

Close Reading: A 6-Step Process

A close reading describes the careful, sustained interpretation of a brief passage of text. Such a reading places great emphasis on the particular over the general, paying close attention to individual words, syntax, and the order in which ideas unfold as they are read. A close reading attempts to link “key” words or phrases to the text as a whole – for instance, a close reading of a passage from chapter 1 may enlighten and further develop ideas which occur later in the text, such as the final chapter or paragraph.

Step 1: Choose a short passage, one that you believe may carry **significance to the work as a whole**. When choosing a passage, ask yourself: Does it have a tangible motif/image/symbol, etc. that is in the novel or play? and Can the motif/image/symbol etc. be broken down into smaller aspects?

Step 2: **Annotate** the passage—highlight, underline or circle “key” words or phrases.

Step 3: Look for **patterns and connections** in the things you’ve made note of. For instance, if the author is using a specific word numerous times, this may be a hint to uncovering something noteworthy.

Step 4: Ask questions about the patterns—especially **how** and **why**: Does this concept appear in other places of the text? What might these patterns mean? (Think of the connotations of words or the order of words.) **Are your questions going beyond plot by analyzing the author’s purpose?**

Step 5: Attempt to answer your own questions—look back at the text! Are you answering the how and why? Does your answer keep with the novel?

Step 6: Come to a conclusion. You want to formulate some sort of theory or argument about your chosen passage. Usually, this will look like a Thesis statement. (Be sure that your conclusion does not merely repeat your observation—this is where you move into analysis and authorial purpose.) Use the details of the text to prove your point. Integrate them smoothly into your analysis and commentary:

For example:

Macbeth Close Reading

In the first soliloquy of the second act, Macbeth is letting the greed for the position of king completely take over as his imagination shuts down his conscious being. He starts off with seeing the invisible “dagger... / [with] the handle towards my hand” (II.i.33-34). The simple thought of murdering another innocent person is causing him to see illusions and hallucinations. He even points out that “A dagger of the mind, a false creation” (38) and the conscious part of his mind, the area where it divides right from wrong, is currently trying to overcome the constant greed for higher power. Macbeth is experiencing an internal conflict where he knows that murdering King Duncan will always stain his hands yet the powerful lust for the position of king is weighing heavily in his mind. He is apparent that his mind is creating false items but the “heat-oppressed brain” (39) is causing him to become reliant on emotions. Macbeth continues to remark that “Mine eyes are made the fools o' the other senses / Or else worth all the rest” (44-45) and he’s trusting his only instinct, his drive for power, and his sensory of sight to guide him through the horrendous act. However, he is hesitant about killing King Duncan and is close to talking himself out of committing murder, when he comments, “Whiles I threat, he lives: / Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives” (56-57). The cold feet he is experiencing is slowly about to confirm his decision to forgo the murder when the signal from his wife, Lady Macbeth, rings in the silence of the night, the sound lurches him into action. All thoughts about the uneasiness of killing the king are gone once he hears the bell. Macbeth is absolute in his act when he returns, “I go, and it is done. The bell invites me. / Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell / That summons thee to heaven or to hell.” (59-61). The internal conflict that he was struggling with had resulted in the hunger for power conquering the righteous side of the mind. Macbeth was completely corrupted by the draw that the power had when he murdered King Duncan. This one act reveals that Macbeth’s righteousness side is completely gone, once the blood of the king stains his hands.