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Reading and Analyzing -some suggestions

What is “close reading”?

Close reading is a process or combination of techniques that focuses on language and language construction to draw conclusions about meanings of texts. Close reading provides the basis for any sound analysis or interpretation of a text.

Reading poetry:

Personally, I have to read the poem many times, and the first few times I read the poem, I read it aloud. These first readings give me an overall sense of the poem—its main themes and the speaker’s mood. Once I have an idea about the poem’s main themes and speaker’s mood, I then do a “close reading.”

Close Reading Techniques:

Rhythm

- Requires knowledge of “scansion,” that is, the ability to identify which syllables are stressed and which syllables are unstressed. Obviously reading aloud helps you identify the stressed and unstressed syllables.
- After you have “scanned” the poem, ask:
 - Which words or syllables are more stressed than others? Why is the effect of having these words stressed?
 - How does the overall rhythm relate to the ideas/themes in the poem? For example, if the poem is about the passage of time and uses the metaphor of a clock ticking, does the overall rhythm of the poem sound like a clock ticking? In other words, does the rhythm echo a sound that poem’s words suggest?
 - Where does the line NOT follow the standard iambic pentameter line? Why might the line deviate from the standard form?

Rhyme:

- Masculine: final sound rhymes and is stressed
- Feminine: final sound rhymes and is unstressed
- Slant: final sound is close to a ‘true’ rhyme; for example “cost” and “ghost”
- End rhyme: final syllable(s) rhyme
- Internal rhyme: words within the line rhyme (not widely used in lyrical poetry)
 - Ask: how do these kinds of rhymes contribute to the overall meaning of the poem? For example, why choose masculine rhyme over feminine rhyme, or slant rhyme?

Syntax

- How does word order affect the poem’s meaning?
- How does a break (usually a “break” is done through punctuation, like a comma, period, colon or semi-colon, but it could also be done without these things by using a grammatical structure that naturally “breaks”)

- End-stopped (a break at the end of a line) v. enjambment (a break somewhere in the middle of the line)

Literary devices (these are but a few—there are many more!):

- Alliteration
- Speaker: the speaker of the poem is NOT the poet (well, usually). The speaker is a persona the poet takes on
- Personification
- Metaphor/Simile
- Hyperbole
 - Ask: why is the effect of using a particular metaphor/simile, etc.? How does that contribute to an overall understanding of the poem?

Word choice

- Why is a particular word used—what meaning comes from the choice of a particular word? For example, in Shakespeare’s sonnet 20 (“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”), why is the comparison to summer rather than say, winter, or autumn? Why a day, and not morning or night?
- Check the verbs—verbs provide all kinds of clues for supportable interpretations of the poems

Essentially, the above things—rhythm, rhyme, syntax, literary devices and word choice—provide a variety of tools that allow one to “close read.” You do not need to use all of them for any given poem, but rather choose ones that are most appropriate to the poem you are reading. These techniques do allow you to analyze the poem and come to a conclusion about the poem without making gross generalizations. Some of these techniques also work well with reading prose.