

Notes on Literary Analysis and Close Reading

One goal of this course is to help you learn the skills of literary analysis—that is, performing a **close reading**. We will perform close readings throughout the semester, and I'll attempt to model this kind of literary analysis in the lectures. You can review the links on our course site, and you can do a search on “close reading” to find detailed articles, but in general—and for the essays—I want you to understand the basic move of literary analysis as **a move between particular language in the text and broader ideas and contexts**.

Close reading is a way to engage with the literary text. We can break this into four broad steps:

- (1) Read the text carefully by taking notes, underlining, posing questions in the margin, etc. The immediate goal is to get a good grasp of how the poem works and what's important.
- (2) Re-read the text (or, if it's a longer work, the most important passages) with an eye to identifying patterns: repetitions of words or phrases; parallel events; connections; major themes.
- (3) Ask questions about the significance of the patterns you've identified.
- (4) Form interpretative conclusions based on your close reading. This would be the stage at which you could begin writing a paper. And, of course, you'll need to go back and re-read the text as you write the paper.

For examples, see the links on our course site, where the authors perform step-by-step close readings. Note how the authors move beyond a **SUMMARY** of the poems to **ANALYZE** the larger ideas that shape those poems. An effective literary analysis should **SHOW HOW** the poem works by explaining what's going on in specific passages and how those passages work together to form the work as a whole.

One way to think about literary analysis is identifying **patterns** in a text and in **moving from the particular language of the text to broader ideas (and vice versa)**.

We'll continue to learn and practice these skills throughout the semester. Please let me know if you have questions, and feel free to come talk to me in my office.