**On Close Reading**

Close reading is a humanistic form of empiricism. Its aim is to ground literary analysis in direct observation. It privileges textual evidence over theory and knowledge of a historical context, which is not to say that it works in opposition to theoretical or historical analysis. Close reading is inductive, in that it seeks to establish interpretations out of the minute particulars of a text. It may be thought of as a particular way of paying attention, of hearing what a text has to say. It requires us to concentrate on the voices we find in what we read, and, only after we have concentrated on listening, to put what we have found into dialogue with our own assumptions, values, and theories.

Because we spend so much of our time reading—newspapers, weblogs, novels, advertisements, instruction manuals—we may automatically apply our habitual reading style to our reading of literature. Reading literary texts closely, however, and poems in particular, requires us to read differently: more slowly, attentively, and repeatedly. A Shakespearean sonnet will not make much sense if you read it as you read a newspaper article.

Before thinking about the thematic elements of a poem, particularly a shorter poem, read it several times, so that its language and rhythms begin to inhabit your mind.

**Fifteen Ways of Looking at a Poem**

1. What is the significance of the title? Does it indicate a context or theme for the poem, or does it supplement or even destabilize the poem’s meaning?

2. Who is speaking? Does the narrator identify, or dramatize, his/her self? What can we figure out about the narrator from the poem? Is the narrator a persona, clearly differentiated from the poet? Where does the narrator stand in relation to the poem’s time and place?

3. Poems often require that we imagine a particular sensory experience, usually visual (this takes practice). How do images and other sensory details illustrate or extend a poem’s more abstract ideas?

4. Consider the poem’s form and organization. What are its parts? How do lines, rhymes, stanza breaks, and section breaks separate the poem into discrete units? How does the poem proceed? At which moments do you sense a change of direction or reversal?

5. Identify the poem’s metrical structure. Does it have a fairly constant meter (such as iambic or trochaic) and line length (such as pentameter), a regularized rhythmic structure, or is it written in free verse? How do the poem’s sonic qualities, its organization of sound including meter and rhyme, inform its meaning?

6. Consider a poem’s tone: its mood, atmosphere, or affect. Is it serious, playful, elegiac, ironic, nostalgic, sentimental, or something else? Which elements of the poem contribute to this tone?

7. Does the poem fit into a particular genre, either formal (such as the sonnet, sestina, haiku) or thematic (lyric, elegiac, pastoral, epic, epistle)? How does it adopt and how does it reform generic conventions.
8. Does the poem make use of any of the various forms of metaphor (conceit, symbol, simile, synecdoche, metonym, allegory)? What sort of descriptive or thematic work is accomplished by a given metaphor? Does the metaphorical realm tend to be natural, cultural, geographical, ideational, scientific? Conversely, what might an absence of metaphor, an emphasis on the concrete and literal, indicate?

9. Because we tend to organize information in terms of oppositions, it is often helpful to examine how the poem invokes, relies upon, and complicates particular dichotomies. For instance, it might be helpful to ask if and how the nature/culture binary informs a given poem. Other common dichotomies include: good/evil, female/male, country/city, leisure/labor, mind/matter.

10. Do you notice direct or indirect allusions to other literary works? If so, how might such intertextuality extend our understanding of the poem?

11. Consider your own sensory, emotional, and intellectual experience of a poem. Who is the poem’s “implied reader”? What does the poem seek to do to its readers: teach, lull, please, antagonize, or something else?

12. Examine the poem's temporalities. Does it look back, does it occupy a continuous present, does it envision the future, or does it put different temporalities into relation? Likewise, think about the poem’s place. Does it occupy a single place, or no place, or a variety of places? Does it imagine geographical movement, and/or does it compare places?

13. Questions of space and time are related to another way of inhabiting a poem, which is to ask, following J. Hillis Miller, what sort of singular universe a poem generates. In constituting a virtual world, does the poem simultaneously create an image of the world outside the poem? Does the poem thematize the relationship between literary and non-literate, imaginative and non-imaginative, verbal and nonverbal worlds?

14. How might the poem act as an ideological text, which seeks to justify or naturalize a particular view of social and economic relationships, of the natural world, of cultural norms? Does the poem/narrator identify with a particular group of people? Which aspects of human experience are validated, denigrated, or ignored altogether?

15. Each of these questions might lead you to ask about a poem’s historical context. Formal, thematic, and ideological aspects of a poem all reflect its historicity, its situatedness in a particular intellectual, political, economic, and aesthetic milieu.
Poetry Lexicon

**Alliteration** – the repetition of stressed, initial sounds of words, usually made by consonants. Example: She sang slow songs in the shower.

**Allusion** - a reference to something outside of the writing itself, such as classical mythology, popular culture, politics, history, other literature, etc.

**Apostrophe** – a poem that addresses an absent person, object, or place.

**Assonance** - same or similar vowel sounds in stressed syllables that end with different consonant sounds. Example: Lake and fate. Bows and down. (Contemporary poetry relies more on assonance than true rhymes like lake and fake.)

**Blank verse** - unrhymed ten-syllable lines (often iambic).

**Caesura** - a technique in which a strong phrasal pause falls within a line.

**Chiasmus** - (derived from the Greek term for the letter X) a sequence of two phrases or clauses which are parallel in syntax, but reverse the order of the corresponding words. So in this line from Pope, the verb first precedes, then follows the adverbial phrase: “Works without show, and without pomp presides.” Similarly, poets can choose to invert the order of an entire phrase, as Yeats does in these lines: “The years to come seemed wasted of breath,/A waste of breath the years behind.”

**Cliché** - an overused, timeworn expression which has lost its vitality, its freshness, and to some extent its meaning. Examples: Her eyes twinkled like the stars, he was mad as hell, or she worked like a dog.

**Couplet** – a pair of lines of poetry, traditionally rhymed. A *closed couplet* packages the image or idea in the two lines; in an *open couplet*, the second line runs into the beginning line of the next couplet.

**Connotation** – the cultural and emotional associations attached to a word or phrase.

**Consonance** - the final consonants in the stressed syllables agree, but the vowels that precede them differ, as in star and door or river and ever.

**Denotation** - the literal definition of a word, absent of larger associations.

**Diction** – the level of language used in a poem—formal, middle, or informal. Formal diction creates an impersonal, elevated tone (“Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night”); middle diction is what most contemporary poems are written in (“I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.”); informal diction uses slang/jargon (“We real cool/ we left school”).
Elegy – a poem of mourning, expressing the sadness of a death.

End-stopped line – a line of verse that ends according to the natural end of a sentence, clause, or other syntactic unit.

Enjambment – a line of verse that continues into the next line without grammatical break.

Epic – A very long narrative poem that describes the adventures of a hero, and, by extension, depicts the fate of a larger community or nation.

Extended metaphor - a metaphor that continues throughout a poem. Example: a family reunion could be described through the metaphor of a battle.

Foot - a rhythmical unit in poetry. A foot consists of one or more stressed (/) or unstressed (u) syllables. Common feet are (stressed syllables in italics):

- iamb (iambic) the tree
- trochee (trochaic) beat-en
- anapest (anapastic) up the road
- dactyl (dactylic) Bu-da-pest
- spondee (spondaic) built-in

A poem may also be described by the number of feet in a line, i.e. monometer (one foot), dimeter (two foot), trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter, hexameter, and so on. Scansion is the detailed analysis of the metrical patterns of lines and stanzas.

Free verse - a poem that experiments beyond the limits of meter, set forms, and rhyme schemes. Formal patterns are determined by the specific demands and exigencies of the poem itself, rather than imposed through a predetermined structure.

Image - a representation in words of the experiences of the senses, including sight, touch, taste, sound, and smell.

Line – the basic unit of composition in a poem.

Lyric – a type of poetry that tends to be brief, to express the personal feelings of a speaker, and to eschew more public concerns in favor of intimate, private expression.

Metaphor – (Greek: “transport” or “transference) when a word or expression that denotes one kind of thing in literal usage is applied, figuratively, to a distinctly different thing. Here is a metaphor from Stephen Spender, in which he describes the eye as it perceives the landscape:

Eye, gazelle, delicate wanderer,
Drinker of horizon’s fluid line.

A metaphor can be broken down into two distinct parts: the tenor and the vehicle. The tenor is subject of the metaphor (in Spender’s lines, the “eye”). The vehicle is the metaphorical term used to describe the subject (in Spender’s lines, the three words “gazelle,” “wanderer” and
In an *implicit metaphor*, the tenor is not specified, but implied. For example, if one were to say while discussing someone’s death, “That reed was too frail to survive the storm of its sorrows,” the situational and verbal context of the term “reed” indicates that it is the vehicle for an implicit tenor, a human being, while “storm” is the vehicle for an aspect of a specified tenor, “sorrows.”

**Meter** - rhythm that is structured into regular units of stress-pattern. Compositions written in meter are also known as *verse*. When we read verse, we attend to the individual line. The meter is determined by the pattern of stronger and weaker stresses on the syllables composing the words in the line; the stronger is called the “stressed” syllable and the weaker one the “unstressed” syllable. Three major factors determine where the stresses will fall in a line of verse: (1) Most important is the “word accent” in words of more than one syllable; in the noun “accent” itself, for example, the stress falls on the first syllable. (2) There are also many monosyllabic words in the language, and on which of these—in a sentence or phrase—the stress will fall depends on the grammatical function of the word (we normally put stronger stresses on nouns, adjectives, and verbs, for example, than on articles or prepositions). (3) Another determinant of perceived stress is the prevailing “metrical accent,” which is the beat that we have come to expect from conventional patterns in verse.

**Metonymy** - (Greek for “a change of name”) when the literal term for one thing is applied to another with which it has become closely associated because of a recurrent relationship in common experience. Thus “the crown” can be used to stand for a king and “Hollywood” for the film industry.

**Persona** - the mask or character adopted by the poet. This could be a real person in history, mythology, an imaginary character, etc. The poet speaks through that person's point of view. Therefore, just because a poem is written in the first person (“I”) we should not assume the “I” is the author; it could very well be a persona.

**Personification** - a figure in which either an inanimate object or an abstract concept is spoken of as though it were endowed with life or human attributes. A brief example from Keats’ “Ode to Autumn”: “…oh, the frosty cliffs/ Looked cold upon me.”

**Point of view** - indicates the perspective of the speaker (could be a persona of the poet, a character created by the poet, etc.)

**Prose poem** - a poem that is not written in lines, but appears in paragraph form.

**Quatrain** – a poem or stanza in four lines.

**Repetend** - the irregular repetition of a word or phrase throughout a poem to give a musical quality by repetition of sound.

**Rhythm** - a recognizable though varying pattern in the beat of the stresses, or accents, in any speech sound. In poetry, the stress-pattern can sometimes draw the reader’s attention toward (or away from) certain words in the line.

**Rhyme** - the repetition of the same or similar sounds (usually stressed) at regular intervals.
Simile - a comparison between two distinctly different things, explicitly indicated by the word “like” or “as.” A simple example is Robert Burns, “O my love’s like a red, red rose.”

Sonnet – A fourteen-line poem, often divided into two parts, the octave (eight lines) and the sestet (six lines). Traditionally written in iambic pentameter.

Stanza - In Italian, "stanza" means room; a stanza is to a poem what a room is to a house. It is a section of a poem, like a paragraph, and it often follows a set pattern. Usually, there's a line space between stanzas. Poets can combine several different kinds of stanzas in one poem.

Symbol - an image or action that stands for more than itself. There are both personal and universal symbols. Symbols that cross cultures and times, like harvest, sunrise, and the full moon, are called archetypes.

Synecdoche - (Greek for “taking together”) when a part of something is used to signify the whole. For instance, we use the term “ten hands” for ten workers and, in slang, “wheels” to stand for an automobile.

Synesthesia - the description of one kind of sensation in terms of another; color is attributed to sound, odor to color, sound to odor, and so on. We often speak of “bright sounds” or “sweet music”—and these are common forms of synesthesia. A complex literary example of this “sense transference” or “sense analogy” comes from Dylan Thomas: “The horse walks warm.”

Tercet – a stanza of three lines.