

# Close Reading

## Close reading, formalism, and New Criticism

**Close reading** involves paying careful attention to the details of a text: its diction, syntax, patterns of imagery and metaphor, and so forth. The practice of close reading has become central to most forms of literary criticism. (There are exceptions: for example, some critics study the production, circulation, and purchasing of literary works in ways that do not require close reading of the works themselves.) One can trace theories and applications of close readings from Classical philosophy to the present, but the practice took its place as the dominant mode of literary study in the twentieth century as a result of **New Criticism**. The New Critics, a group of mostly American critics in the early to middle twentieth century, reacted to the impressionistic, biographical, and often moralistic approaches of many earlier critics. Using a **formalist** approach to a text that sought links between the smallest details of a work and its broadest, even mythical aspects, the New Critics followed the poet Coleridge in thinking of the literary work as an organic whole—that is, as like a living thing with diverse parts but a recognizable order and identity. The New Critics therefore emphasized close reading as a way of discovering the tensions and paradoxes of a text in order to find their resolution into a coherent whole; this approach de-emphasizes contextual considerations and sometimes leads to the neglect of the parts of a text that trouble its coherence. Many later schools of criticism—deconstruction, feminist criticism, Marxist/Marxian criticism, and so forth—use close reading to other ends, often paying special attention to the fragments and disruptions that disturb the wholeness of literary works.

## How to do a close reading

There is no single approach to doing a close reading of a literary text or passage. (Google “close reading” to see a variety of approaches from professors at other colleges.) Here is a sketch of a method that you may find useful.

- ◆ **Choose a method of capturing information before you read.** You cannot do an effective close reading without recording your thoughts as you read. The easiest way to do this is probably to use a pencil to annotate your text. You may also find that a computer or some other note-taking technology works well for you, especially when you read a text (such as a library book) that you cannot mark with a pencil. *Do not use a highlighter for close reading.* Highlighting is too blunt an instrument for recording thoughts of any complexity.
- ◆ **Make sure you know the meanings of the text’s words.** If you do not know the meaning of a word, look it up. If you see a word you think you know used in a way that appears strange, use the *Oxford English Dictionary* (available through the databases section of the library’s website) to check its meanings. The *OED* gives chronologically arranged quotations for every definition, so it is a miraculously useful tool for discovering older meanings of English words.

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- ◆ **Identify the text's voice and implied audience.** Who is speaking to whom? Does the text invite you to question the authority of some speaker or speakers? What is the tone of the text or its speakers?
  - ◆ **Identify the text's genre and structure.** How does the author respond to the reader's expectations for a genre (as in a sonnet, a play, or a novel)? Once the reader recognizes the form of the text, how does the author use or alter that form?
  - ◆ **Looking for patterns, identify the text's imagery and metaphors.** Look especially for details that do not seem necessary to the simple plot or action of the text. How does the text evoke ideas and contexts other than those suggested by the text's literal action? Remember that part of the importance of seeking patterns is to be able to identify breaks with the patterns you find. The strange parts of a text are often the most interesting.
  - ◆ **Ask questions about the implications of what you have found.** At this point, your close reading could lead you to any number of approaches to the text. You may find, for example, that your attention to word choice leads you to a cultural analysis of a concept in the author's time. You may find that an author attaches a certain kind of image to a certain character, or female characters, or to Germany. You may find that the text's narrator plays with the reader's expectations about the work's genre in a way that leads you to conclusions about the reliability of the narrator. The key here is to move beyond gathering details to wondering what a given set of details tells you about the subtle meanings of a text.