of your notes and annotations.
- Work towards finding meaningful links between the moments that you draw out for comment and use them to come up with a perspective that can see the poem's discrete elements in dialogue with each other.

## **Argument**

- The close reading essay is designed to bring out your reading of a text, and as such, will involve you making an argument (remember, close reading is not just a description of the text).
- When you have thought about the poem's form, diction, rhythm and so on, you need to think about what effect this creates and what the poet-narrator is saying by doing this.
- There is no 'right' argument to be gained through completing this process as each interpretation will choose to focus on a different aspect of the poem.
- An argument looks to persuade, not insist; it engages the reader as a thoughtful listener, who could be imagined as responding to, or questioning, your claims.

- An argument also takes its observations to the ‘next level’ by using its initial answers as the stuff for questions. If you notice the recurrence of certain motifs or tendencies in our texts, a first step would be to draw the reader’s attention to its presence. Then take this observation and pose it as a question that needs to be further examined. What are the implications of these representations; what are the stakes in presenting matters in this way?
- An argument also depends on the analysis you have already done in the annotating process: you should then relate all of the relevant details to that thesis. Those ideas which do not support your argument should be omitted from your essay: excessive detail about unimportant features will draw attention away from the argument (although make sure not to ignore details that contradict your argument: reassess these details and use them to reevaluate your argument).
- The order of the textual evidence presented in support of your argument should not follow the order of the passage being discussed. Rather, the order of the evidence depends on how it relates to your central argument. Don’t let the passage walk you through your analysis; instead, re-organize the passage to suit your discussion of it.
- Remember to include a brief statement of your argument in your introduction: it is best to write the introduction after you have finished a draft of the essay so you know what you’re introducing (you can also start with a rough introduction that can be deleted or rewritten later).

### **Things to avoid**

- Do not attempt to slot the poem into preconceived ideas of what ‘Romanticism’ or ‘Victorianism’ is: it is incorrect to discuss ‘Romantic’ ideas (the French Revolution, nature, language of common men, etc) and then apply the poem to these ideas (because the essay becomes flooded with historical detail at the expense of your reading of the poem).
- Avoid cross-referencing or alluding to other poems: the close reading exercise is too short to begin writing about similar poems.

- Avoid making general statements without backing them up: do not claim that your chosen poem is, for example, 'expressive of the sublime' without showing how the text conveys the sublime; neither should you give a definition of the sublime unless you do so through the text.

### **You must**

- Be particular about accounting for your interpretations with intimate reference to the text – this usually means showing your reader in close detail how you see different parts of the poem working together.
- Remember that one reader will view lines differently from another, so you cannot rely on pointing to the text and expecting it to demonstrate your interpretation – the interpretation is what you must demonstrate ....
- Remember that close reading takes time. Spend as much time as you can reading and re-reading the poem, working to trace its logic, finding its moments of argument, drawing out associations, establishing rhythms, hearing for sounds.
- If you spend too little time on this stage it will show up in your essay, as it will result in a piece that is hesitant at the beginning and only starting to get going as it concludes – this is usually because the requisite amount of time has only been given to the poem when the writer has been forced to do so by writing the essay almost contemporaneously with reading it.
- By spending time before writing, you will find how the poem's dynamics echo and mutate across its course, constantly reaching back and forth from beginning to end – this will help you firm up your perspective on what the poem is trying to express, and will give imaginative shape to your essay.

### **Some starting points**

- Metre, rhythm, rhyme: how does metre work in the passage you're reading? How are units of meaning created by the line divisions? When a poet downplays or emphasizes a particular word through positioning it in a particular way, what

effect does it have? How does the poet manage tone, pace and register with his or her use of rhyme and rhythm?

- What is the structure of the poem? Are there abrupt changes or a progression from one idea to another? Are there any symmetries or dialogue?
- Are there any words you don't understand? Look them up.
- Grammatical features: tenses, conditional constructions, the passive voice. Is the poem in the first, second or third person? Perhaps there are tense or person shifts; what effect do these produce?
- Predominance: are there several words that mean the same thing? repeated adjectives or pronouns?
- What kind of language is being used, or what register is the poem written in? Common, elevated, earthy, legal, lyrical, rhetorical, religious? Why?
- Are there any rhetorical features? metaphor and simile, hyperbole and litotes, personification, metonymy?
- Look at punctuation (but remember this could be the intervention of a printer or a later editor). Look out for: enjambment, parentheses, direct speech. When the punctuation is sparse, why? Is it because there is a proliferation of conjunctions that resist punctuation like, for example, the word 'and.' This may indicate parataxis or a conversational style.
- Allusions and references, to the poet's contemporaries, and often to bible or classical stories.
- What is the tone of the poem? Is it homiletic, comic, anxious, joyful, melancholy or ironic? How is this effect created?