

**AN INTRODUCTION TO
CLOSE READING**

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Preparation

Assumptions and Goals

Straightforward Reading

Descriptive Analysis

Interpretation

Coherence, Conviction, Intention

Conclusion

2 • CLOSE READING

Glossary

Tactics for Reading

Advice about Writing

Suggested Resources

Works Consulted

INTRODUCTION

This guide is meant to survey a method of reading valued by most teachers in the humanities. Although this is a provisional description of techniques, strategies, and terms, there is enough general agreement among different close readers to justify an overview of their frequently named but seldom-explained approach. Close reading and explication have developed over centuries. As a result, many essential, common assumptions underlie even the most disparate contemporary approaches to the interpretation of written texts.

What is "close reading"? The expression refers either to a method or to an account resulting from the practice of that method. After engaging in the activity of reading closely, you can write down (or simply communicate) a "reading," an account of your findings. Closeness here describes a practice of reading that is strict, searching, and minute; it remains close or near to the text.

The reader typically moves through a selection gradually, using highly specific textual evidence to make broader connections and claims. In this way, microscopic and macrocosmic views combine in a unified, sustained consideration of form, significance, and context.

PREPARATION

The effort to read closely does not require much preparation. You get better at it with practice and experience. At the same time, some basic areas of study will prove helpful. One is an understanding of grammar; another, a knowledge of literary traditions and their conventions. Close reading is also an excellent way to study these things.

Progressive education has undervalued grammar, while fashion has swung critics, teachers, and readers back and forth between reverence and scorn for information lying beyond the text at hand. There is some risk that too much knowledge will smother creative thought; too little, however, will leave a reader unequipped to read carefully.

At the same time, many readers fear that linguistic and historical knowledge will lead to mechanical study and make their favorite books dry and empty. Instead, this knowledge provides tools and fosters skills. Grammar is one of the most expressive aspects of language. And knowing about Elizabethan literature, or poetry, or sonnets will not keep someone from reading a Shakespearean sonnet carefully, although it could -- if it led only to the complacent recital of easy answers. Received opinions, like jargon, can become empty placeholders, displacing thought.

ASSUMPTIONS AND GOALS

Why bother to read closely? Because a casual reader misses out on untold riches: fresh dimensions of meaning and inspiration. The straightforward reader proceeds in a linear manner, seeking uniform, superficial meanings; the close reader becomes convinced that here there is more than first meets the eye. An initial, immediate reading of the text comes to appear insufficient and impoverished.

For the purposes of this introduction, let's agree that close reading concentrates on *literary* aspects of writing. A more literary work invites questions, especially about its peculiar arrangement; we look to a less literary work for straightforward information and answers. Strictly speaking, every piece of writing is in this sense literary to some degree. In its literary aspect, a written work can be resistant to paraphrase, indirect, ambiguous, opaque, suggestive, implicit, questioning, layered, open to many interpretations, and capable of evoking delight.

4 • CLOSE READING

Resistance to paraphrase is a particularly helpful indicator of writing's literary aspect. Take a scientific study. It may not be easy to read, and the data presented may be open to interpretation. Nevertheless, the study has an identifiable main point or argument that can be paraphrased, restated, rewritten. Perhaps many readers will simply read a summary, leaving the technical data to a few qualified specialists. When the study gets translated into a foreign language, nothing important is lost (from a nonliterary point of view). Textual features such as word choice and metaphor will be considered inconsequential, incidental, and decorative.

Roland Barthes points out that deeply rooted assumptions divide scientific writing from literature. "For science, language is merely an instrument, which it chooses to make as transparent, as neutral as possible . . ." Science separates out "the contents of the scientific message, which are everything" from "the verbal form entrusted with expressing these contents, which is nothing." Although the difference between scientific writing and literature is not always so clear-cut, the scientific perspective, with its penchant for unambiguous results, has a powerful hold on us all, even when we are reading literature. We first look, naturally enough, for what each work says outright: a straightforward message, a story or moral, a theme or thesis.

Arguing for the extreme contrary of this perspective, a poet might claim that form is content-as-deployed, that the medium is the message. A poem has meaning that cannot be made by any other means. Through features of language that *cannot be replicated in any other form*, poetry defies scientific comprehension by saying things without saying them in a direct, immediate, everyday, practical manner.

The literary perspective gives verbal particulars special attention. That is because the story of *Hamlet* -- which could be jammed into a paragraph -- is not the whole story; a summary of *Pride and Prejudice* is more of a remainder than a sum; and a paraphrase of *The Waste Land* would be nothing like the poem itself. Whereas scientists may discard texts like candy wrappers once their contents have been consumed, the formal and thematic features of poetic significance are only hypothetically separable from each other.

When focusing on the poetic dimension of language and writing, a close reader has various overlapping assumptions in mind. Here are three that will be discussed more

fully below. First, a straightforward reading is insufficient. A text's immediate, explicit meaning (its story or moral, perhaps) and its structure serve as starting points for further interpretation. Second, there is no such thing as *mere* rhetoric. Ignoring *how* a text is formulated or articulated is like reading with blinders on. Third, there is no one single, correct interpretation of a text. A reading is not a verifiable answer. Instead, readings are better or worse according to how convincing, comprehensive, and intellectually engaging they are.

Despite the dogmatic and negative ring of these three assumptions, they clear the way for convincing and insightful readings. They point toward the following goals. One is to reveal things that a hasty, straightforward reader would miss. Close readers seek to discover and identify implicit formal and thematic elements, thereby making them explicit. Another task is to draw meaningful connections between these specific forms and broader themes. The final challenge is to unite these observations in a coherent (if necessarily partial) version or view of the text's meaning.

Each step toward a coherent close reading presents particular difficulties. After grasping a text's basic form and explicit themes, the close reader's work has only just begun. The next four sections sketch a sequence of likely hurdles.

STRAIGHTFORWARD READING

People read in all kinds of ways for all kinds of reasons, which is surely for the best. Right now, however, straightforward reading is a serviceable villain. Straightforward reading is just a step on the path of close reading, though it is unavoidable and useful. It is linear, seeking to extract uniform answers and explicit themes. It can be a practical, powerful way of getting information quickly and directly. When we say that someone can read, we have straightforward reading in mind.

American exams such as the SAT and the GRE have sections called “critical reading” and “reading comprehension.” Students must read a passage and then answer questions about it within a limited amount of time. Correct answers are presumed to exist, of course, and no one is expected to reread a passage in order to ponder literary style or subtle ambiguities. Guidebooks say, “don't read the passage thoroughly -- that's a waste

6 • CLOSE READING

of time”; “don't get caught up in details.” On these exams, straightforward reading is appropriate and institutionally sanctioned.

It is important to remember that, however useful, this sort of reading is different from analytical and interpretive reading. The move into close reading is a challenging conceptual leap.

Like an absentminded professor who searches for her glasses when they are perched on her nose, a close reader must look at things that are so obvious as to escape notice. Since we ordinarily treat a piece of writing as if it were a transparent window, it takes a special effort to notice the text (the glass) itself. The word "text" comes from Latin; like "textile," it has roots in the meaning "woven thing." Thus it might be helpful to think of the text as a transparent, woven fabric. The straightforward reader, willing to look only through it, tries not to get distracted by the fabric per se. The close reader scrutinizes its weave or texture intently.

Yet straightforward reading is a crucial starting point. The broader genre or type to which a passage may belong; the explicit point of the passage; the overall structure; and the story, if there is one: these are all important. In fact, overeager students sometimes make the mistake of ignoring these essential features, which as it happens are not always so easy to grasp.

Besides the main literary genres of lyric poetry, drama, fiction (including epic, novel, and short story), and the essay, countless variations and subgenres exist. Each has its own conventions and expectations. Learning to recognize general types and to handle specific cases with sensitivity is an ongoing challenge.

Focusing on the literary dimension of various writings, including pieces of prose and nonfiction as well as lyric and fiction, is not to suppose that they are all the same, but that they share features fruitfully explored by the method of close reading. Nor does each case fit easily on a spectrum that runs from extremely scientific (direct, literal, explicit) to extremely literary (indirect, figurative, implicit). A work of science might contain striking metaphors; a lyric poem might be markedly simple rather than bewilderingly archaic, allusive, or cryptic; a spy thriller might be packed full of carefully researched factual details. Nonetheless, our perception of literary significance in any text can lead us beyond straightforward reading.

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

After an initial look at a text's main explicit features -- its apparent type, overall structure, and thesis, themes, or story -- close analysis and interpretation can begin. I shall discuss description and interpretation consecutively; in practice, they are entangled if not indistinguishable. Analysis is the process of breaking something apart. Interpretation is somewhat like putting the pieces back together, from a different point of view.

Both activities involve constant decision-making. Each reader will dissect a text differently, choosing to emphasize some elements and downplay others, and each choice will ideally share in the concurrent development of a coherent interpretive viewpoint. Which elements we notice, what we call them, and what we make of them constitute interpretive decisions. Reading is in this sense an exercise of intelligence, the human capacity to "choose between," as suggested by the Latin word *legere*, meaning both "to read" and "to choose."

Some literary theorists describe the straightforward reader as oblivious, complacent, anesthetized, blind, ignorant, charmed, unconscious, asleep, brainwashed, unaware, superficial. Accordingly, the text is said to harbor forgotten, unnoticed, hidden, latent, repressed, concealed, esoteric, overfamiliar, implicit, ignored layers. A close reader may experience heightened awareness, alienation, and defamiliarization; the text may, through a jarring combination of elements, draw attention to its texture, thereby waking interest in a dimension typically taken for granted.

Upon first reading a piece of writing, many intelligent people do not have much to say. After all, a quickly executed, straightforward reading should distill the text's explicit message. Once we have said (restated) what the text simply "says," what could possibly remain for us to say? Nevertheless, another level of reading can be reached through intelligent description. The close reader has plenty to say about a text.

Description may sound mechanical, but it is an interpretive process because of the many choices involved. Description provides evidence. We base our own claims on the evidence, and by means of the evidence, conclusions can be convincingly communicated to others. Every text under scrutiny presents a wealth of elements waiting to be noticed, identified, and, in turn, meaningfully connected.

8 • CLOSE READING

Before I discuss some broader aspects of this procedure, a sample description might be helpful. I present it in the crude form of a list, leaving an interpretation for later.

Text: My Country, 'tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing.

Straightforward observations: beginning of a well-known American hymn; three lines of poetic verse forming a sentence.

Restatement of main point: the speaker praises American liberty.

Description of details:

- unusual word-order; verb and subject postponed
- rhymes, assonance, and alliteration: *t* and *e* sounds stand out
- synonymy: *country* and *land*
- archaic vocabulary; letter *i* lost in contraction of *'tis*
- variation: *of* repeated with variation in function
- personification: *country*
- apostrophe (impassioned address)
- metaphorical adjective: *sweet* land
- song identifies itself as quintessential "patriotic song"
- speech act of singing (language that performs an action)

First and foremost, every observation concerns specific, quotable evidence found in the text. Various rhetorical and linguistic terms aid in the characterization of the specifics. The description is fairly objective but also reflects choices. As it stands, it is scarcely more than a sterile, arbitrary list, though it already represents an individual view of the text. Note that repetition is a common point of focus. Each formal element displays some degree of dependence: few stand alone, some are linked together, all are noted because of their function within a frame of reference.

Close readers usually look for patterns that stand out. Sometimes a single punctuation mark, letter, or word (like *'tis*) attracts attention. As a rule, though, repetition leads us to link small units together. In the phrase *sweet land of liberty*, specific consonants and vowels are repeated, and by linking them together we identify sound patterns. On its own, the word *country* could potentially perform many functions; in this

actual context, the country is addressed by the speaker/singer, giving us personification and apostrophe.

Elements are most commonly linked by repetition, variation, or contrast. Repetition is probably the single most important factor in descriptive analysis. It can be a surprisingly flexible type of formal feature, noticeable not only as a kind of rule-breaking but also as a form of over-regularity. Some theorists refer to linguistic repetition as a conspicuous sort of "density," adding that a text can become "saturated" to the point where a particular formal feature appears as the rule rather than the exception. A text can thereby act as its own context, developing internal norms apart from the rules or conventions of everyday usage.

Smaller contexts include patterns of forms and themes within a passage; and then there are surrounding stretches of text, from neighboring words to entire works; other works by the same author; other works by contemporaries and predecessors; historical background about the text itself, its author, languages, literary and social conventions; theories of literature, psychology, and philosophy; as well as the reader's expectations, predilections, and presuppositions. Context is the reader's ever-expanding universe.

When close readers attempt to describe the twists and turns of poetic language, they usually draw on rhetorical concepts and terms. Originally viewed as the (predominantly oral) art of persuasion, rhetoric has come to provide a framework for describing a huge range of verbal phenomena. Rhetorical terms can aid in describing anything from phonemes (the smallest unit of speech) to genres and speech-acts (such as praising and wishing). They map out the framework that allows us to gather formal, generic, and functional (formal-thematic) evidence. They can be learned by taking classes, studying introductory books, and reading examples of criticism. Their purpose is simply to help us describe what we read, so we do not need to make up a whole new system from scratch.

Since rhetoric has the potential to describe such a wide range of specifics, the framework just mentioned deserves elaboration. Rhetoric is a fine tool for describing poetic language. It is traditionally based on a practical distinction between norms and deviations. For example, figures of speech are considered deviant in comparison with the norm of literal usage. If you say, "I am a lowly worm," this is metaphorical because the

"worm" turns or deviates from its straight (biological) definition. Thus figures of speech are also called tropes, from the Greek word for "turn."

Deviation is an effective working concept, not an absolute: as a descriptive system, rhetoric justifies our labeling poetic language deviant. You might even call it the poetry with which we talk about poetry. In addition to deviation and trope, many of rhetoric's underlying premises are metaphorically concerned with turning: verse, version, conversion, perversion, indirection, distortion, deformation, discourse. Similar metaphorical notions support the term metaphor: transfer, translation, transformation, performance, trespass, transgression, metamorphosis. Compare also: implicit, implication, explication, complication, complexity, replication, deployment, employment, unfolding.

Lyric poetry is the field where these concepts apply most readily and widely. So Helen Vendler speaks of lyric poetry as "transforming" and "converting" implicit ideas into unified form-ideas. For students seeking to describe lyric poetry, Vendler provides information on prosody (versification), grammar, speech acts (like singing), rhetorical devices (such as metaphor), and lyric subgenres.

Given that poetic language is rhetorically describable, these categories are germane to the close reading of any text. Certainly there are crucial differences between genres. The study of narration, for instance, introduces many categories of its own. And some individual poetic features deserve special mention: diction (key-words, word-choice) and imagery, for instance. Distinct as it is, poetry provides a representative collection of poetic creatures and their habits, so to speak. And these are the creations described in close reading.

The conversion or transformation seen in poetic language therefore pertains to close reading generally. The rhetorical turn is what our straightforward, linear reader underestimates or overlooks. Narrative is a prime example. A written narrative, which specialists also call a discourse, is a text that tells a story. In fiction, the story exists nowhere else; a nonfictional story is factual and potentially verifiable. Either way, we conceive of a linear sequence of events, a story, which has been *converted* into textual discourse. Even though story and written discourse are inseparable -- there is no such thing as a story without a narrative -- the story is ordinarily given priority in our minds.

The written version will deviate more or less from the presumed story; it may contain gaps, flashbacks, digressions and other distortions, forming a texture distinct from the story.

It follows that every text, if viewed as a specific manifestation of ideas, presents such a texture for analysis. Whether we envision a perfect articulation of the author's intended message or a twisted sample of writing gone awry -- two hypothetical extremes -- *every piece of writing is inherently rhetorical*. To speak of "mere" rhetoric, as many do, is like remarking on a mere tombstone when flying over a pyramid in an airplane.

INTERPRETATION

To the extent that description and interpretation are simultaneous, steps toward an interpretation have already been made by the time a reader has focused on certain formal properties in a text. For this reason, description now needs to be considered in a new light. If the describer is looking for interesting details, the interpreter's task is, among other things, to figure out why those details seem interesting. In other words, they seem significant, but why?

The close reader's search for details is guided by a desire for coherence and supported by a sense of conviction. Hence the immediate attraction of patterns and repetition; we look for significant connections (coherence) instead of random accidents. One might try out all kinds of connections, but a good reader will discard those that do not prove convincing, viable, or recognizable.

Yet all of this is easier said than done, especially as description becomes interpretation. The main question here is, how do readers get from explicit to implicit ideas by means of textual evidence? We have already conceived of the literary dimension as a specific formulation of thoughts: each text, therefore, consists of underlying thoughts that have been converted into specific forms. The "underlying" character of these thoughts betrays another pervasive and indispensable rhetorical assumption: our experience of reading takes place on more than one level. Interpretation occurs within a complex and layered network of forms and meanings.

While scrutinizing detailed evidence, the interpreter begins to reconnect the details in a new way, exploring and uncovering relationships between different *kinds* of

elements, including but not limited to manifest themes, narratives, images and the like, which occupy surface layers. Potentially deeper levels of meaning, to twist a common phrase, are hidden *on* the surface. Interpretation is therefore a continuation of the search for coherence begun in descriptive analysis. After linking details to each other, the reader continues building an interpretation by connecting formal properties and themes, and by making claims grounded in the connections.

This process can eventually result in a relatively straightforward hierarchy of claims and conclusions. The close reader, explicating the implicit like a detective or archeologist, brings a previously unknown version of the text to the forefront or surface of consciousness.

A crucial and extraordinarily complex side of close reading remains to be discussed. If repetition is a cornerstone of description, thematic context is an equally powerful factor guiding the interpreter's choices. Thematic context is a web of abstract topics, ongoing concerns, and claims found in the text. It emerges as one reads, starting with the explicit themes and meanings observed in straightforward reading. "My Country, 'tis of Thee," for example, is manifestly about American freedom. This simple topic is bound to influence any intelligent search for significant details and implicit meanings in the text. But the search quickly becomes far less simple and predictable, and the context rapidly expands.

Consider the unusual word-order of the patriotic selection. "My Country, 'tis of thee, / sweet land of liberty, / of thee I sing." Although it does not affect the straightforward meaning of the sentence, the word-order is a recognizable formal property -- it can be identified and described. The postponement of verb and subject is a deviation from everyday syntax. In fact, it nicely illustrates that poetic language can be backward instead of straightforward. Note that variation fortifies the postponement: four references to America (*country, thee, land, thee*) come between the words *my* and *I*, which are themselves linked both by rhyme and by their grammatical representation of the singer.

Having observed these interrelated formal features, the reader might then ask, what is the relationship between this postponement and the theme of American liberty? You can see that the question already involves a fairly tangled network of repetition,

variation, synonymy, rhyme, word-order (syntax), and grammar as well as a manifest theme. The interpretation could go in countless directions. To take one, the sentence places the country before the citizen, thereby enacting or strengthening the patriotic declaration. It acts out patriotism by showing, on a formal level, that "my country comes first."

Here strong connections have been made between very different kinds of particulars. I used "enacting" to explain a major link between a theme (patriotism) and a formal property (word-order). The link exemplifies the poetic conversion of thoughts into forms and forms into thoughts. To make the link is to recognize a meaningful enactment, which amounts to making a claim. In addition to an enactment, the connection could be understood as a translation, an analogy, a projection, or a circular movement.

These last two, projection and circularity, require explanation. Projection is another way to conceptualize the transfer of significance from one category to another. In a relevant discussion, Tzvetan Todorov writes, "Imagine a small slide projected onto a huge screen: the appearances are quite different, but the relationships of the parts to each other remain the same." In our example, it is as if patriotism had been reduced to a small slide of word-order and then enlarged through the process of close reading.

This process does not move in only one direction at a time; instead, it is circular. On the one hand, larger, explicit themes and contexts influence our handling of details. On the other hand, smaller pieces of evidence point toward larger themes. This is the interaction between description and interpretation touched on earlier. According to Leo Spitzer, close reading is a "to-and-fro voyage from certain outward [formal] details to the inner [thematic] center and back again to other series of details."

In this manner, readers experience a constant interplay of emerging explicit and implicit elements. The two extremes of explicit and implicit or macrocosmic and microscopic are unlikely to prove strictly parallel -- close reading often discovers tensions within a text. Many kinds of relations are again recognizable, including contrast and contradiction as well as similarity and variation. Whether an author or work's single and stable "inner center" could ever be found is largely beyond the purview of this treatise. Suffice it to say that some ideal of coherence is presupposed by most readers.

Now let us continue to interpret the patriotic song. While putting America first, the syntactic subordination of the citizen demonstrates a paradoxical moral about freedom: I am free because submissive; I, the (grammatical) subject, am a devoted subject. In this view, the interplay between themes and forms is less straightforward, though just as coherent and supported by evidence. The repeated *of*, twice meaning "about" and once characterizing the land, suggests that *singing of* the country goes hand in hand with *being of* it. Within a single sentence, the country belonging to me and the country to which I belong coexist.

Again, this may be implicit in the nature of patriotism as well as in this particular text. American notions of patriotism certainly contribute to the song's context. Indeed, some basic background can enrich our close view of the song's text while also leading back to broader conclusions. The text, written by Samuel F. Smith, a Boston clergyman and Harvard graduate, was first published on July 4, 1831. Its title at that time was "Celebration of American Independence." The theme of independence, clearly important for a union of former colonies, is celebrated in the phrase *sweet land of liberty*.

Less obviously, not only the country but also singing itself are celebrated through song. By insisting '*tis of thee... land of liberty... of thee*, the singer emphatically proclaims devotion, reassuring the land that it is not taken for granted. Only once this pledge has been made does the singer sing *I sing*. The speech act self-consciously celebrates freedom of expression, which is as though suspended until the land has been given its due. The freedom to sing is celebrated, asserted, and concretely demonstrated (that is, enacted) by singing.

The American text was put to the tune of the British national anthem "God Save the King." Accordingly, musical, historical, and retrospective contexts will color our view of the text, which is alluding to a preceding text. A degree of irony lurks in Smith's earnest appropriation of the preeminent royal anthem. Stealing the British ruler's thunder, the American song substitutes country for King. From this angle, the King is a very specific alternative; the American declares independence by saying *of thee* -- and not *of the King*.

The word *King* does appear at the very end of the hymn, when the singer seeks protection from a mighty King, but not from King George. Ending with the words "God

our King," the song lets no earthly King intervene between *my country* and *God our King*. Instead, the song itself, freely sung, is what leads from one to the other.

God, in the last stanza, is the "Author of liberty" to Whom "we sing." Thus the individual authorial voice of the worldly text has (having gone from *I sing* to *we sing*) joined us in the audience, subsumed by one nation, where those reading God's text of liberty are in effect singing it back to Him in praise and prayer. The circularity of our microscopic sentence (singing *I sing*) has been enlarged to a macrocosmic level of liberty given and received by God through song. If there is a contradiction in the author's submissive type of liberty, it is mitigated rhetorically by attributing the greatest liberty to the highest author.

Although countless avenues and intersections remain unexplored, this reading has yielded a coherent interpretation; a hierarchy of observations, claims, and conclusions. On the surface, the sentence simply expresses devotion to America. A close reading has revealed deeper implications. The singer is celebrating independence by exercising freedom of expression. Even more importantly, this freedom is not taken for granted. That is why the singer, passionately addressing the country, insists that it takes priority over individual freedom. Liberty must be commemorated first because no song would be possible without it. Thus the hymn is simultaneously a pledge of allegiance and a declaration of independence, the former making the latter possible.

Our patriotic American has not so much eliminated subjugation as made it a matter of self-determination. To sing the song is to make a free choice, to celebrate, remember -- and submit to -- that freedom. I mention this again in order to rejoin the topic of close reading. Our patriotic text is an instructive selection because it is tremendously familiar. Americans usually call the song "My Country 'tis of thee," running the last three words together in a pattern of stress that sounds like the word "Italy." Since no meaningful emphasis is placed on *thee*, the lone line is virtually incomprehensible. This is a sign of complacency.

Insofar as Americans take this song for granted, chanting it without consciously or closely reading it, the hymn loses much of its meaning and even turns against its readers. What could be a conscious recollection of freedom becomes an oblivious gesture of abdication. As if oblivion were not bad enough, this thoughtless gesture of devotion is

still a potentially consequential speech act. Should one pledge allegiance lightly? Might thoughtless reading become irrevocable commitment? When does harmless singing become coercive propaganda and loss of freedom? The hymn provokes such questions, allowing me to point out a parallel between the conscious exercise of freedom and the close reading of written texts.

COHERENCE, CONVICTION, INTENTION

As an interpretation grows increasingly elaborate, incorporating evidence from different strata and categories of text and context, coherence becomes more visible. By the same token, things come together and the interpretation becomes more convincing. At this stage, claims about the text are supported by coherently connected evidence. Connections that now seem irrelevant may be discarded; contrary evidence must be taken into account. A willingness to let go of some leads and to explore unforeseen possibilities makes for a stronger interpretation.

Along with the reader's sense of conviction comes the ability to convince others that the new close reading is a meaningful interpretation. A successful close reading culminates in a main point that (1) is firmly anchored in a convincingly coherent network of textual evidence and (2) reveals implicit layers of significance.

Many readers have been educated to seek a single, correct interpretation, equivalent to the author's conscious intention. In straightforward reading, this approach can work smoothly. In close reading, it breaks down. For one thing, the poetic dimension's layered complexity gives rise to multiple, and even contradictory or unconsciously created meanings. The author's declared or suspected intention is only one among many potentially significant contexts considered by the close reader.

For close readers, the text, not its author (whose identity is in some cases unknown or inconsistent), is taken at its word. Focused on the text, not on a personality or a free-floating idea, the close reader is free to weigh all available evidence. But if we do not give priority to the author, the question remains, where does our experience of the text's coherence come from? Within the limited and practical arena of close reading, this question is nearly moot. Each reading may justify itself simply by being convincing and satisfying.

Nevertheless, we have already outlined a series of assumptions about the production of meaning, most of which were anticipated by Freud at the turn of the century. Close readers view the text as a peculiarly human creation. And any text created by a human being is the result of extraordinarily complex operations. In essence, it is a mentally determined manifestation. Before seeing the light of day, the mind's racings are presumed to have been unconsciously and/or consciously developed, connected, and arranged; the poetic dimension of the text is a distorted manifestation of latent mental states and movements.

So a text will never, as a rule, be regarded as the result of random, vegetative, or mechanical activity. As a practical matter, readers nearly always study passages that they already respect. While making their case, readers usually allow the intellectual, emotional, sensuous, and kinetic qualities of a text to reveal themselves during the unfolding of textual evidence.

Indeed, the whole of each reading is ideally a human unfolding of observable thematic forms and formal themes. Our claims and conclusions should direct attention toward previously ignored realities.

CONCLUSION

Predecessors of close reading include ancient rhetoric, biblical interpretation, and medieval commentary. Classical philology and linguistics are two current, established disciplines that often involve the close scrutiny of literary texts. And then there are literary terms such as explication, textual analysis, practical criticism, and stylistics -- all of which may be synonymous with close reading.

In the 20th century, the practice of literary criticism has evolved in tandem with developments in the philosophy of literature (now often called literary theory). For close reading, the most prominent of these theoretical movements have been Semiotics, Formalism, New Criticism, Structuralism, and Deconstruction. Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger have fundamentally influenced these and related philosophies of reading.

Explication de texte and practical criticism are exercises still used in French and British educational institutions respectively, and are usually part of examinations taken before students graduate from high school. Explication became an official part of the

French curriculum by 1880; practical criticism became standardized at Cambridge University in the 1930s, when I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis were leading the way to New Criticism.

A French explication is normally an oral exam on a passage drawn from a list of prepared books. After situating the passage -- with such information as author, date, and the like -- and giving a brief overview of its main structure, the bulk of an explication is devoted to a detailed examination of how textual specifics convey the meaning of the passage. This kind of reading is meant to follow the text's lead; instead of imposing coherence or developing an argument, the reader submits to the text, guided by observations that reveal how the writer is making a point at a particular moment of the book. Traditionally, this approach has been a technical exercise in the recognition of rhetorical devices and their function within historical or biographical contexts.

Unlike its French counterpart, the British examination focuses on an "unseen passage" (an unexpected selection), is usually written, and emphasizes internal aspects of the text rather than external contexts. This approach sees the text as an autonomous creation, born through the interplay of forms and ideas meeting on an equal footing.

Throughout its development in the 20th century, close reading has placed great emphasis on form and structure. Formal and structural features can be defined quite broadly, however, by rhetorical means. Rhetorical terms and strategies can characterize *how* a text has been articulated, allowing a reader to explore tight connections between specific, identifiable features of language and meaning. Formal properties are concretely textual; themes are abstract topics. The interaction between formal and thematic evidence is rarely simple, but it is always of interest to a close reader.

The kind of close reading described above has great latitude. I have tried to be more inclusive than narrowly prescriptive. A wide variety of critical views are here combined in the interest of practicality and universality. Instead of adopting a strict notion of literature, I treat written texts generally as the object of close reading. Holding an expansive sort of rhetorical analysis in mind, I believe that anything remotely poetic may be read with a degree of care -- and with many of the tools -- usually reserved for lyric poetry itself.

I have also avoided jargon and supplied a glossary; more advanced topics and terms can be found through the bibliography. My aim has been to introduce a method accessible by college-level readers, one that addresses linguistic details, the reader's response, contextual information, and theoretical issues.

Anyone reading this knows how to read. Meanwhile, there are as many ways to read as there are readers. To many people, however, close reading seems unnatural, even threatening. And so it should, insofar as this is a method of reading that challenges us to notice things we might not ordinarily observe or think about. Yet it also provides broadly applicable skills and tools for exploring unfamiliar mental territory. Close reading exercises a powerful but often neglected muscle of the soul.

GLOSSARY

(These are working terms used in this guide, though some other common definitions are also given. Synonyms are in parentheses.)

AMBIGUOUS: susceptible to multiple interpretations.

APOSTROPHE: impassioned address.

CLAIM: proposition not yet proven by evidence (theory, hypothesis).

CLOSE READING: scrutiny of text itself for detailed evidence.

COHERENCE: recognizable relation between elements or properties.

CONCLUSION: proposition proven by evidence.

CRITICISM: discussion of specific examples.

DICTION: word-choice; vocabulary.

DISCOURSE: specific telling (narrative) of a story; language deployed, especially in a particular manner, as in *legal discourse*; linguistic example longer than a sentence.

ELEMENT: small unit or detail.

FICTION: narrative not considered potentially verifiable.

FIGURE: deviation from everyday use of language (trope).

FORM, FORMULATION: actual example of text; specific manifestation of thought.

GENRE: conventional name classifying type of written work.

20 • CLOSE READING

IMAGE: visual detail; also can refer to other four senses.

LATENT: implicit, underlying, hidden.

LITERARY THEORY: philosophy of literature; attempt to explain what literature is in general and how it should or may be interpreted; called poetics until the 1930s or since New Criticism; poetics that continuously questions its own assumptions and methods.

LITERARY: dimension of text where forms and themes are viewed as ultimately inseparable (poetic); not susceptible to being paraphrased or replicated in a different form.

METAPHOR: implicit comparison -- without *like* or *as*.

METONYMY: metaphor based on known connection, as in *Crown* for *King*.

OVERDETERMINATION: occurs when one explicit element is linked to multiple implicit elements at the same time; symptom having multiple causes; form as manifestation of multiple thoughts at once.

OVERINTERPRETATION: holding multiple interpretations at the same time, potential consequence of ambiguity.

POETIC: dimension of text where forms and themes are seen interacting (literary); not susceptible to being paraphrased or replicated in a different form.

POETRY: language used figuratively and indirectly; normally has a visibly strict arrangement.

PROPERTY or FEATURE: specific and describable use of language, may involve a combination of elements.

RHETORIC: means of describing formal and thematic properties; art of persuasion.

SPEECH ACT: use of language that performs an action.

STORY: sequence of events presumed to underlie narrative discourse.

STRAIGHTFORWARD READING: linear approach seeking uniform answers.

TEXT: piece, passage, selection, work of writing.

THEME: abstract topic.

THESIS: main claim or conclusion; direction of themes.

TROPE: figure; deviation from everyday use of language.

VERSE: language fixed in a conventional scheme or pattern, not necessarily poetry.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDENTS
(TACTICS FOR CLOSE READING)

Reading a selected passage

Reread the selection

Grasp the explicit surface

- genre and overall structure (beginning, middle, end)
- thesis, main themes, story
- apparent speaker/narrator

Scrutinize the passage

- mark up your copy
- single out unusual formal elements
- notice emerging themes

List formal and thematic elements

- key words and images
- rhetorical figures
- tone, attitude
- versification (when relevant)

Look for basic connections/relations between elements

- arrangement, order
- patterns, deviation
- uniformity, repetition, variation, contrast, oppositions
- emphasis, playfulness, contradiction
- condensation, compression
- expansion, digression

Take conscious stock of questions that have arisen

- seek coherence

22 • CLOSE READING

- sort through evidence
- try out hypotheses
- follow your convictions
- develop, outline, and organize claims (make written notes)
- articulate main point or theory about passage (make written note)

Writing about a selected passage

Though written close readings fit under the general rubric of expository writing, they present special challenges. Some advice about writing a reading may prove helpful.

If you have been asking questions, describing evidence, and testing out hypotheses while reading, your answers have been shaping into claims. Try to develop, outline, and organize your claims on paper. You might find it helpful to make lists or draw diagrams. Expository writers who work through a draft often see their main point more clearly by the end of it. Then the main point can be articulated at the beginning of the essay.

The thesis ought to be engaging, intriguing, provocative, or controversial. Pointedly state the interesting perspective *your* interpretation provides. What is the main thing that you want to say about the selected passage? If you chose the selection yourself, this might explain why you chose it. When trying out a thesis statement, see whether it distinguishes between explicit and implicit layers. Close readings usually boil down to something like, "a careful look reveals X," where X is a surprising or unexpected thesis.

Concerns about going too far (overinterpreting) or missing the big picture (reading too narrowly) should be overcome by the force of your convictions and your power to convince.

The body of a tightly organized essay is a chain of interlinked claims supported by specific textual evidence. Each claim should further convince your reader of your overarching main point. The thread of your argument may follow the order of the text or make its own order. Here is one way to proceed after articulating the main point: claim > quotation > description > conclusion > transition > claim > quotation > description > conclusion..., and so on.

It is difficult to avoid summarizing the text. The best policy is to make sure that all examples (quotations) and comments (claims, descriptions) are to the point. A relevant description can be an enlightening new version of what might otherwise be taken for granted. That is also why quotations cannot be trusted to speak for themselves -- the text is a given; the close reader has a new version to write.

In short:

- State your thesis at outset.
- Set out to convince your reader of this main point.
- Stay focused on claims, developing a hierarchical chain.
- Demonstrate awareness of broad structure and theme.
- Quote details (words, phrases), not large segments.
- Do not leave quotations hanging to speak for themselves.
- Describe evidence carefully.
- Clearly separate your claims from the author's.
- Avoid summary, generalization, vagueness.
- Clarify transitions.
- If possible, conclude with a thought-provoking insight.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR CLOSE READING

Language dictionaries. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* is a solid resource for English words.

Writing handbooks with explanations of grammar. (Such as *The St. Martin's Handbook* or *The Bedford Handbook*.)

Various reference works for background, including series such as *Ancient Writers* and *European Writers* (Scribners), the Oxford "Companions," and the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (DLB). Etymological dictionaries, dictionaries of quotations, *The Reader's Encyclopedia*, etc.

Dictionaries of terms:

J. A. Cuddon. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*.

Katie Wales. *A Dictionary of Stylistics*.

Richard A. Lanham. *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*.

Robert Audi, ed. *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*.

John Hollander. *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse*.

Introductions to Critical Reading:

Helen Vendler. *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology*.

Klaus, Carl et al. *Elements of Literature*.

Montgomery, Martin et al. *Ways of Reading*.

Jonathan Culler. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*.

Bonny Stevens and Larry Stewart. *A Guide to Literary Criticism and Research*.

Some Examples of Close Reading:

Erich Auerbach. *Mimesis*.

Cleanth Brooks. *The Well Wrought Urn*.

Roland Barthes. *S/Z*.

Gregory Nagy. *The Best of the Achaeans*.

Barbara Johnson. *The Critical Difference*.

Helen Vendler. *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*.

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