Close Reading

English 009Z
T Th 11:20-12:35
Professor Rachel Buurma
"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)
  - 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*
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)
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
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:


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. The 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](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.