

THE ART OF CLOSE READING

“To see the World in a Grain of Sand”

By Lawrence Ypil

Introduction:

The art of close reading is the art of looking at a specific aspect of a thing in order to get a better sense of the whole. It is an art that believes that one of the best ways to get to know something (a painting, a piece of text), even someone (a stranger, a friend) is by looking at the details: the sound of a voice, the angle with which a hand holds a cup puts it down, the color of a shirt, the way it is tucked, all reveal some aspect we did not know of before looking.

We can only perceive part of the world. And the art of close reading honors that limitations: the limits of human perception. We can only live in the moment. Our eyes can only see one thing at a time but if only we look closeley and deeply, then much is revealed.

This handout aims to lead you through the process of close reading. It is designed to allow you to identify and explore potentially rich parts of the text on which you are doing a close reading. A certain time limit is suggested for each of the steps. Time limits are good. They help us focus. IF this is the first time you're trying this out, stick to the time. Otherwise, all you need for this activity is a pen and paper. Also feel free to write anything that comes to your mind. Don't censor yourself. Ideas come from the most surprising places. Let's begin.

1. General Impression:

Think of the text that you are writing about and list down everything that you know about the text so far. List down words, phrases, ideas, and parts of the book which stand out to you. These may be ideas that you've discussed in your seminars or sections which you remember starkly. **(3 minutes)**

2. Moment of Friction:

When we are reading books, there are always moments which stand out from the rest. They fascinate us. They bother us. For one reason or another, we remember them and even if it isn't quite clear to us yet, they seem to embody an important aspect of the text. Let's call this a moment of friction, a piece of sand, if you will, that is integral to the making of a pearl in a shell. It is something which scratches against our otherwise smooth flow of reading. It may be the fact that the protagonist does not have a son. Or that the trees of the forest that our hero enters are described in a particular manner. No details are trivial. Follow the impulse of your reader's instinct. Choose a moment of friction and free write about it. *What happens in that moment? What about it stands out for you?* **(5 mins)**.

3. Identifying a quote and paraphrasing it:

Locate that moment of friction in your text and choose relevant passages from it. If you are writing about a piece of prose, this may be a section of the scene. If you are writing about poetry, this may be a group of stanzas. Write down the passages by hand. (Copying a quote by hand is an important way of getting to know a text. It's one way of literally letting a text embody you. You are also encouraged to say it out loud.)

After writing this quote down, *paraphrase* this quote in your own words. Use a language you would most naturally write or speak in. Keep it simple. Imagine that you are translating this quote to a friend. **(7 mins)**

4. Comparing original and paraphrase :

Compare the original text and your paraphrase of it. Ask yourself: *What has been lost in the translation? What words/phrase are really important in the original that you wished you had retained? Why is it necessary to return to the original?* Look at word choice and sentence structure. Perhaps the repetition of a phrase which you realize is significant. Underline the important phrases. Ask: *Why are these phrases / style important to retain?* (7 mins)

What is vital to a text is sometimes lost in translation. Notice how much of a poem is diminished by a paraphrase that reduces it to its meaning--- the rhythm of the lines, the sequence of the words, the choice of metaphor. These qualities may also be important even in a work of prose.

5. Sharing with a partner:

At this point, if you are working with other people, pair up and share your answers. Being made to explain our discoveries, verbalize our ideas, often leads us to discover new directions in which to take our arguments and observations. (10 mins --- 2.5 minutes each person)

6. From Local to Global

Finally, return to your chosen passage and think about how this passage is important in relation to the rest of the book as a whole. Ask: *How is this quote related to the bigger themes you have discussed in class?* (Gender, for example. Or relations of power or hierarchy, or representation of nature and landscape.) *How do these passages shed light on a sometimes neglected concern of the book, ideas that you have not discussed in class yet?* Extra challenge questions: *How does the quote go against or counter to the general themes of the book?* (Perhaps the female character isn't as feminist as you thought she was initially? Perhaps the protagonist and the villain or two versions of the same problem and not entirely opposite. *Does the quote subvert certain assumptions you have been making about the text?* (10 mins)

Final note: The process of close reading is something that bears its fruits the more you practice it. It is also a skill that will be useful in many of your academic papers throughout your stay here in Yale-NUS: whether it's looking at the character of a novel, observing a science experiment, doing field work and thinking about the environment.