

Teaching Through Close Reading: Poetry and Fiction

An Online Professional Development Seminar

A throng of bearded men,
in sad-colored garments
and gray, steeple-
crowned hats, intermixed
with women, some
wearing hoods, and others

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AMERICA *in* CLASS[®]

from the National Humanities Center

- The Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and literacy in history and social studies seek “To help ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy”
- Through close reading foster deep and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts

GOAL

To demonstrate how to apply close reading techniques to fiction and poetry.

Challenges, Issues, Questions

- What is close reading?
- I would like to learn more about techniques for active reading so we may apply them to our programs and make them more effective.
- What are strategies to effectively break up long readings to maintain students focus and prevent intimidation?
- Most of my students are loathe to put their eyes to paper and when they do, they skim something once and, since text can be challenging, judge themselves deficient and say they can't understand the text and give up. I'd like to have more "tools" to use to encourage and support students in close, multiple readings.

Challenges, Issues, Questions

- I'm interested in learning about teaching students specific strategies for analyzing literature and other texts, without making students feel like they have to find a right answer. I'd like them to understand that they can appreciate and enjoy literature at its face value (plot, etc.), but that delving deeper can provide greater enjoyment and insight.
- This year I am focusing on teaching students to ask thoughtful questions about what they are reading, hearing, and seeing. We often start lessons with see - think - wonder activities, e.g. show students an image and ask them to write about "what do you see, what do you think about it, what do you wonder about it." I emphasize that I am looking for thoughtful answers rather than "right" answers.



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*Daughters of Time: Creating Women's
Voice in Southern Story*
1992

What is close reading?

When we do close reading, we go through a text carefully, examining and putting together all the striking elements of the text that produce its meanings. We trace patterns and make connections. As we read, we use as evidence the key, relevant language tools (we will list these below) that a text gives us in order to gain a clear understanding of the author's ideas and purposes.

NOTE

In many cases you will **not** be able to do a close reading of an entire text.

Select a **manageable excerpt** that illuminates key themes or other elements in the full text and that offers something you and your students can work with.

How to Select “Manageable Excerpt” When Teaching Fiction

- Begin with the end in mind. What understanding(s) do you want your students to take away from the unit/lesson/whole text?
- Identify an excerpt (or excerpts) that points the way to the broader understandings you want students to comprehend.
- Determine how much contextualizing information your students will need to make sense of the text/excerpt: author, publication date and location, purpose, historical context, etc.
- Determine how much defining, translating, annotating, etc. you will have to do to make the language of the excerpt intelligible to your students.
- Analyze the excerpt to frame the specific understanding you want students to take away from it. This “excerpt understanding” should align with the broader intellectual goals of the unit or lesson.
- Identify specific details in the passage that will lead students to the excerpt understanding.
- Frame close reading questions and strategies to focus analysis on those details.

The Instructor's Task

The instructor's task in teaching through close reading is to **analyze** a text (can be an excerpt) to frame an understanding of it and then to **translate** that analysis into close reading questions and strategies that lead students to discover the understanding. The process is guided by the overarching intellectual themes or goals of the unit or lesson.

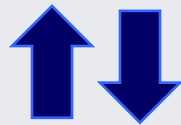
Teacher Analyzes Text



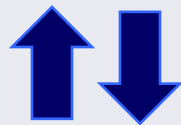
Begin where students begin. Dive into text.

Ask the same sort of questions you will ask the students.

Guided by unit/lesson themes or goals.



Teacher Frames Understanding



Teacher Develops Close Reading Strategies



Students Discover Understanding

- the connotative and denotative meanings of words
- the impact of words
- repetition of words and phrases
- figures of speech
- sentences and their structure
- paragraphs and their structure
- imagery
- logic of presentation or argument
- strategies of presentation or argument
- point of view
- multiple perspectives
- audience
- strategic silences
- the author's intent (to the extent we can discern it)
- historical context
- setting
- theme or central idea
- organization and arrangement of ideas
- tone
- inferences
- implications
- evidence

It is important to note that we will **NOT** focus on every element in our list in every text. For close reading each text will require its own distinctive set of sharply focused, fine-grained questions. Some examples:

Focusing on the word:

- What sensory impressions does the word _____ (or the phrase _____) provide?
- Does the word _____ convey both a literal and a more symbolic level?
- What connotations does the word _____ carry? Why are those connotations important in this text?
- Why does the writer repeat _____?
- How does the meaning/tone of the sentence/paragraph change if we substitute another word for _____?
- What does the writer suggest by her use of metaphor/simile/analogy?

Focusing on the sentence:

- How/why does the writer employ parallelism?
- What is the effect of the writer's use of sentences of varying lengths?
- How does the writer link one sentence to another?

Focusing on the paragraph:

- How does the writer link one paragraph to another?
- How does the writer develop the paragraph? (Example, compare/contrast, definition, etc.)
- What is the thesis of the paragraph?
- What information might we expect to get in this paragraph that we do not get?

Focusing on the whole:

- Citing specific information from the text, what is the author's attitude toward _____?
- What is the writer's point of view?
- What is the thesis of the piece?

NOTE

You need **NOT** focus on every element in our list in every text.

Each text will require its own distinctive set of questions, based upon what we want our students to get out of the text.

**Some Strategies:
From Text-Dependent Analysis
To Critical Insight**

Chapter 1, “The Prison-Door”

A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes.

Unit Goal/Theme

To explore the **tension** between the **rule of law and individual freedom**.

Understanding

In his opening sentence, through the use of heavily connotative and descriptive language, Hawthorne characterizes the society of Salem as grim, patriarchal, and oppressive and introduces a key theme of the novel by suggesting a **tension between freedom and authority in Salem**.

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Close Reading Strategies

Identify the words that catch the eye, that convey impressions to the senses, or that represent actions and movement.

Identify words that have similar connotations.

Identify words that set up oppositions.

Notice the sentence structure: what is the subject; where is the verb.

Notice the distance between them.

Note the two “color” verbs: the throng is “assembled” and the door is “timbered.”

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Close Reading Strategies

What does this scene, set before a prison, suggest about the place of law in Salem?

What kind of culture is being described?

What tensions might be inferred?

What are the larger implications for *The Scarlet Letter*?



Understanding

In his opening sentence, through the use of heavily connotative and descriptive language, Hawthorne characterizes the society of Salem as grim, patriarchal, and oppressive and introduces a key theme of the novel by suggesting a tension between freedom and authority in Salem.

Understanding

Their Eyes Were Watching God is not only a story about deep love between a man and a woman but also a story about how storytelling itself and the way it makes us who we are and gives our lives meaning. In the first paragraphs of chapter one Hurston trains her readers in how to be listeners to and readers of stories. She starts with an abstract riddle and uses poetic, ringing proclamative diction. From there, the succeeding paragraphs make several shifts: in speaker (voice), subject, diction, dialect, specificity, form (from description to dialogue), sentence style etc. (Teaching note: important to distinguish clearly between *diction*, *dialect*, and *dialogue*. All 3 are extremely important to Hurston and are often confused.)

Chapter One, paragraph 1

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.

Analysis

The diction is biblical, the speaker (3rd person omniscient) making a kind of proclamation. The speaker uses formal and abstract words, as “every man” (or later “men”), is described, with the word “Watcher” capitalized mysteriously.

Text-dependent questions?

Chapter One, paragraph 2

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.

Analysis

The diction etc. remain the same, but there is a key shift to the subject of “women,” with alternating emphasis on the words “remember” and “forget.”

Text-dependent questions?

Chapter One, paragraph 3

So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead. Not the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment.

Analysis

The level of specificity changes. There is now ONE woman and very graphic details about burying the dead. The diction is more lyrical, but less heightened, much more concrete and evocative.

Text-dependent questions?

Chapter One, paragraph 4

The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment.

Analysis

The diction of the 3rd person speaker becomes even more poetic and lyrical, with the use of personification (sun as “He”; another example?), hyperbole, and with sentence fragments heightening poetic effect.

Text-dependent questions?

Chapter One, paragraph 5

Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive, Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song.

Analysis

The speaker continues with similar diction, but the metaphors become heavily associated with speech, how words feel and are shaped (in paragraph 4, the people had been “tongueless”.) Poetic devices are used again, along with the analogy of thinking to eating.

Text-dependent questions?

Chapter One, paragraph 6

“What she doin’ coming back here in dem overhalls? Can’t she find no dress to put on?—Where’s dat blue satin dress she left here in?—Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her? — What dat ole forty year ole ’oman doin’ wid her hair swingin’ down her back lak some young gal? Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid?—Thought she was going to marry?—Where he left her?—What he done wid all her money?—Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain’t even got no hairs—why she don’t stay in her class?”

Analysis

Entirely in dialogue and dialect, using quoted snatches of conversation, from several different voices. and colloquial, informal diction. The paragraph is giving a concrete example of the kind of speech that was described in Paragraph 5.

Text-dependent questions?

Chapter One, paragraph 7

When she got to where they were she turned her face on the bander log and spoke. They scrambled a noisy “good evenin’” and left their mouths setting open and their ears full of hope. Her speech was pleasant enough, but she kept walking straight on to her gate. The porch couldn’t talk for looking.

Analysis

Returns to a more restrained, standard dialect 3rd person speaker. There is an important “gap” here, with Janie’s own words completely omitted.

Text-dependent questions?

WHAT soft, cherubic creatures

These gentlewomen are!
One would as soon assault a plush
Or violate a star.

Such dimity convictions,
A horror so refined
Of freckled human nature,
Of Deity ashamed,—

It's such a common glory,
A fisherman's degree!
Redemption, brittle lady,
Be so, ashamed of thee.

Understanding

The poem critiques Christian gentlewomen who want a refined religion that will not ask them to accept a Savior who became fully human in order to redeem them.

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- ① Make a list of striking words (images), and then group images into categories based on similar sense or meaning. Come up with labels for your categories (religious images, images associated with ladies or femininity or delicacy, images of violence. Are there are groupings of images that contrast with other groupings? Does the contrast set up a tension between different values or attitudes?

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- ② Think about the speaker of the poem. Who is the speaker talking about? What is the speaker's tone or attitude towards “these gentlewomen”? Where, in the poem does the speaker stop talking ABOUT these women and start talking TO someone. Who is the speaker talking TO finally. What word or words show you that someone is now being addressed specifically.

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- ③ In stanza 3, Who is “ashamed” of “Diety.” Note how the word “ashamed” is used again in the last stanza. Now who is ashamed of whom? What do you make of this shift of emphasis?
- ④ Is the speaker of the poem making a judgment? Of whom? On what basis does the speaker **MAKE** this judgment? What is his/her “evidence.”
- ⑤ As you look at images that have to do with Religion, what allusions help to pinpoint religion is being referenced?

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- ⑥ Does the poem seem to you to be about religion, or about the speaker's attitude towards “soft cherubic” women?
- ⑦ Mark where the speaker is employing any of these devices of tone: sarcasm, anger, surprise, accusation.

“Demeter’s Prayer to Hades” by Rita Dove

A Common Core Text Exemplar

This alone is what I wish for you: knowledge.
To understand each desire has an edge,
To know we are responsible for the lives
We change. No faith comes without cost,
No one believes without dying.
Now for the first time
I see clearly the trail you planted,
What ground opened to waste,
Though you dreamed a wealth
Of flowers.

There are no curses—only mirrors
Held up to the souls of gods and mortals.
And so I give up this fate, too.
Believe in yourself,
Go ahead—see where it gets you.

Understanding

In this poem a mother (Demeter) speaks to Hades, who has seduced her daughter Persephone. Although she offers a “prayer” instead of a “curse,” she still attacks him with knowledge of her grief and his transgression.

Pre-Teaching Considerations

How much about the myth of Demeter, Persephone, and Hades should the students know before they read the poem, in order to understand its references? The poem is from a collection called *Mother Love*. Is that important to know? The close reading strategy should focus on the nature of motherly love, on Demeter’s tone, and her attitude toward Hades.

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- ① Make a list of the words in the poem that relate to the myth of Demeter and Persephone. For each word, write something to explain its connection to the myth.
- ② Think about the word “Prayer.” In what sense does the poem seem to be or not to be a prayer, in any traditional sense?
- ③ Although Demeter deeply mourns Hades’s stealing her daughter, Demeter does not mention her daughter. Can you find places where she might be thinking about, and referring to Persephone and what has happened to her?

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- ④ What language helps to establish the tone of the speaker?
- ⑤ Demeter tells Hades she wants him to have “knowledge.” What specific pieces of knowledge does she impart to him. Note how parallel sentence structures help to highlight the knowledge she wants him to gain.
- ⑥ Demeter is telling Hades things that, from her point of view, he clearly doesn’t know. Does her information constitute a judgment?
- ⑦ Rewrite the line “each desire has an edge,” using synonyms that restate the meaning in a new way that keeps its substance.

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- ⑧ Why is Demeter offering Hades mirrors instead of curses?
- ⑨ What fate do you think Demeter is giving up, using only the previous words in the stanza to help you speculate?
- ⑩ What is the tone of the last two lines? How do these lines illuminate Demeter’s feelings about Hades?

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Understanding

Through an African American ritual song of naming, the poem enacts a process of self discovery. The poet affirms both an individual identity and a connection to the universal workings of time, place, and human history.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes

Stanza 1

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and
older than the flow of human blood in human
veins.

Is the speaker of the title the same person as the speaker in the poem? Or is there a shift from the title's speaker to the poem's speakers?

How would the poem be different if the title were, “A Negro Speaks of Rivers”?

How does the structure of this stanza replicate (imitate) the structure of a river, whose waters move while both retaining and expanding their content?

What makes the rivers different from what is “human”?

Note the rhythm of this stanza. Is it more like prose or more like a kind of song or chant?

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes

Stanza 2

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Mark how this single line stanza will be repeated as stanza five.

Mark the 3 key words of the stanza. What word in stanza one can be paired with “soul” in stanza 2. Is the “human” being “deepened”?

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes

Stanza 3

I bathed in the Euphrates when
dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it
lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the
pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi
when Abe Lincoln went down to
New Orleans, and I've seen its
muddy bosom turn all golden in
the sunset.

Note the parallel structures of each sentence in this stanza.

Think about the emphasis on the “I” that is repeated in each sentence, and connect this “I” to “The Negro” of the title.

What kind of sentences are these 4, grammatically. Does the rhythm change as we shift to this kind of sentence structure in this stanza? (Simple declarative sentences.)

Trace the geographical journey that a reader takes in following each of the named rivers, and consider the speaker’s choices, and also sequential arrangement, of these particular rivers.

Note how the naming of the 4th river in the 4th line expands the sentence structures that precede it. What is the effect of the mentioning of Abe Lincoln and his going downriver to New Orleans. Can you relate New Orleans to the pyramids in the earlier line?

The Mississippi river turns from what to what in texture/color. What might this transformation be signaling?

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes

Stanza 4

I've know rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

Note the repetition here, and also the introduction of one new word. What are the multiple possibilities for the meaning of this word? How does it connect the different elements of the poem: the speaker, the rivers, and the history that the rivers evoke?

Stanza 5

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

What is the effect of the repetition of this sentence, and its use as the concluding line of the poem? Repetition always highlights and emphasizes. What is the speaker emphasizing here?

“The Oven Bird” by Robert Frost

There is a singer everyone has heard,
Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.
He says the early petal-fall is past
When pear and cherry bloom went down in
 showers
On sunny days a moment overcast;
And comes that other fall we name the fall.
He says the highway dust is over all.
The bird would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

Pre-Teaching Analysis

This poem works through so many different language tools that you might consider breaking students into groups and having each group read for a different group of elements. We have used this model in dividing the questions into categories below.

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Read for Images.

What are the characteristics of an actual “ovenbird.” (They make a noise that sounds like “Teacher-teacher.”)

After making an image list, note the progression of images and how they change and/or contrast with one another—in terms of appearance, time, mood, association with human rather than natural life.

What is happening in the natural world?

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Read for Poetic Devices.

Note the number of lines. What sonnet line structure (4-4-4-2;8-6) is Frost using. How do the end-line rhymes break the poem into units that affect the progression of the poem?

Note rhythm, especially places where regular iambic rhythms are broken in order to emphasize a word, feeling, etc. (line 2, how the word “Loud” is made “loud”)

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Read for Diction, word-choice, mood, repetition of grammatical, syntactic structures.

Note the speakers use of “prosaic” words that have little specificity or striking, imagaic quality: everyone, all, other fall, other birds, thing;

Note the repetition of “He says.” What do you make of a “saying” instead of a “singing” bird?

Note the implication that the “bird” “almost” speaks in words. Do this and other cues suggest that the speaker (poet) is talking about himself, what he writes about, what he sees as his “subject” or concern?

Note the effect of the word “diminished” in the last line? How does it differ in diction from the other words in the poem? How does it work as a “key” to the poem’s meaning, whether the poem is about Nature, Time, or the Poet himself?

Final slide.

Thank you