Close Reading of a Literary Work

**Drama**

Close reading is important because the skill is the building block for larger analysis. To do a close reading of a drama, read each scene, beginning at scene one, with the idea of your first impression, the drama’s vocabulary and diction, patterns, point of view, and metaphor. Jot your comment about your reactions as a reader. Your thoughts evolve not from someone else's truth about the reading, but from your own observations. The more closely you can observe, the more original and exact your ideas will be.

To begin your close reading, ask yourself several specific questions about the scene. The following questions are not a formula, but a starting point for your own thoughts. When you arrive at some answers, you are ready to organize and write. Organize a close reading like any other kind of essay, paragraph by paragraph, but you can arrange it any way you like. However, regardless of how you arrange your essay, adhere to the “Basic Requirements” below.

**Beginning Requirements**

- **Write in present tense.** For example, instead of writing “Bottom was a comic character because of how he acted toward the situation,” say, “**Bottom is a comic character because of how he acts toward the situation.**”
- **Write in active voice.** For example, instead of “Oberon is betrayed by Titania,” write, “**Titania betrays Oberon.**”
- **Write in first-person point of view.** In other words, you can write “I think Oberon treats Titania unfairly”; you can also use third person: say “**Oberon treats Titania unfairly.**” Or, you can write: “The feeling I got from reading this passage is…”; you can also write “**This passage produces in readers a feeling of...**”

I. First Impressions:

- What is the first thing you notice about the passage?
- What is the second thing?
- Do the two things you noticed complement or contradict each other?
- What mood does the passage create in you? Why?

II. Vocabulary and Diction (word choice):

- What is noteworthy about the diction in this passage?
- How do the important words relate to one another?
• Do any words have double meanings? Do they have extra connotations? How is language manipulated for effect?
• Look up any unfamiliar words. For a pre-20th century text, such as Shakespeare’s, look in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for possible outdated meanings. (The *OED* can only be accessed by students with a subscription or from a library computer that has a subscription. Otherwise, you should find a copy in the local library.)

### III. Discerning Patterns:

• Does an image here remind you of an image elsewhere in the play? Where? What's the connection?
• How might this image fit into the pattern of the play as a whole?
• Could this passage symbolize the entire work? Could this passage serve as a microcosm--a little picture--of what's taking place in the whole work?
• What is the sentence rhythm like? Short and choppy? Long and flowing? Does it build on itself or stay at an even pace? What is the style like?
• Is there any repetition within the passage? What is the effect of that repetition?
• How many types of writing are in the passage? (For example, narration, description, argument, dialogue, rhymed or alliterative poetry, etc.)
• Can you identify paradoxes in the Shakespeare's thought or subject?
• What is left out or kept silent? What is significant about these omissions?

### IV. Point of View and Characterization:

• How does the passage make us react or think about any characters or events within the narrative?
• Are there colors, sounds, physical description that appeals to the senses? Does this imagery form a pattern? Why might the author have chosen that color, sound or physical description?
• Who speaks in the passage? To whom does he or she speak?

### V. Symbolism:

• How might objects represent other things?
• Do any of the objects, colors, animals, or plants appearing in the passage have traditional connotations or meaning? What about religious or biblical significance?
• If there are multiple symbols in the work, could we read the entire passage as having allegorical meaning beyond the literal level?