

Assignment 2 - Close Reading

For this assignment, you will write a close reading, about 500 words long, of one of the poems in the Week 1 Reading Packet.

Close reading—the careful, detailed analysis of a text—is an important part of both literary criticism and historical scholarship. For the literary critic, close reading is a way to show just how much is “going on” in even a brief passage from a great work of literature; this in turn can lead to a better appreciation of what is valuable and distinctive in a particular author or work. For the historian, close reading can help uncover crucial information, such as an author’s motivations or target audience. Close reading can also help the historian reconstruct the so-called “mentalities” that characterize a particular historical period—including habits of reading and writing, a central subject for our course. As we chart textual transmission this semester, close reading will give us a way to explore how the survival of a text over time is, at least potentially, a function not just of *what* a text says, but *how* it says what it says.

Here are some questions to answer before writing the assignment:

What is your poem about? What does it say, and what information does it convey? What are its main ideas or statements? Often, a poem has some kind of argument, however loosely structured; does yours? What is the evidence the poet provides for his or her argument? You might find it helpful to paraphrase the poem.

How is your poem structured? Assess the overall shape of the poem, including its main parts or constitutive units and their sequence. Most of the poems we have read are composed in *stanzas*, short groups of lines. How are these stanzas formed? Do the verses vary in length? Do they rhyme? How do the stanzas organize the themes of your poem? Be as specific as possible in describing the formal and thematic structure of your poem.

What imagery does the poet use? Make a list of the images in your poem. Why has the poet chosen to evoke these images and not others? What kind of effect do these images produce? Is there an associative logic to the sequence in which the images appear, or to the transitions between images?

What figures of speech does the poem use? You are probably already familiar with such important figures of speech as metaphor, analogy, and simile. There are many more such figures (for example: enjambment, paradox, allusion, synecdoche), most of them bearing Greek or Latin names, a legacy of the codification of these figures in ancient rhetoric. (If you’re a certain kind of person, you might enjoy browsing through [this](#) long list of rhetorical figures courtesy of Wikipedia.) Note down any figures of speech you recognize in your poem. **Repetition** of various kinds can also count as a figure of speech. Does your poem repeat any of its elements once or multiple times? What effect does this repetition produce?

How would you describe the poem’s diction (i.e., the poet’s choice of words)? You could begin by noting down any striking or unusual words or phrases that appear in your poem. What does the poet gain by using one of these unusual words or phrases, as opposed to a more common equivalent? Diction has what we sometimes refer to as different **registers**. We might speak of *elevated diction* in the case of a poet who uses

high-sounding terms that sound solemn or dignified or grave. But poets also sometimes choose to sound colloquial and informal, adopting a relaxed, casual, or even chatty tone. Which camp does your poem fall into? What are the characteristic words or turns of phrase that determine the register of the poem. (It's worth noting here that classical rhetoric, the art, in the ancient world, of teaching people to speak in public, had a set terminology for discriminating different levels of style, from the high style to the so-called *sermo humilis*, or humble way of speaking. The poets we are reading, including Shakespeare, would have been intimately familiar with this terminology, and very sensitive to shifts in register.)

What is the tone of your poem? When we speak of the tone of a poem, we are usually trying to talk about the emotion, attitude, or mood that a phrase or line conveys. When you can hear or see the person you are talking to, it's usually easy to tell whether they are being sarcastic or earnest, kind or cutting. But as living in an age of rapid communication by text and email has made familiar to all of us, written language is remarkably bad at conveying tone. Emojis and exclamation points try to work against the inherent tendency of written documents. Although it requires sensitivity to pick up on it, gifted poets, however, are remarkably good at imbuing written texts with tone, whether the effect is striking or subtle.

What are the meter and rhythm of your poem? The poets we have read (with the exception of Martial, who writes some of his epigrams in prose, some in verse) all write in **meter**: that is, language that is regularly patterned to conform to a predetermined rhythmic scheme. The **rhythm** of a poem, by contrast to its meter, is the way we naturally emphasize the words in the poem, if we forgot it was written in meter. The fit between **meter** and **rhythm** is (in a good poem) never perfect, and the tension between how we would naturally speak a line of verse and the metrical pattern we perceive behind it does much to generate subtle modifications of tone and emotion in poetry. It's beyond the purview of this class to deal with the metrical and rhythmic qualities of ancient Greek and Latin poetry, but it's important to be aware that the poems we have read are inherently *musical*. And a good translation will try to provide, in the target language, some rough equivalent to the music of the original poem.

Finally, what do these poetic techniques convey about the broader context and life of the poem? Who would have read the poem? What uses might the poem have had for the poet or its readers? Have your poem's techniques or uses helped it survive over time? By closely reading your poem, you should glean more information about its relevance to the themes of our course.

Once you've spent some time looking closely at your poem and considering the questions above, gather your observations together in a short, unified essay of about 500 words.