

Close Reading

English 009Z

T Th 11:20-12:35

Professor Rachel Buurma

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Close Reading and Its Discontents (FYS)

English 009Z • Fall 2008 • T-Th 11:20-12:35 • SCI 102

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"Close reading" is something we do almost every day in the English literature classroom; it seems so natural that its protocols and practices are sometimes said to structure the way we read the world. But what does it really mean to get close to a text? At what might it mean for a reader or critic to reject – as many have – the idea of close reading? What might we learn – about literature and about ourselves – from looking at the history of reading, close and otherwise? In this class, we will study the ways various kinds of readers – from New Critics like Cleanth Brooks to postcolonial theorists like Edward Said to deconstructionists like J. Hillis Miller to queer theorists like Eve Sedgwick – have turned their attention to texts as different as John Donne's poem "The Canonization," French automobile advertisements from the 1950s, and Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park*. Students will keep a close reading journal, which will include experiments in various types of close reading and will write and revise three five-page papers.

Introduction: Close Reading and Its History

Week I

September 2 Welcome and Introduction: What is Close Reading?
September 4 Practicing Close Reading
Practical Criticism preparation: poems: I, II, and III
Blog: your close reading of one of the *Practical Criticism* poems

Week II

September 9 *Practical Criticism*, Part I: Introduction; Documentation of Poems I, II, and II; Part II: Analysis, Chapter I
September 11 *The Well Wrought Urn* preparation: Donne, "The Canonization"
Blog: your close reading of "The Canonization"
Paper 1 assigned

Part I: The Text as World (New Criticism, Inside the Text)

Week III

September 16 *The Well Wrought Urn*, "The Language of Paradox" (3-21)
September 18 *The Verbal Icon* preparation: Donne, "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot, "A Game at Chess" from *The Wasteland* (first reading only)
Blog: your close reading of "Prufrock," keeping Brooks in mind OR find and close read a "counterexample" poem (we will discuss this in class)

Week IV

September 23

"The Intentional Fallacy," *The Verbal Icon*

September 25

7 Types of Ambiguity preparation: Eliot, "A Game at Chess"

Blog: research a reference from "A Game at Chess"

sign up for paper 1 revision meetings

Paper 1 due to Blackboard Friday by midnight

Week V

September 30

"Second Type of Ambiguity," *7 Types of Ambiguity*, focusing on pages 48-56 and 68-88

Paper 1 revision meetings this week

October 2

Mimesis preparation: pages 1-48 of *To the Lighthouse*

Blog: use the OED to research a word from *To the Lighthouse*

Part II: From Text to World, From World to Text (historicisms, cultural materialisms)

Week VI

October 7

Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," "The Brown Stocking," "Epilogue," *Mimesis*

October 9

Paper 2 assigned; discussion of revision and editing process

Paper 1 revision due to Blackboard Friday by midnight

Week VII

October 14

October Holiday – no class – begin reading *Mansfield Park*

October 16

October Holiday – no class

Week VIII

October 21

Austen, *Mansfield Park* (all)

Said, from *Culture and Imperialism*

Blog: identify a significant historical detail in *Mansfield Park*

October 23

Miller, from *Jane Austen and the Secret of Style*

Week IX

October 28

Mansfield Park, continued

Cohn, from *Transparent Minds*

October 30

Watt, from *The Rise of the Novel*

Paper 2 due to Blackboard Friday by midnight

Part III: The World as Text (structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction)

Week X

November 4 Barthes, *Mythologies*, p 9-12,15-28,34-38,41-46,50-57,74-90,97-102,109-159
Look at selected images (see Blackboard)

November 6 Barthes, continued
editing project assigned; editing project meetings

Week XI

November 11 J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host"

November 13 J. L. Austin, Lecture I, *How to Do Things with Words*
Blog: a brief deconstructive reading of one of our earlier poems

Week XII

November 18 James, "The Aspern Papers"
J. Hillis Miller, "History, Narrative, Responsibility: The Aspern Papers" (1-29) in
Literature as Conduct
Blog: a brief reading (keeping Miller's style of deconstruction in mind) of a
paragraph of *The Aspern Papers*

November 20 Editing presentations
Paper 3 assigned (final paper)
paper 2 revision due to Blackboard Friday by midnight

Part IV: Against Close Reading, Distant Reading

Week XIII

November 25 Editing presentations

November 27 no class – Thanksgiving break

Week XIV

December 2 Sedgwick, "Paranoid and Reparative Reading," *Touching Feeling*

December 4 Rabinowitz, "Against Close Reading"
Moretti, from *Maps, Graphs, and Trees*
Batuman, review of *Maps, Graphs and Trees*

Week XV

December 9 conclusions

final paper due to Blackboard December 18th by midnight

Assignments

Course texts available in the bookstore:

Austen, Jane. *Mansfield Park*. Toronto: Broadview Press, 2001. ISBN-13: 978-1551110981

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Hill and Wang. ISBN: 0374521506

Dawn Rodrigues and Myron Tuman, *A Norton Pocket Guide to Grammar and Punctuation*.

New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2006. ISBN-10: 0-393-92937-X

You are also welcome to buy these books online or at a different store. If you do this be aware that you need to have your own copy of the **specific edition** of each of the books listed above; make sure that the ISBN numbers above match the ISBN number on the books you order.

All other course texts will be available on the “course documents” section of Blackboard.

Please be sure to **print out assigned electronic formal texts and bring them to class with you**.

Reading assignments

The reading load for this class is fairly modest because I want you to have time to read certain texts (the poems in particular) more than once and to be able to devote time to your writing. The major exception to this low-reading-load rule will be our weeks on *Mansfield Park*. Do try to get started on that novel ahead of time, or plan to read it over fall break.

Informal reading responses

Many weeks you will write a very short post (about 250 words) in response to some question related to the day’s reading. These short posts will not be graded individually, though they are a part of your 25% blog and class participation grade. They offer an opportunity for you to experiment with various styles of close reading, work on developing your own style of close reading, and learn relevant research skills. They are designed so that each set of blog posts feeds into one of the longer papers; this means that you are welcome and encouraged to draw on your posts as you write the more formal papers.

Papers

These three different essay assignments will be discussed in detail in class. In addition to the work on writing and revision our class will provide, you may wish to visit the Writing Center (more information at <http://www.swarthmore.edu/x9317.xml>) for additional help.

Editing project and presentation

Writing in college – despite the existence of our excellent writing center and the meetings with peers and professors involved in revision-heavy classes like this one - often seems like a very individualistic and solitary activity. However, most published writing is not just the product of the hand and mind of its “author” (the person whose name appears on the title page or at the top of the article), but is in fact an amalgamation of the efforts of writer, editor, printer, and publisher. In this assignment, we will (in a limited way) try to create the effect of writing for

publication by focusing on the editing process. You will be assigned a partner and the two of you will edit each other's Paper 2. Together, you will then briefly present to the class the "story" and results of the editing and revision of each paper. I will explain this assignment, and its grading structure, at length in class.

Policies and Advice

Grading

25% class participation (includes quizzes and weekly ungraded reading responses)

60% 3 short essays (paper 1 = 15%, paper 2 = 20%, paper 3 = 25%)

15% editing project and presentation

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a very serious offence. It includes both the direct copying of the words of another person without crediting him or her and paraphrasing the ideas of another person without giving credit. See the English department's guidelines on how to properly cite sources here:

<http://www.swarthmore.edu/x10027.xml>

If you have any questions about how to properly cite another person's work, please do not hesitate to ask me.

Attendance and due dates

Because this is a discussion-oriented class, attendance is essential. Missing more than two class sessions will result in a lowered grade unless you have a valid excuse confirmed by your advisor.

Late papers will incur a penalty unless you have a similarly valid excuse.