

CLOSE READING OF A LITERARY PASSAGE

To do a close reading of literature, you choose a specific passage and analyze it in fine detail, as if with a magnifying glass. You then comment on points of style and on your reactions as a reader. Close reading is important because it is the building block for larger analysis. Your thoughts evolve not from someone else's truth about the reading, but from your own observations. The more closely you can observe, the more original and exact your ideas will be. To begin your close reading, ask yourself several specific questions about the passage. The following questions are not a formula, but a starting point for your own thoughts. When you arrive at some answers, you are ready to organize and write. You should organize your close reading like any other kind of essay, paragraph by paragraph, but you can arrange it any way you like.

I. First Impressions:

- ◆ What is the first thing you notice about the passage?
- ◆ What is the second thing?
- ◆ Do the two things you noticed complement each other? Or contradict each other?
- ◆ What mood does the passage create in you as a reader? Why?

II. Vocabulary and Diction:

- ◆ Which words do you notice first? Why did they stand out from the others?
- ◆ How do the important words relate to one another? Does a phrase here appear elsewhere in the story or poem?
- ◆ Do any words seem oddly used to you? Why? Is that a result of archaic language? Or deliberate weirdness?
- ◆ Do any words have double meanings? Triple meanings? What are all the possible ways to read it?
- ◆ Look up any unfamiliar words. For a pre-20th century text, look in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for possible outdated meanings. Look up very common words as well, since they often have several possible meanings.

III. Discerning Patterns:

- ◆ Does an image here remind you of an image elsewhere in the book?
- ◆ How does this pattern fit into the pattern of the book as a whole?
- ◆ How could this passage symbolize something in the entire work? Could this passage serve as a microcosm, a little picture, of what's taking place in the whole narrative or poem?
- ◆ What is the sentence rhythm like? Short and choppy? Long and flowing? Does it build on itself or stay at an even pace? How does that structure relate to the content?
- ◆ Look at the punctuation. Is there anything unusual about it? What about capitalization?
- ◆ Is there any repetition within the passage? What words are repeated? Why are they repeated?
- ◆ How many *types* of writing are in the passage? (e.g., narration, description, argument, dialogue, rhymed or alliterative poetry inserted into the prose passage, etc.)
- ◆ Can you identify paradoxes in the author's thought or subject?
- ◆ What is left out or silenced? What would you expect the author to say that the author seems to have avoided or ignored? What could the author have done differently—and what's the effect of the current choice?

IV. Point of View and Characterization:

- ◆ How does the passage make us react or think about any characters or events within the narrative?
- ◆ Are there colors, sounds, physical description that appeals to the senses? Does this imagery form a pattern? Why might the author have chosen that color, sound or physical description? Is it symbolic? Foreshadowing?
- ◆ Who speaks in the passage? To whom does he or she speak? Does the narrator have partial or omniscient viewpoint? How does that viewpoint help or hinder the reader's comprehension?

V. Symbolism, Schemes, Tropes:

- ◆ Are there metaphors, similes, figures of speech? What kinds? Why might the author have chosen them?
- ◆ Is there one controlling metaphor? If not, how many different metaphors are there, and in what order do they occur? How might that be significant? Consult the "Schemes and Tropes" section of the Course Packet or on the class website under "Rhetoric" and see if any of these rhetorical tools appear in the writing.

VI. Importance (the most vital part of the exercise):

- ◆ Why is it important for the reader to know what you have just analyzed and explained? How does the passage you have chosen help us understand the story, poem, or play more completely?