Close Reading of Poetry and Fiction

Provided by:
The Ohio State University at Lima Writing Center
Close Reading – An Overview

- Literary Analysis requires that one not only read the text, but look closely at what the author is saying as well as how the author is saying it.

- When close reading, it is important to look at the small details and understand how they work together in the piece to create meaning.
Part 1

How to Tackle the Ever-Daunting Task of Close Reading
How to Read Closely

- When reading, look at passages that seem important in the text.
- Underline or highlight or take notes on passages that stand out.
- Things you might look for:
  - Symbolism
  - Repeated images, words or ideas
  - Words or phrases that jump out as important
  - Words or phrases that can be interpreted in more than one way
  - Irony or ambiguity
  - Passages you don’t understand
  - Figurative language
How to Read Closely

- Before you look too closely at what you’ve marked, make sure you understand the basic plot and characters.
  - Look at characters and their roles in the work.
- Try paraphrasing passages you don’t understand.

- Look for associations you make with words that the work challenges.
  - An angel is normally associated with cleanliness and purity.
  - Passages that emphasize dirtiness might be important.
How to Read Closely

- Look up the meanings of words!
- There may be a meaning that you didn’t think of before, or a word that may have had different meanings at different times in history.

- A good resource for looking up words is the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED).
  - The OED provides definitions of words relevant to specific time periods.
How to Read Closely

- Re-read passages you did not understand the first time.
- Never ignore anything that you don’t understand.
- Keep working at difficult passages until they make sense.
After reading and making note of important passages, try to find a unifying idea.
First, ask what the elements seem to be saying.
Any idea supported by the text is valid. There are no “crazy” or “stupid” ideas, unless there is no evidence from the text to support the claim.
Don’t try to relate everything you found in the story. Use the parts that create one unifying idea.
   ◦ However, don’t ignore anything that contradicts this unifying idea. Remember to present and discuss any contradicting evidence you find.
How to Read Closely – Unifying Idea

If you have trouble finding a unifying idea:

- Try writing about ideas that interest you.
  - By writing your ideas down you may begin to see connections you did not see before.

- The thesis (unifying idea) should point to something about the text that people might not otherwise have realized.

- If no one would argue your point, ask “So what?”
  - Sometimes the answer to this question is the thesis.
How to Read Closely – Utilizing Quotes

- Use everything from the text that works for your idea.
- Also, quote from the text.
  - Show what details you found, and tell why they are important.
- Quotes support your argument, and you need to support every idea with evidence from the text.
- If there is no evidence, there is no argument.
Close Reading: Fiction

Excerpt from Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno”
The morning was one peculiar to that coast. Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter’s mould. The sky seemed a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come.

The morning was one peculiar to that coast.

Morning - ideas of a new day or beginning, light, sunrise

Peculiar - means distinct, characterizes a person, place or thing, also the idea of different

Coast - near the sea, establishes setting
Everything was mute and calm; everything gray.

- Mute - silent
- Calm - tranquil, peaceful, quiet, everything is quiet and gray
- Gray - color between black and white, dull, the cold of light at twilight, not bright or hopeful, dismal, gloomy, sad, depressing, cold and sunless
The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter’s mould.

- Undulated - wavy markings, forming a waved surface
- Roods - one meaning is a cross or a representation of a cross, another is a unit of linear measurement,
- Swells - rising or heaving of the sea/water in succession of long rolling waves, as after a wind causing it has dropped, or due to a distant disturbance
- Fixed - fastened securely, firmly resolved, stationary
- Lead - gray, heavy metal
- Smelter - one who fuses metal—
- Here there is a Paradox - the sea is moving, has swells and undulated waves, yet it seems fixed, sleeked at the surface, and like lead
- There is also a simile - the water is like lead
The sky seemed a gray surtout.

- The color GRAY has become a dominant theme by this point.
  - May be important in the work—take note of the color, perhaps;
- Surtout - a man’s great-coat or overcoat; a hood worn by women; outer covering
  - (We know from the OED that the word is obsolete now.)
Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms.

- Kith and Kin - country and kinsfolk, relatives, family
- Vapors - matter in the form of a steamy or imperceptible exhalation, exhalation of nature of steam, usually due to the effect of heat on moisture; used figuratively to mean something insubstantial or worthless, sometimes to mean a fantastic idea, foolish brag or boast
- Skim - to deal with, treat, or study very lightly without close attention, move over something with very slight contact, glance over without reading closely, pass over lightly without dwelling on or treating fully
Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms.

- Storm - violent disturbance of affairs, whether civil, political, social, or domestic, commotion, sedition, tumult
- So the birds—Fowl—are relatives in some way to the vapors—what does this mean? Why are they troubled? Note that there is more gray—These fowl are like “swallows over meadows before storms”—does this mean these “fowl” are foreshadowing a storm, as well (commonly believed that animals have some weather predicting capabilities)?
- Is this a literal storm, or also some sort of storm in the story itself?
Sentence 6

Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come.

- Shadow - comparative darkness, gloom, unhappiness, darkness of night or growing darkness after sunset; image cast by a body intercepting light; type of what is fleeting or ephemeral; delusive semblance or image; vain/unsubstantial object of pursuit; obscure indication, symbol, foreshadowing; imitation, copy; slight or faint appearance, small portion, trace
  - (Note how many meanings for one simple word that we all think we know)
- Deeper - extension downward; profound, hard to get to the bottom of; grave, heinous; intense, profound, great in measure/degree; intense (color); penetrating; much immersed, involved, implicated, far advanced, far on
Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come.

These shadows are also gray.
Shadows foreshadowing deeper shadows might be all signs on the water of a coming storm—the waves, the quiet, the birds, the vapors—how does this relate to the story?
Are their “deeper shadows” to come yet in the story itself?
The story itself starts gray, in shadow-like environment on the sea—also the word “foreshadowing” is in the passage.
Putting it Together

- There is a lot of gray which signifies an in between state, not light or dark.
  - Not black or white (an association we use to mean right/wrong or good/bad).
    - Could these concepts be brought in simply by the color gray?
- Also there is a storm, an idea of shadow, ideas of illusion versus reality are present.
  - The passage discusses ideas about things not being what they seem.
- To fully analyze the work, we would need the rest of the story, but this brief passage in the introduction already sets up quite a few ideas for what might be coming.
Part 3

Close Reading: Poetry
Close Reading of Poetry – Overview

Some elements of poetry to consider when close reading:

- The speaker is **not** always the same as the poet.
- Where is the poem taking place?
- What kinds of figurative language are present?
  - Simile, Metaphor, Personification, Symbolism, Paradox, etc.
- What kinds of imagery are in the poem?
- What can be said about the sounds of words?
  - Alliteration, Assonance, Consonance, Onomatopoeia, etc.
- What is the meter? (stressed, unstressed syllables)
- What is the rhyme scheme?
- What is the form of the poem?
  - Sonnet (14 Lines), How many stanzas?, Are there any refrains?
Shakespeare’s Sonnet 3

1 Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest
2 Now is the time that face should form another,
3 Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest
4 Thou dost beguile the world, unbless some mother.
5 For where is she so fair whose uneared womb
6 Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?
7 Or who is he so fond will be the tomb
8 Of his self-love, to stop posterity?
9 Thou art thy mother’s glass, and she in thee
10 Calls back the lovely April of her prime
11 So thou through windows of thine age shall see,
12 Despite of wrinkles this thy golden time
13 But if thou live, remembered not to be,
14 Die single, and thine image dies with thee.
Rhyme Scheme

Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest
Now is the time that face should form another,
Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest
Thou dost beguile the world, unblest some mother.
For where is she so fair whose uneared womb
Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?
Or who is he so fond will be the tomb
Of his self-love, to stop posterity?
Thou art thy mother’s glass, and she in thee
Calls back the lovely April of her prime
So thou through windows of thine age shall see,
Despite of wrinkles this thy golden time
    But if thou live, remembered not to be,
Die single, and thine image dies with thee.

• This is a Shakespearean sonnet.

• The rhyme scheme is:
  ABAB CDCD EDE EDD

• This is a variant from the standard Shakespearean rhyme schemes of:
  • ABAB CDCDEFEFGG
  • ABBACDDCEFFEGG

• The rhyme scheme shows possible turning points in a sonnet.

• Areas that break the rhyme pattern or don’t quite rhyme often draw attention to important words or ideas.
Meter

/ U / U / U / U / U /

1 Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest

/ U / U / U / U / U /

2 Now is the time that face should form another,

/ U / U / U / U / U /

3 Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest

- Meter is important because areas where the meter falters obviously could suggest important portions or words in the poem.
- Look for stressed and unstressed syllables.
- Count how many syllables are in the line. What might extra syllables suggest?
Speaker

- Look at the speaker of the poem—is it a man or woman? How can you tell?
  - The speaker is not always the same as the poet.
  - Though the poet is Shakespeare, he is not necessarily the speaker.

- To Whom is the poem addressed?

- Also, think about the theme of the poem
  - Is this a love poem?
  - Is it something else?
Meanings of Words

- Look for words that you don’t understand or that might be important.
- Look words up in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED).
- In a poem, especially short poems, all words are important.

**Beguile** –
- 1. To entangle or over-reach with guile; to delude, deceive, cheat.
- 2. To deprive of by fraud, to cheat out of.
- 3. To cheat (hopes, expectations, aims, or a person in them); to disappoint, to foil.
- 4. To win the attention or interest of (any one) by wiling means.
- 5. To divert attention in some pleasant way from (anything painful, or irksome)
Figurative Language

- Look for figurative language and other poetic elements in the poem.
  - simile, metaphor, symbolism, imagery etc.
- Metaphor – “Thou art thy mother’s glass”
- Symbolism & Imagery – glass, meaning mirror, is a symbol throughout the poem.
- Symbolism & Imagery – living, life, death, youth, children, mother
Having Troubles?

- If you have troubles figuring out the language, try paraphrasing line by line, or sentence by sentence...
- See the example below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SONNET 3</th>
<th>PARAPHRASE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest</td>
<td>Look in your mirror and tell the face you see</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now is the time that face should form another;</td>
<td>That now is the time it should form another [create a child];</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest,</td>
<td>If you do not renew yourself,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thou dost beguile the world, unblesse some mother.</td>
<td>You rob the world, and prevent some woman from becoming a mother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For where is she so fair whose unear'd womb</td>
<td>For where is the woman whose unploughed womb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?</td>
<td>Would frown upon the way you plough your field?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Image from: http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/3detail.html
The Unifying Idea (Thesis)

- What does Shakespearean Sonnet 3 seem to be saying?
- What do all of these elements combined suggest?
- Generate a unifying principle to tie the information you’ve gathered together.
Further Reference

- Visit the Writing Center to meet with a tutor to discuss your paper.

- Take advantage of this and other helpful online resources through the Writing Center website at:
  
  http://www.lima.ohio-state.edu/academics/writing/
The OSU-Lima Writing Center thanks Jered Slusher for creating this PowerPoint Presentation.

Based on a workshop
Created by Mary Hirt, Anne Maag, and Stephanie Verhoff

Visit us online at:
http://www.lima.ohio-state.edu/academics/writing/