

How to Do a Close Reading

Introduction

Students are often understandably confused by exactly what it means to do a “close reading” (a term you’ll hear often in English courses). Fundamentally, “close reading” refers to the systematic analysis and interpretation of a text beyond its literal explanation.

In class discussions on close reading, a student may comment: “Where are you getting that?,” “I think you’re reading too much into it,” or “I don’t think the author intended it that way.” All of these are valid positions *only* if we take a text’s literal or surface meaning to be the limit of its possible meanings *and* assume that this is all that the author “intends” to convey. And, if we were to limit conversations about books to the horizons of any one individual’s vision or historical context, we would miss out on the joy and generative potential that reading brings! There would be little to enjoy in a piece of writing other than “a good story, well-told.” There would be no depth of meaning, no philosophical or historical resonance, no symbolic possibilities, no abstract thought or complex ideas, no creative or artistic vision, no portal for readerly engagement, and very little purpose to reading other than entertainment. The practical-minded may rightly wonder why literature is even part of our “compulsory” education.

To gather the full relevance, scope, and potential of a piece of literature, it is vital to push beyond the surface of the text—to plunge, pierce, question, and analyze it—and to allow our imagination to interact with that of the author and their work.

Below is an example and suggested method of textual analysis. This is not a comprehensive outline, but it should provide a basic understanding of the process that I am looking for. Feel free to adapt it to the needs of the particular text you are analyzing. I have highlighted terms and phrases that are particularly generative, though I don’t engage many of them for this short exercise.

Let us start with a passage from Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Chapter 23:

Some chapters back, one Bulkington was spoken of, a tall, new-landed mariner, encountered in New Bedford at the inn. When on that shivering winter’s night, the Pequod thrust her vindictive bows into the cold malicious waves, who should I see standing at her helm but Bulkington! I looked with sympathetic awe and fearfulness upon the man who, in mid-winter just landed from a four years’ dangerous voyage, could so unrestingly push off again for still another tempestuous term. The land seemed scorching to his feet. Wonderfulest things are ever the unmentionable; deep memories yield no epitaphs; this six-inch chapter is the stoneless grave of Bulkington. Let me only say that it fared with him as with the storm-tossed ship, that miserably drives along the leeward land. The port would fain give succor; the port is pitiful; in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that’s kind to our mortalities.

But in that gale, the port, the land, is that ship's **direst jeopardy**; she must fly all hospitality; one touch of land, though it but graze the keel, would **make her shudder** through and through. With all her **might** she **crowds** all sail off shore; in so doing, **fight**s 'gainst the very winds that fain would blow her homeward; seeks all the **lashed** sea's landlessness again; for **refuge's** sake **forlornly rushing into peril**; **her only friend her bitterest foe!**

Reading the passage for comprehension

1. Start by reviewing the literal events that take place in the passage. In this case, the passage is about a sailor who seeks refuge in his ocean voyages even though they may prove dangerous and difficult. The land seems to offer safety and all the comforts one could ask for, but Bulkington rejects it. Once aboard ship and caught in a storm, the land becomes more dangerous than the open sea. He has to fight to keep the ship away from the dangerous reefs and shallows that would wreck it.
2. Note the situation and attitude of the narrator or speaker: The narrator (the character Ishmael, who is also a sailor on the Pequod) seems both awed and terrified by the sight of Bulkington. He's impressed with the man's courage and persistence, but puzzled by his motives. Ishmael is attempting to convey his impression of Bulkington to the reader, but also seems to be trying to explain these motives to himself (Ishmael often meditates on questions that arise while he's watching events unfold.)
3. Note the passage's general point: The passage suggests the irony of the sailor's situation (that the safety of land has become the greatest peril to the ship), but also reveals something about the character of Bulkington (and perhaps of all sailors). For some reason, he seems to prefer the dangers of the sea to the security of land.

*****We could stop here but would have accomplished not much more than a basic, literal reading of the passage. Now we have to start asking questions!*****

Questioning the Passage for Deeper Revelations

1. What is revealed about the narrator in this passage?: He's clearly not the same kind of sailor as Bulkington, else he wouldn't wonder so deeply about Bulkington's character (in fact, Ishmael has only sailed on merchant vessels before, never a whaling ship). He is fascinated not only by people's actions, but by the underlying motives and feelings that drive them. He possesses an active, metaphoric imagination (see "Analyzing the Language" below).
2. What is revealed about other characters in this passage?: The only other character mentioned is Bulkington, and we learn that he's not comfortable on land ("The land seemed scorching his feet.") Why? What's on the land that he dislikes? What does he like about the sea? We also learn that he dies—"this six-inch chapter is the

stoneless grave of Bulkington--and that the ship goes down as well. Let me only say that it fared with him as with the storm-tossed ship."

3. What, beyond the scope of the literal, might the author be talking about?: He seems to be trying to explain the deep-seated motives that drive certain men to the ocean (or to danger in general?). He may be trying to show why the sea compels such men, or why one might want to abandon the land and all of its security. Finally, he's revealing the strange reversals of meaning that take place when you're "aboard ship"—"home" becomes a "peril," "hospitality" is something you "flee," a "friend" becomes your "bitterest foe."

Analyzing the Language

1. Take note of the author's use of language and figures of speech; I've underlined some examples in the passage above. Notice how the author uses personification—the winter "shivers," the bows of the ship are "vindictive," the waves are "malicious," the ship travels "miserably" and "forlornly," the port is "pitiful" and wants to "give succor"—to give us a sense of the scene's emotional tonality. Are these the feelings of inanimate objects, or of the characters and narrator? Why are they being projected? Are these associations that the narrator has, or feelings that we are supposed to share as readers? Perhaps both?

2. Look at how the author employs adjectives and descriptive phrases: He uses the word "unrestingly" to describe Bulkington, a synonym for "restless." Is this why Bulkington wants to be aboard a ship—because it moves? Why is he restless? Is there a specific reason, or is it a state of being (just for sailors, or for all men)? The narrator uses the word "sympathetic" to describe his "awe and fearfulness." Does "sympathetic" mean that he understands those feelings and has pity, or that he shares them? If he shares them, then why is he questioning them? Perhaps he is trying to explain his own motives by examining those of another?

3. Note the types of pronouns used, and what they refer to: Here, the ship is referred to as a "she," even though it's being used to describe a man's situation and attitude. "She" shrinks from the "touch of land"—is the land suggested as masculine? Are gender dynamics and stereotypes at play? Why?

4. Identify the central metaphors and symbolism. The central metaphor here seems to be the comparison of Bulkington to the ship. Their identities seem to merge, and the feelings of one are ascribed to the other. The ship in the gale becomes the embodiment of Bulkington's own relationship to the land. We might even see the storm itself as symbolic of Bulkington's "tempestuous" existence. He abandons the land and what it represents, goes out into a hostile sea, and apparently dies there. The Pequod itself seems to enact the same story. Why is the ship/Bulkington "vindictive," and why is the

ocean “malicious?” If they’re hostile to one another, then why does Bulkington seek it out and give up the comforts of home?

Drawing Connections to Other Passages in the Book

(This exercise requires reading the book, but I will offer two examples here)

1. In the first pages of the novel, Ishmael describes his own “restlessness” and desire to go to sea. One might compare that passage to the one shared here to attain a deeper sense of the two men’s underlying motives. Common to both is a sense of the discomfort engendered by human society (which exists on land), the need to move and wander, the flight from unpleasant experiences, and the unnamable desire to seek out mystery and “depth”—“Wonderfullest things are ever the unmentionable.” The land, however, bears its own attractions that threaten to destroy the person caught between both places.
2. As we learn throughout the novel, The Pequod is inevitably linked to its captain, Ahab. The ship’s “vindictiveness” and the sea’s “maliciousness” parallel the relationship between Ahab and the white whale. A famous and important chapter called “The Whiteness of the Whale” explains some of Ahab’s (and Ishmael’s) obsession with the creature.

Interpret the passage:

1. Now that you’ve taken apart the elements of the passage and compared it with others, you should be ready to offer a creative interpretation. Here is one possibility drawn from the evidence that we’ve gathered:

The image of Bulkington and his battle with the sea is meant to draw a connection between the motives that compel all sailors (including Ishmael) to seek out the danger, mystery, or solitude of the ocean and Ahab’s singular hunt for the white whale. This passage seems to look backward at Ishmael’s explanation of the sea’s unnamable and unquantifiable mystique and attraction and forward to the voyage’s ultimate fate. It reveals both the impulses shared between Ahab and his crew and the uniquely obsessive nature of his personal quest. Like the narrator, as revealed in this passage, Ahab personifies his fears and desires through gesturing toward the natural world and regards the whale as the embodiment of all that seeks to possess or destroy. Bulkington’s story is not important in itself (indeed, we never see or hear about him again). Rather, it serves as a synthesis and encapsulation of the novel’s larger themes, thus rendering this passage a compelling site of inquiry and exploration...and, you guessed it, ripe for a close reading!