

Adapted from 'EL1/SL1 Poetry Close Reading Exercise -Some Guidelines'

A close reading is not a description of a poem from beginning to end. **It is a view on a poem that sees it whole, and has an opinion about it.**

A close reading requires activity – interpretation – on the part of the reader. This activity can be thought of in terms of the **analysis, synthesis and interpretation of the poem's formal features** – these include the poem's shape on the page, language used, rhythm, metre, sound, tone, voice. The point, in the end, is to be able to **say how those formal features contribute to what the poem means and does** – how they not only help to create but also interact with themes, topics, personae and so on.

You might like to start by making a note of **anything that strikes you as surprising or significant**, or that raises questions. **Focus on particulars and specifics:** Who is speaking? Where and when is the poem located? What kind of language is being used? What allusions are made? What kind of punctuation is employed? You can then use this list as the basis for working out an account of the poem.

Don't state the obvious: anyone can spot that one word rhymes with another; close reading requires that you account for the **significance**, for example, of that word rhyming with that word, this word with this word. Other formal features or aspects should be treated in the same way. A main point of the exercise is to try to see how the discrete elements of the poem are in dialogue with each other.

A close reading will involve you **making an argument based on your observations**, and this will seek to persuade the reader rather than simply state and describe. In constructing your argument you will take your observations to the 'next level' by using them to ask questions about the text.

For instance, if you notice the recurrence of certain motifs or tendencies in the poem a first step would be to draw the reader's attention to its presence. Then use this observation to pose a question for further examination: **What are the implications of these representations?** What is the purpose in presenting matters in this way? There is no need to follow the order of the text in this; reorganise the text to suit your discussion of it.

In composing the essay **be particular about accounting for your interpretations with intimate reference to the text** – this usually means showing your reader in close detail how you see different parts of the poem working together. Include line numbers after every quotation and a Works Cited list, even if it consists of the single text you are working from.

Avoid cross-referencing or alluding to other poems, or focusing extensively on its historical or cultural contexts; the close reading exercise is too short to begin writing about similar poems, or using the poem under discussion as a window onto the era in which it was written. Avoid making general statements without backing them up.

In conclusion, remember that **close reading takes time**, even if the poem or extract you are handling is brief. **Spend as much time as you can reading and rereading the poem**, working to trace its logic, finding its moments of argument, drawing out associations, establishing rhythms, hearing for sounds. This will be invaluable in forming **your perspective on what the poem is doing, how it works, and will help in shaping your argument.**

Some things to think about when approaching the poem:

- **Metre, rhythm, rhyme:** how does metre work in the poem you're reading? How are units of meaning created by the line divisions? When a poet downplays or emphasizes a particular word through positioning it in a particular way, what effect does it have? How does the poet manage tone, pace and register with his or her use of rhyme and rhythm?
- What is the **structure** of the poem? Are there abrupt changes or a progression from one idea to another? Are there any symmetries or dialogue?
- Are there any **words** you don't understand? Look them up. Consider exactly why the poet might have chosen that particular word.
- **Grammatical features:** tenses, conditional constructions, the passive voice. Is the poem in the first, second or third person? Perhaps there are tense or person shifts; what effect do these produce?
- **Predominance:** are there several words that mean the same thing? Repeated adjectives or pronouns?
- **What kind of language is being used**, or what register is the poem written in? Common, elevated, earthy, legal, lyrical, rhetorical, religious? Why?
- Are there any **rhetorical features**? For example: metaphor and simile, hyperbole and litotes, personification, metonymy? (If you don't know what any of these are, look them up.)
- Look at **punctuation** (but remember this could be the intervention of a printer or a later editor). Look out for: enjambement, parentheses, direct speech. When the punctuation is sparse, why? Is it because there is a proliferation of conjunctions that resist punctuation like, for example, the word 'and.' This may indicate parataxis or a conversational style. *NB: For medieval texts this may be less relevant than the overall style/structure.*
- Are there any obvious, striking **allusions and references**, whether to works by other writers in English or to biblical or classical stories?
- **What is the tone of the poem?** Is it homiletic, comic, anxious, joyful, melancholy or ironic? How is this effect created?

Suggested Reading

Eagleton, Terry. *How to Read a Poem*. Blackwell, 2007

Fry, Stephen. *The Ode Less Travelled*. Hutchinson, 2005.