

Close Reading: Analyzing Poetry and Passages of Fiction

What Is Close Reading?

Close reading, sometimes called explication of text, means developing an understanding of a text that is based on its small details and the larger ideas those details evoke or suggest. Although you might worry that taking a work apart somehow lessens its power or the pleasure of reading it, the opposite is usually true. By looking at the various parts of a poem or passage of fiction, you come to appreciate the writer's artistry and understand how a writer uses various techniques to make a statement, suggest an emotion, or convey an idea. John Ciardi's classic book on analyzing poetry is entitled *How Does a Poem Mean?*—and that's the purpose of close reading: to analyze not just *what* a piece of literature means but *how* that meaning comes about. When you write a close analysis essay, you start with the larger ideas you've discovered and use the small details—the words themselves and how they're arranged—to support your interpretation of the meaning of the piece.

The key to close reading is, of course, observation—taking note of what you read and what you think about it, and asking questions. The good news is that the texts you are asked to read closely are usually not that long, which means you can read them several times. Each time you read a text, you will notice more and more. Later in the chapter we'll suggest specific strategies—such as annotating and using a graphic organizer—that will help you organize what you notice, pose questions about your observations, and even answer the questions you've posed. Let's start with what you notice when you first read a poem or passage of fiction.

First-Impression Questions

Take a look at this excerpt from *My Antonia* by Willa Cather, a novel about early settlers in the American West, narrated by a young boy who moves from Virginia to Nebraska to be brought up by his grandparents. As you read, jot down some questions that arise from your first impressions.

I sat down in the middle of the garden, where snakes could scarcely approach unseen, and leaned my back against a warm yellow pumpkin. There were some

ground-cherry bushes growing along the furrows, full of fruit. I turned back the papery triangular sheaths that protected the berries and ate a few. All about me giant grasshoppers, twice as big as any I had ever seen, were doing acrobatic feats among the dried vines. The gophers scurried up and down the ploughed ground. There in the sheltered draw-bottom the wind did not blow very hard, but I could hear it singing its humming tune up on the level, and I could see the tall grasses wave. The earth was warm under me, and warm as I crumbled it through my fingers. Queer little red bugs came out and moved in slow squadrons around me. Their backs were polished vermillion, with black spots. I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep.

[1918]

After just one reading, you can probably get a sense of the tone of this passage and the mood it creates; you might even be able to imagine a few things about its narrator, its setting, and even its themes. You will surely have questions about how and why Cather's style is so distinct, and that is the first step in reading closely.

Here are some questions that a first reading may raise. Your questions may be similar to the ones here, or you may have come up with completely different ones.

- What part do the snakes play in this passage about happiness?
- What might it mean that the passage is set in a garden?
- How big is that pumpkin? How big are the grasshoppers, really?
- What makes the objects in the passage so vivid?
- Why does the narrator connect happiness and death?
- How does the narrator fit—literally and figuratively—into the landscape?
- How does the passage change from beginning to end?

What's important at this point is not necessarily answering the questions but simply asking them. By posing questions, you're engaging with the text—you're reading actively.

• ACTIVITY •

Read the following poem by A. E. Housman. Then create your own first-impression questions.

To an Athlete Dy A. E. HOUSMAN

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To an Athlete Dying Young

A. E. HOUSMAN

The time you won your town the race
 We chaired you through the market-place;
 Man and boy stood cheering by,
 And home we brought you shoulder-high.

To-day, the road all runners come,
 Shoulder-high we bring you home,
 And set you at your threshold down,
 Townsman of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away
 From fields where glory does not stay
 And early though the laurel grows
 It withers quicker than the rose.

Eyes the shady night has shut
 Cannot see the record cut,
 And silence sounds no worse than cheers
 After earth has stopped the ears:

Now you will not swell the rout
 Of lads that wore their honours out,
 Runners whom renown outran
 And the name died before the man.

So set, before its echoes fade,
 The fleet foot on the sill of shade,
 And hold to the low lintel up
 The still-defended challenge-cup.

And round that early-laurelled head
 Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,
 And find unwithered on its curls
 The garland briefer than a girl's.

[1896]

The Elements of Style

The point of close reading is to go beyond merely summarizing a work to figuring out how a writer's stylistic choices convey the work's message or meaning. Once you begin to analyze literature closely, you will see how all of the parts of a piece of literature work together, from the structure of the piece down to individual word choices. The following is a brief introduction to the essential elements of style. Understanding these terms

and concepts will give you things to be on the lookout for as you close-read, as well as vocabulary to help you describe what you see. Examples for all of these concepts, and more, are available in the glossary at the back of the book.

Diction

Authors choose their words carefully to convey precise meanings. We call these word choices the author's diction. A word can have more than one dictionary definition, or *denotation*, so when you analyze diction, you must consider all of a word's possible meanings. If the words have meanings or associations beyond the dictionary definitions, their *connotations*, you should ask how those relate to the meaning of the piece. Sometimes a word's connotations will reveal another layer of meaning; sometimes they will affect the tone, as in the case of *formal* or *informal* diction, which is sometimes called *slang*, or *colloquial*, language. Diction can also be *abstract* or *concrete*. Let's look at an example of diction from the third stanza of Housman's poem:

Smart lad, to slip betimes away
From fields where glory does not stay
And early though the laurel grows
It withers quicker than the rose.

In the third line, Housman plays with the multiple denotations of the word *laurel*, which is both a small evergreen tree, and an honor or accolade. Housman is using these multiple denotations to establish a paradox. Though the laurel that represents fame is evergreen, fame itself is fleeting, even more fleeting than the rosy bloom of youth.

Figurative Language

Language that is not literal is called *figurative*, as in a *figure of speech*. Sometimes this kind of language is called *metaphorical* because it explains or expands on an idea by comparing it to something else. The comparison can be explicit, as in the case of a *simile*, which makes a comparison using *like* or *as*; or it can be an implied comparison, as in the case of a *metaphor*. *Personification* is a figure of speech in which an object or animal is given human characteristics. An *analogy* is a figure of speech that usually helps explain something unfamiliar or complicated by comparing it to something familiar or simple.

When a metaphor is extended over several lines in a work, it's called an *extended metaphor*. Other forms of figurative language include *overstatement* (or *hyperbole*), *understatement*, *paradox* (a statement that seems contradictory but actually reveals a surprising truth), and *irony*. There are a few different types of *irony*, but *verbal irony* is the most common. It occurs when a speaker says one thing but really means something else, or when there is a noticeable incongruity between what is expected and what is said.

Imagery

Imagery is the verbal expression of a sensory experience and can appeal to any of the five senses. Sometimes imagery depends on very concrete language—that is, descriptions of

how things look, feel, or sound, how the sense impressions are repeated through descriptions even if they are not repeated.

Queer little red
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Syntax

Syntax is the arrangement of words in a sentence. When we read closely, we can see how complex the sentence structure is. The sentence clause and follow the beginning with subject word order can be subject-object or such as several lines in several places. When he writes the expected word order is emphasized by being

Tone and Mood

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how things look, feel, sound, smell, or taste. In considering imagery, look carefully at how the sense impressions are created. Also pay attention to patterns of images that are repeated throughout a work. Often writers use figurative language to make their descriptions even more vivid. Look at this description from the Cather passage:

Queer little red bugs came out and moved in slow squadrons around me. Their backs were polished vermilion, with black spots.

The imagery tells us that these are little red bugs with black spots, but consider what is added with the words “squadrons” and “vermilion,” both figurative descriptions.

Syntax

Syntax is the arrangement of words into phrases, clauses, and sentences. When we read closely, we consider whether the sentences in a work are long or short, simple or complex. The sentence might also be cumulative, beginning with an independent clause and followed by subordinate clauses or phrases that add detail; or periodic, beginning with subordinate clauses or phrases that build toward the main clause. The word order can be the traditional subject-verb-object order or inverted (e.g., verb-subject-object or object-subject-verb). You might also look at syntactic patterns, such as several long sentences followed by a short sentence. Housman uses inversion in several places, perhaps to ensure the rhyme scheme but also to emphasize a point. When he writes, “And home we brought you shoulder-high” (l. 4), the shift in expected word order (“We brought you home”) emphasizes “home,” which is further emphasized by being repeated two lines later.

Tone and Mood

Tone reflects the speaker's attitude toward the subject of the work. Mood is the feeling the reader experiences as a result of the tone. Tone and mood provide the emotional coloring of a work and are created by the writer's stylistic choices. When you describe the tone and mood of a work, try to use at least two precise words, rather than words that are vague and general, such as *happy*, *sad*, or *different*. In describing the tone of the Cather passage, you might say that it is contented and joyful. What is most important is that you consider the style elements that went into creating the tone.

Now that you have some familiarity with the elements of style, you can use them as a starting point for close reading. Here are some questions you can ask of any text:

Diction

- Which of the important words (verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs) in the poem or passage are general and abstract, and which are specific and concrete?
- Are the important words formal, informal, colloquial, or slang?
- Are there words with strong connotations, words we might refer to as “loaded”?

Figurative Language

- Are some words not literal but figurative, creating figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, and personification?

Imagery

- Are the images—the parts of the passage we experience with our five senses—concrete, or do they depend on figurative language to come alive?

Syntax

- What is the order of the words in the sentences? Are they in the usual subject-verb-object order, or are they inverted?
- Which is more prevalent in the passage, nouns or verbs?
- What are the sentences like? Do their meanings build periodically or cumulatively?
- How do the sentences connect their words, phrases, and clauses?
- How is the poem or passage organized? Is it chronological? Does it move from concrete to abstract or vice versa? Or does it follow some other pattern?

• ACTIVITY •

Reread Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young" (p. 21), and use it to answer the preceding questions on style.

A Sample Close Analysis

Let's look at a passage from Eudora Welty's short story "Old Mr. Marblehall."

There is Mr. Marblehall's ancestral home. It's not so wonderfully large—it has only four columns—but you always look toward it, the way you always glance into tunnels and see nothing. The river is after it now, and the little back garden has assuredly crumbled away, but the box maze is there on the edge like a trap, to confound the Mississippi River. Deep in the red wall waits the front door—it weighs such a lot, it is perfectly solid, all one piece, black mahogany. . . . And you see—one of *them* is always going in it. There is a knocker shaped like a gasping fish on the door. You have every reason in the world to imagine the inside is dark, with old things about. There's many a big, deathly-looking tapestry, wrinkling and thin, many a sofa shaped like an S. Brocades as tall as the wicked queens in Italian tales stand gathered before the windows. Everything is draped and hooded and shaded, of course, unaffectionate but close. Such rosy lamps! The only sound would be a breath against the prisms, a stirring of the chandelier. It's like old eyelids, the house with one of its shutters, in careful working order, slowly opening outward.

[1937]

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F. SCOTT FITZ

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The passage begins with an incongruity: the house is an "ancestral home," yet "it's not so wonderfully large." This sets up a discrepancy between what we might expect and what the speaker describes. The concrete details in the passage—columns, box maze, front door, knocker, tapestry, sofa, brocades, lamps—suggest formality and elegance, yet adjectives such as "wrinkling and thin," "draped," "hooded," and "shaded" create images of decay, deception, even death. The S-shaped sofas are so snake-like that they practically hiss. The speaker's description creates a sense of decay and menace, from this house that does not live up to the grand description of "ancestral home."

Figurative language emphasizes these incongruities. The speaker uses a simile (in this simile, "like" is implied rather than explicit) to describe the way observers look at the house without actually seeing anything, "the way you always glance into tunnels and see nothing." The box maze is not fun or beautiful but "like a trap," a door knocker is not welcoming but "shaped like a gasping fish," brocades are not elegant but "tall as the wicked queens in Italian tales." Personification deepens this sense of mystery. The river "is after it now," as if in pursuit of the house. The front door "waits," prepared to swallow up any visitors. The furniture is "draped and hooded and shaded," calling to mind both ghosts and executioners. The final simile personifies the house as being "like old eyelids." This image literally refers to the shutters opening slowly but also emphasizes age and decrepitude while suggesting that this house is alive, and watching you. In fact, all of these figures of speech suggest that something sinister is afoot.

Apart from the one short sentence fragment—"Such rosy lamps!"—the sentences are fairly long and build through accumulation of detail. Most are in normal word order with clauses and phrases added one after another to characterize the house and add description and qualification. One exception is an example of inverted syntax—"Deep in the red wall waits the front door"—a phrase that underscores the menace of the entranceway. These sentences acquaint the reader with the house—and suggest something about the character of its owner, Mr. Marblehall. Through the eye of the speaker, we become wary of this place and its occupant.

• ACTIVITY •

Below is the conclusion to F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*. At the end of the novel, its narrator, Nick Carraway, remembers Jay Gatsby as a person with a great "capacity for wonder." Read the passage carefully. Then analyze how the style conveys this sense of Gatsby.

From *The Great Gatsby*

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors'

[1937]

eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

[1925]

Special Considerations for Reading Poetry Closely

Reading poetry and fiction closely requires the same careful attention to language, but when you read poetry closely, you will look at some additional elements of style and structure.

Rhyme

As you know, some poems rhyme and some—those written in free verse—do not. Rhyme at the end of a line is called **end rhyme**, while rhyme within a line of poetry is called **internal rhyme**. Eye (or sight) rhymes should be considered in addition to the rhymes you can hear. When an author uses poetic license to rhyme words that do not sound quite the same, it is called **near rhyme**. Rhyme is usually notated using letters of the alphabet. For instance, a simple **quatrain** or four-line stanza might rhyme *abab*, or be arranged as couplets that rhyme *aabb*. The pattern of rhyme for an entire poem is called its **rhyme scheme**. It can be useful to consider the effects of rhyme in a poem by charting its rhyme scheme; reading a rhyming poem out loud is also helpful.

Meter

The lines in structured poems often follow a regular pattern of **rhythm** called a **meter**. Literally, meter counts the measure of a line, referring to the pattern of stressed or unstressed syllables, combinations of which we call **feet**. Iambic meter is by far the most common in English. An iamb is a poetic foot of two syllables with the stress, or accent, on

the second, as in the patterns are iambic tetrameter, which is the Housman poem's rhythm of four beats

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Notice how odd it is

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