Close Reading

Close reading is a technique of literary analysis that uses careful discussion of the language and structure of a text to make an argument about the text's meaning. Typically, close readings focus on symptomatic moments that reveal the text's structure or ideology (set of values), arguing for the status of such moments as representative of the workings of a particular aspect of the text as a whole. Close readings often trace patterns of imagery, symbol, or allusion throughout a text or portion of a text in order to illuminate how meaning is built up around particular terms, definitions, characters, rhetorical devices or images.

Choose a brief excerpt from today’s text and describe how the formal aspects of that excerpt reveal something about the text’s treatment of a specific theme. Remember that your excerpt should be brief (no more than about 50 lines, and the fewer the better). Because you will be examining the language, do your best to rely on the Old French, using the translation only as a resource to help you understand the language.

Your close reading presentation should include:

- A reading of the excerpt aloud.
- Brief introduction setting up the context of the excerpt: Where does this excerpt take place in the text? How does the individual excerpt relate to the main concerns or issues that arise in the text as a whole?
- An unexpected or interesting argument relating to what the excerpt reveals about the way a text deals with a theme: What aspects of the text would a casual reader miss without close, careful attention to the language and imagery?
- Direct quotations from the text bolster your argument.

Close reading is not a summary, nor is it a word-by-word explanation of the text. Instead, it is an analytical tool, a way to break down complex ideas and language so that the meaning of a text becomes clearer to you. The following questions may help you develop your interpretation of a literary text:

- What is the form of the text? Is it in prose or verse? If verse, what are the details of the versification? What is the rhyme scheme and syllable count? Why does this matter?
- What is the tone of the excerpt? How is the tone conveyed? How does the tone of the tone of the narrator or speaker impact the excerpt’s meaning?
- Whose point of view governs the excerpt? What do you see—and what is obscured—because of this point of view? What point(s) of view are left out or considered less important?
- Pay attention to the individual words in the excerpt. What kinds of adjectives, verbs, adverbs appear? How do they connect the excerpt to the text as a whole? How does language help build a sense of character, setting, and theme?
• Identify figurative language. Why might the author use a metaphor or simile? Where do literal and figurative uses of language collide?

• What kinds of images surface in the excerpt? Are certain images repeated? How does this image seem to function in the excerpt—is it evocative, symbolic, used to conjure a different picture of the world?

• How do details describing the setting or environment function in the excerpt? What does the setting say about the text’s characters, its themes?

• What facets of different characters/relationships surface in the excerpt? Does the excerpt reveal anything surprising or unexpected about the character or speaker?

• Above all: How does all of this evidence help you make the case that the excerpt acts as a microcosm of the text’s treatment of a larger theme or concern?

Your responses to these questions will help you construct your interpretation of the excerpt. Choose details from the text that support your argument, and let the text help you shape that argument. Above all, a close reading is a way to see the complexity and ambiguity of a text, not a way to find one single correct meaning.

Adapted from: Alex Beringer, "Close Reading," University of Michigan, 2009.