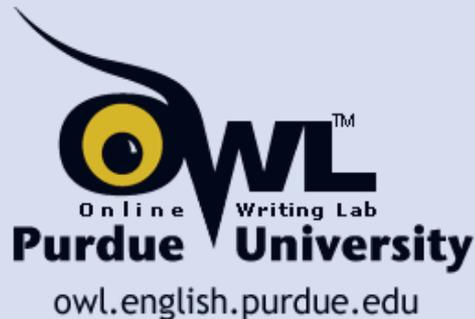# Close-Reading Poetry: An Overview

What is a Close Reading?

A close reading is the careful, sustained analysis of any text that focuses on significant details or patterns and that typically examines some aspect of the text's form, craft, meanings, etc.

Close Reading: The Goal

Overall, the goals of performing a close reading are to…

- Learn about language and rhetorical technique

- Gain a deeper understanding of a text

- Explore a specific theme or pattern within a text

- Understand how writers craft their work

Tips for Reading Poems

When you first approach a poem:

- Read the poem slowly

- Read it at *least* twice

- Read it aloud to yourself

- Annotate important words, images, phrases, and sections

Tips for Reading Poems

If you're struggling with a poem, also try the following:

- Examine your beliefs about what poetry should be or do

- Rewrite the poem as a prose paragraph

- Read with your gut *and* your brain
  - Not all poems are logical and/or narrative

Close Reading: Step 1

Understand the **poet's project**:

- What subject(s) does the poem address?
- Who is the speaker of the poem?
- What is the poem's larger context?
- What genre or mode of poem are you dealing with?

Common Poetic Modes

Lyric ⟶ associative, vivid language

Narrative ⟶ tells a story

Dramatic Lyric ⟶ lyric + narrative elements

Elegy ⟶ laments or remembers

Ars Poetica ⟶ explores writing as a subject

Mode can affect our expectations of a poem and the conventions the poet employs (or alters).

Close Reading: Step 2

Examine the poem's **form and structure:**

- Use of closed or nonce form
- Stanzaic make-up
- Devices like repetition, punctuation, or section divisions
- Use of negative vs. positive space

How is the poem put together?

Closed Form

These forms have set rules for the poet to follow:

Sonnets

14 lines

Iambic pentameter

Rhyme scheme:
ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, GG

Final heroic couplet

Villanelles

5 tercets + 1 quatrain
(19 lines total)

Rhyme scheme:
ABAx5, ABAAx1

Closed Form

Not sure if the poet used a closed form?

Look for these tell-tale **clues**:

- Number of lines and/or stanzas

- Patterns of repetition or regularity

- A rhyme scheme

- Rhythmic or syllabic patterns (meter)

Nonce Form

Nonce form refers to any new form a poet creates for a particular poem.

Nonce forms:

• Operate by "rules" the poet creates herself

• May seem more irregular at first glance

• Can sometimes be highly organic

What does form contribute to content?

Stanzaic Structure

Stanzaic structures can carry connotations:

Couplets (2) = balance, movement

Tercets (3) = imbalance, religious references

Quatrains (4) = balance, stability

Stanza means *room* in Italian. Think of each stanza as a room in the house of the poem

More Structural Devices

Repetition

- Does the poet use anaphora or refrain?

- Is there a repeated word or image?

- Are there words/ideas that echo each other?
  - *Example*: night, black, dark

Punctuation

- Does the poet favor dashes, semi-solons, etc.?

- Is there a lack of punctuation?

Positive vs. Negative Space

Both positive space (the text) and negative space (or white space) make meaning in a poem.

White space can:

- Emphasize a word or phrase

- Give the reader room to pause

- Facilitate movement between ideas

Close Reading: Step 3

Look more closely at **line** within the poem:

- Meter or rhythm within line
- Line length and variation
- Line break (white space)
- Enjambed vs. end-stopped lines

Elements of line can be dictated by form.

Analyzing Line

What to notice:

- Meter might indicate a closed form

- Line breaks influence flow and speed
    - End-stopped lines slow our reading down
    - Shorter lines move more quickly

Look for places where form and line *change*.

Close Reading: Step 4

Look closely at the **language** the poet uses:

- What kind of diction does the poet use?
- What is the tone/mood of the poem?
- Which images stand out and why?
- Does the poet use figurative language?

Analyzing Language

Notice the poet's **diction**:

- Is it Latinate (multi-syllabic)?

- Is it colloquial?

- Is it formal or elaborate?

Diction affects *tone:*

Example: emerald vs. snot vs. celery

Analyzing Language

Tone affects the *mood* of a poem. Compare the following lines:

She walked out into the black, yawning night.

She walked through the warm, glittering night.

Analyzing Language

An image can work as an important nexus of <u>emotion and idea</u> in a poem.

- What is the tone of the image?
- Does the poet use metaphor to alter the image or layer on other associations?
- What does the image embody?

Final Advice

The job of the poet is to "make it new."

- Does the poet combine unexpected elements, like form and subject?

- Does s/he employ an unusual perspective?

- How does the poet's language make something new or surprising?

Close Reading: Step 5

Make a claim about how the poem works or what the poet is doing (your *thesis*).

- What is the *overall* effect of the poem's craft of all the poem's craft elements?

- Where does the poem take us (emotionally, intellectually, narratively, etc.)?

More Helpful Resources

Call the Purdue Writing Lab Grammar Hotline:
765-494-3723

Look for these other resources on the Purdue OWL,
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl:

- "Writing About Poetry"
- "Poetry: Close Reading"
- "Image in Poetry"

For even more help, see www.poets.org for samples of
close readings.

The End

Online Writing Lab
Purdue University
owl.english.purdue.edu