7.1: An Introduction to Close Reading

What is Close Reading?

Close reading refers to a careful and deliberate style of reading that seeks to draw a deeper understanding of the text. When we perform a close reading we analyze or explicate a text. Reading closely is a process of working through the layers of meaning. A process of moving beyond the literal meaning of a text to the – sometimes various and at times conflicting – figurative meanings.

Literature contains layers of meaning. When you are reading to remember or simply to enjoy a story, you read on the most basic level. You remember characters’ names, major events, the setting, and other basic facts.

When we perform a close reading we analyze or break apart the text. This is a process through which we ask what else we can learn or understand beyond what a basic reading provides. This involves analysis and interpretation.

Close reading is not just asking what the author had in mind or trying to figure out a code or mystery placed there intentionally by the author. It is a process in which the reader/writer makes meaning from carefully studying the text.

A Quick Guide To Textual Analysis

Critical Lenses

When you do a close reading, you are taking part in literary criticism. Over the years, scholars have tended to focus on a few types of literary criticism to make meaning of texts. Each examines some aspect of our society and asks what a
particular story or poem tells us about that aspect. Let’s start by looking at a few of these, as they can be helpful guides for the close reading process.

#1. History

There are several schools of literary criticism that focus on history. New Historicism, for example, asks how a story represents or is an artifact of the time period when the author wrote it.

#2. Race/ethnicity

Various schools study what texts can teach us about race, ethnicity, or other aspects of heritage. These schools include African American Studies, Asian Studies, Latino/a or Chicano/a Studies, Native American Studies and so on. Asking what a story tells us about race or ethnicity does not necessarily mean we interpret the author’s message, but perhaps simply how she reflects attitudes or ideas about race prevalent when she wrote the text.

#3. Gender/sex/sexuality

Like schools that look at race and ethnicity, some schools look at gender, sex, and sexuality. These schools include Feminism, Queer Studies, Gender Studies and more. For example, Feminism examines power structures in stories and how they affect men and women. When people, particularly women, are controlled by forces beyond their influence, and those forces affect them because of their sex or gender, those forces are called “patriarchy.” A Feminist critic asks how patriarchy affects the characters in a text.

#4. Class or Social Position

Critics who study class in texts look at power structures. They examine who makes the decisions, who makes the rules, who enforces them, how, and why. An example of this would be Marxist Criticism which examines how money, production, and economics establish and support power structures.

Steps to Perform a Close Reading

Step 1 – Read the text thoroughly. Annotate, or take notes, as you go along. You can highlight or write directly on the page. Ask questions, underline connections, highlight points of interests and ALWAYS note patterns of repetition.

Step 2 – Identify the theme – What is the text about? This isn’t a summary of the plot or events, it’s the bigger or broader idea the text addresses. There can be more than one theme or interpretation of a theme. Remember your literary lenses. If you are having trouble finding a theme, ask questions guided by the critical lenses – race, sex/gender, class, history.

Step 3 – Identify the protagonist/speaker. This is the character who changes as a consequence of the conflict. There can be more than one protagonist or non-protagonist characters who change; the “main” character is generally the protagonist.

Step 4 – If you are analyzing a story, connect the theme and the protagonist. Whatever lesson the protagonist learns or whatever change he/she undergoes is most likely the story’s comment on the theme. If you are analyzing a poem, what is the lesson or concept the reader should draw from the speaker’s observations?
Step 5 – Create a thesis that teaches us about the theme. In your response, you will give examples from throughout the text that support what you think about the theme.

Step 6 – Support your thesis with examples, quotes, comparisons, and whatever evidence from the text you uncover. These can be scenes, symbols, other characters, dialogue, setting, figurative language and so on.

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