

Close Reading

Close Reading – An Overview

- ▶ Literary Analysis requires that one read the text by looking closely at **both** what the author is saying and how the author is saying it.
- ▶ When conducting a close reading, readers should look at the small details **and understand how they work together in the piece to create meaning.**



Part 1

How to Tackle the Ever-Daunting
Task of Close Reading

1. Get the basics, then dig deeper

- ▶ Before you look too closely at what you've marked, make sure you understand the basics of the passage such as speaker, setting, characters..
- ▶ Try paraphrasing passages you don't understand.
- ▶ Look for associations you make with words. **THINK OUTSIDE OF THE TEXT.**
- ▶ Example:
 - An angel is normally associated with cleanliness and purity.
 - Passages that emphasize dirtiness might be important.

How to Read Closely

2. Annotate

- ▶ When reading, look at passages that seem important in the text.
- ▶ Underline, highlight, or take notes on passages that stand out.
- ▶ Things you might look for:
 - Purpose and HOW the writer achieves it.
 - Speaker: background, reliability, biases, POV
 - Audience: background, economic level, biases, beliefs, fears, age, and culture
 - Evidence: statistics, anecdotes, expert testimony, quotes, examples, reasons, or definitions.

How to Read Closely

2. Annotate

- ▶ When reading, look at passages that seem important in the text.
- ▶ Underline, highlight, or take notes on passages that stand out.
- ▶ Things you might look for:
 - Symbolism
 - Repeated images, words or ideas
 - Words or phrases that jump out as important
 - Words or phrases that can be interpreted in more than one way
 - Irony or ambiguity
 - Passages you don't understand
 - Figurative language

3. Look up!

- ▶ **Look up the meanings of words!**
- ▶ There may be a meaning that you didn't think of before, or a word that may have had different meanings at different times in history.
- ▶ A good resource for looking up words is the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED).
 - The OED provides definitions of words relevant to specific time periods.

4. Re-read

- ▶ Re-read passages you did not understand the first time.
- ▶ Never ignore anything that you don't understand.
- ▶ Keep working at difficult passages until they make sense.



Now what?

▶ After reading and making note of important passages, try to find a unifying idea.

▶ First, ask what the elements seem to be saying.

Any idea supported by the text is valid. **There are no “crazy” or “stupid” ideas, unless there is no evidence from the text to support the claim.**

▶ Don't try to relate everything you found in the story. Use the parts that create one unifying idea.

- However, don't ignore anything that contradicts this unifying idea. Remember to present and discuss any contradicting evidence you find.

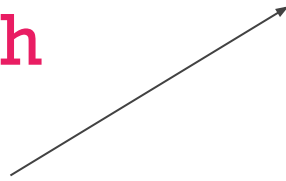
Utilizing Quotes

- ▶ Use everything from the text that works for your idea.
- ▶ Also, quote from the text.
 - Show what details you found, and tell why they are important.
- ▶ Quotes support your argument, and you need to support every idea with evidence from the text.
- ▶ **If there is no evidence, there is no argument.**

Remember:

- ▶ Annotating is not simply highlighting, circling, and underlining.
- ▶ Annotating is having a conversation with the text. As you highlight, circle, and underline,

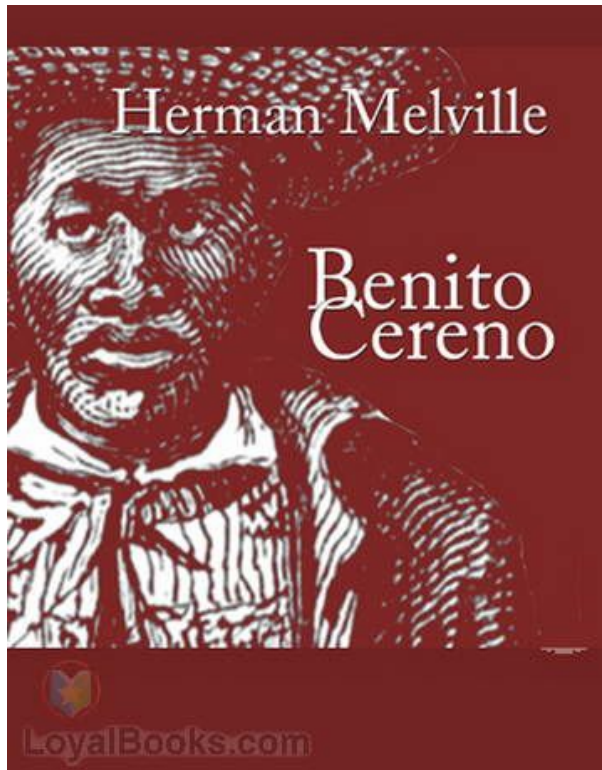
YOU MUST WRITE IN THE MARGINS WHY YOU DID THAT (WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?)!



Part 2

Close Reading: Fiction

Excerpt from Herman Melville's
"Benito Cereno"



“Benito Cereno” by Herman Melville

The morning was one peculiar to that coast. Everything was mute and calm; everything gray. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter's mould. The sky seemed a gray surtout. Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come.

Melville, Herman. “Benito Cereno.” *Nation of Letter: A Concise Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Stephen Cushman and Paul Newlin. Vol. 1. St. James: Brandywine P, 1998. 278-315.

Sentence 1

The morning was one peculiar to that coast.

- ▶ Morning - ideas of a new day or beginning, light, sunrise
- ▶ Peculiar - means distinct, characterizes a person place or thing, also the idea of different
- ▶ Coast - near the sea, establishes setting

Sentence 2

Everything was mute and calm; everything gray.

- ▶ Mute - silent
- ▶ Calm - tranquil, peaceful, quiet, everything is quiet and gray
- ▶ Gray - color between black and white, dull, the cold of light at twilight, not bright or hopeful, dismal, gloomy, sad, depressing, cold and sunless

Sentence 3

The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed, and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter's mould.

- ▶ Undulated - wavy markings, forming a waved surface
- ▶ Roods - one meaning is a cross or a representation of a cross, another is a unit of linear measurement,
- ▶ Swells - rising or heaving of the sea/water in succession of long rolling waves, as after a wind causing it has dropped, or due to a distant disturbance
- ▶ Fixed - fastened securely, firmly resolved, stationary
- ▶ Lead - gray, heavy metal
- ▶ Smelter - one who fuses metal—
- ▶ Here there is a Paradox - the sea is moving, has swells and undulated waves, yet it seems fixed, sleeked at the surface, and like lead
- ▶ There is also a simile - the water is like lead

Sentence 4

The sky seemed a gray surtout.

- ▶ The color GRAY has become a dominant theme by this point.
 - May be important in the work—take note of the color, perhaps;
- ▶ Surtout - a man's great-coat or overcoat; a hood worn by women; outer covering
 - (We know from the OED that the word is obsolete now.)

Sentence 5 (Part 1)

Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms.

- ▶ Kith and Kin - country and kinsfolk, relatives, family
- ▶ Vapors - matter in the form of a steamy or imperceptible exhalation, exhalation of nature of steam, usually due to the effect of heat on moisture; used figuratively to mean something insubstantial or worthless, sometimes to mean a fantastic idea, foolish brag or boast
- ▶ Skim - to deal with, treat, or study very lightly without close attention, move over something with very slight contact, glance over without reading closely, pass over lightly without dwelling on or treating fully

Sentence 5 (Part 2)

Flights of troubled gray fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled gray vapors among which they were mixed, skimmed low and fitfully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms.

- ▶ Storm - violent disturbance of affairs, whether civil, political, social, or domestic, commotion, sedition, tumult
- ▶ So the birds—Fowl—are relatives in some way to the vapors—what does this mean? Why are they troubled? Note that there is more gray—These fowl are like “swallows over meadows before storms”—does this mean these “fowl” are foreshadowing a storm, as well (commonly believed that animals have some weather predicting capabilities)?
- ▶ Is this a literal storm, or also some sort of storm in the story itself?

Sentence 6

Shadows present,
foreshadowing
deeper shadows to
come.

- ▶ Shadow - comparative darkness, gloom, unhappiness, darkness of night or growing darkness after sunset; image cast by a body intercepting light; type of what is fleeting or ephemeral; delusive semblance or image; vain/unsubstantial object of pursuit; obscure indication, symbol, foreshadowing; imitation, copy; slight or faint appearance, small portion, trace
 - (Note how many meanings for one simple word that we all think we know)
- ▶ Deeper - extension downward; profound, hard to get to the bottom of; grave, heinous; intense, profound, great in measure/degree; intense (color); penetrating; much immersed, involved, implicated, far advanced, far on

Sentence 6

Shadows
present,
foreshadowing
deeper shadows
to come.

- ▶ These shadows are also gray.
- ▶ Shadows foreshadowing deeper shadows might be all signs on the water of a coming storm—the waves, the quiet, the birds, the vapors—how does this relate to the story?
- ▶ Are their “deeper shadows” to come yet in the story itself?
- ▶ The story itself starts gray, in shadow-like environment on the sea—also the word “foreshadowing” is in the passage.

Putting it Together

- ▶ There is a lot of gray which signifies an in between state, not light or dark.
 - Not black or white (an association we use to mean right/wrong or good/bad).

Could these concepts be brought in simply by the color gray?

- ▶ Also there is a storm, an idea of shadow, ideas of illusion versus reality are present.
 - The passage discusses ideas about things not being what they seem.
- ▶ To fully analyze the work, we would need the rest of the story, but this brief passage in the introduction already sets up quite a few ideas for what might be coming.