Guide to Close Reading

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What is close reading, in an age of speed-reading? We're constantly connected to our friends, the news, and even our favourite celebrities via social media and smartphones. Twitter spits out information 140 characters at a time, Facebook updates are brief, and so is text messaging. It's easy to take all of these words in quickly--to skim them, to glance at them, to process them in an instant.

In the study of literature, you need to move away from this habit of "fast" reading and engage in something Nietzsche called "slow reading," but which current literary critics usually call "close reading." And the first step of close reading is simple: S-L-O-W D-O-W-N. The types of passages that you'll be analyzing--whether they come from a short story, a poem, a play or a novel--will require your utmost attention. Don't just read to "get" the point, or see what happens next; instead, you want to read closely to begin to understand and appreciate what the passage is doing, and how it is doing it.

The first step in any close reading is to start with a general understanding of the text. To begin, you will have to know what the text is about—that is, what actions or events are being described, what moods or emotions are being evoked, and so forth. From this general understanding, you can develop a more sophisticated understanding based on your close reading. A close reading should augment and enhance that general understanding from which you began.

Remember that when you're being asked to perform a close reading, you are not just being asked to come up with a running commentary on the text; rather, you're being asked to create an argument or interpretation of the passage based on close attention to the particulars of the text.

As you develop your close reading, start with your general impressions: what sort of mood does the text evoke? How do you feel about it? What do you learn about the setting, the characters, or the speaker? Then, ask yourself HOW the passage elicited these responses, or provided this information to you.

Generally speaking, a close reading could focus on any or all of the following aspects of a passage:

- Vocabulary and diction
  - Is the language formal/colloquial, literal/figurative, denotative/connotative? Look up words you don't know, or which seem interesting. Why is one word being used and not another? What associations does that word have that might be significant?

- Characterization and point of view
  - Does the speaker or narrative have a limited or omniscient point of view? What do you learn about a character or the speaker from this passage? How does vocabulary and diction influence your understanding of the characters?

- Formal patterns
Are there repetitions within the passage—that is, repeated words, phrases, images, or symbols? Can you find anything in the passage repeated in the larger work? If so, why do you think it is being emphasized? Does the work contain instances of rhyme (including slant and eye rhymes), alliteration, consonance, or assonance? If it is poetry, is it written in a fixed or open verse form? Does it used end rhymes or enjambment? And if there are any patterns, are there any breaks in those patterns?

- Figurative language and symbols
  - Does the passage contain metaphors, similes, metonymy? Are there plants, animals, figures, or items, which might have larger connotations and further associations (for example, a dove is a symbol for peace, an ass is a beast of burden, and in some contexts a fish might be associated with Christ)?

Example – Close Reading

“The Dance” by William Carlos Williams

In Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess, the dancers go round, they go round and around, the squeal and the blare and the tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles tipping their bellies (round as the thick-sided glasses whose wash they impound) their hips and their bellies off balance to turn them. Kicking and rolling about the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those shanks must be sound to bear up under such rollicking measures, prance as they dance in Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess.

General understanding:

The speaker of the poem is describing a painting by the artist Brueghel, entitled the Kermess. The painting depicts a group of dancers, dancing.

Close reading:

You can start your close reading by picking up on the most obvious formal characteristics. The first formal characteristic that jumps out is the repetition in lines two and three: “round,” “round,” and “around.” These words are being used to describe the motion of the dancers—that is to say, those words describe the dance itself. The next formal characteristic that you might pick up on is the repeated first and last line. So, the last line is exactly like the first line—the poem has come full circle. And if the poem is a circle, that means that it’s going “round” and “around,” like the dancers.
This probably gives you enough to establish that the poem is shaped like the action of the dancers—in other words, the form of the poem matches its content. The next step would be to develop this comparison. Do other aspects of the poem’s form match its content? That is, what else about the poem is “round”?

Reading carefully through the poem again (you’ll have to do it several times to perform a thorough close reading), you’ll probably notice the other “ound” sounds in other words: “impound,” “Ground,” “sound,” for instance. So, the repetition of this sound—rhyme, consonance—emphasizes the significance of “roundness” in the poem.

Another formal characteristic seems relevant: **enjambment**. Enjambment means that the meaning of one line of verse flows over into the following line. If the lines were end-stopped, then your eyes would naturally halt at the end of each line. Due to the use of enjambment, your eyes keep moving. So, the enjambment reinforces the idea of continuous motion embodied in the dancers.

Finally, several of the things mentioned are round: bagpipes, bellies, hips, glasses, and so forth. Many of the nouns are round, then, and many of these nouns are emphasized through **alliteration** (as are musical instruments, which are clearly relevant to dancing). The brackets in lines 5-6 are themselves round: ().

Other characteristics might apply to this analysis, but so far we’ve already established that the form of the poem matches the content, through repetition (of words and lines), consonance, alliteration, and enjambment. This represents an argument about the text based on close attention to the particulars of the text, which is exactly what you’re being asked to do when you’re asked to perform a close reading.

Links:
Close Reading of a Literary Passage: [http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/reading_lit.html](http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/reading_lit.html)

Close Reading Exercise: [http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit.margaretpoem.html](http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit.margaretpoem.html)

Poetry: Close Reading: [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/poetry_close_reading.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/poetry_close_reading.html)
