

Art of Fiction
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ENGL 273G - 02

Close Reading Literary Detective Work

It is possible, in a poem or short story, to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things—a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone, a woman’s earring—with immense, even startling power. It is possible to write a line of seemingly innocuous dialogue and have it send a chill along the reader’s spine. – Raymond Carver (104)

What is a close reading?

A close reading investigates how the “precise language” of a text works to create meaning.

Why perform close readings?

Literature doesn’t tell you what it means in a straightforward way. It often raises more questions than it answers. It is often purposely complex or unclear. Why? Literature attempts to capture the complexity of the human experience—and human emotions, thoughts, dreams, and memories are far from straightforward. Crucially, *literature does not tell you exactly what it means and it does not tell you exactly what to think*. Literature is not a lecture, or a sermon, or a political speech, with a clear message or argument. But, that is exactly why we read literature—it gives us the freedom to think on our own. A close reading helps us to gain some insight into this complex meaning.

What do I get out of a close reading?

If you think about the process outlined above, the most obvious outcome of these steps is that *you interpret a piece of literature—you figure out what you think that literary text means*.

In a literature class, the act of interpreting a literary text is what it is all about! The ability to come to your own conclusions about a text’s meaning is the foundation for all sorts of activities: class discussions, class debates, class papers—all of which typically present an argument that a text emphasizes a key idea. The interpretation you create through close reading often becomes the thesis of a paper or presentation.

More generally, though, note the underlying skills that close reading develops. A close reader learns not only to become a better reader, but to notice patterns, to feel comfortable asking questions, to develop interpretations, to test his or her own ideas, and to make arguments. This process is *critical thinking* at its most sophisticated.

How can I perform a close reading?

1. *Read with an eye out for important details*

For example, take the opening sentence of James Joyce's short story *Araby*: "North Richmond Street, being blind, was a quiet street except at the hour when the Christian Brothers' School set the boys free."

2. *Ask questions as you read.*

The sentence above instantly raises questions: What does that mean—how can a street be blind? What are the boys being set free from? Where are we? Asking questions like these starts the close reading process.

3. *Slow down your reading. Re-read and re-read.*

Reading inquisitively, carefully, and multiple times reveals missed details (clues) and enhances understanding.

If we re-read that sentence from *Araby*, it starts to make sense. The street must be "blind" like a "blind alley" or a dead end; the boys must be being set free from their school, which is holding them in like a prison; the school is in a town with clearly-named streets and buildings.

4. *Collect clues.*

In literature, the clues are the interesting words and the interesting ways those words are positioned in a text—such as repetition or sentence placement. A close reading locates the words that seem to be signaling deeper meaning.

(And, don't shy away from weird, strange, unexpected, unclear, or complicated words—those might be the best clues. Just like a person's odd behavior might raise a detective's suspicions during a case, weird word behavior should be a clue to finding important meaning(s) in the text.)

By re-reading, we can start to "sense" or "feel" a text's meaning. For example, the second sentence of *Araby* is: "An uninhabited house of two storeys stood at the blind end, detached from its neighbors in a square ground." *Araby* is not describing a street filled with happiness; those words "uninhabited" and "detached" are creating a feeling of loneliness or uneasiness.

6. *Create predictions or hypotheses concerning possible meanings.*

The word "blind" is repeated in the first two sentences. Is a **pattern** being set up? In the story, maybe someone won't be seeing things clearly? With only two sentences to go on, we can **hypothesize** that *Araby* is going to explore loneliness or unhappiness, might feature a boy, and might be set in a city.

7. *Create an interpretation. Take a jump: what do you think the text means?*

Use evidence (read: quotes) and hypotheses to form an interpretation. This interpretation often forms part or all of the thesis of your close reading.

8. *Have Fun!*