A Guide to Close Reading and Writing in USW 34:

The Civil War from Nat Turner to Birth of a Nation

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The Civil War from Nat Turner to Birth of a Nation

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Cover: *I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance,* Sojourner Truth
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A Quick Disclaimer

You are not expected to master the information below. I have provided it in the hope that it might serve to flesh some of the more difficult concepts that undergird close reading. Use it as a guide or reference rather than as a list of concepts one needs to know in order to succeed.

And, of course, if there is anything that needs further clarification—whether included on this list or not—please let me know.

What is Close Reading?

Most broadly, close reading describes a way of interpreting texts that favors an attention to particulars over and above general meaning. As such, close reading considers and analyzes word usage; form; syntax; patterns; connections to other texts; breaks from other texts; incongruities; and other issues unique to the text at hand.

This doesn't mean that the general is tossed aside. Rather, all of the above considerations might be thought of as the components through which we come to determine the general—though never total or complete—meaning. As caveat, this has not always been so. In "The Heresy of the Paraphrase," New Critic Cleanth Brooks argues that the purpose of poetry is not to produce a statement or proposition. To the contrary, the successful poem is one whose use of irony (incongruity) resists paraphrasable meaning. (For more on New Critics and the politics of close reading see "Background" below.)

One of the more valuable—and, perhaps, controversial—assumptions made each time a person engages in close reading is the idea that style generates meaning. Indeed, any change in style signals a change—however large or small—in meaning. The idea that style is more than rhetorical adornment opposes the common idea amongst linguists that the same content, proposition, or argument can be expressed in a variety of ways. For close readers—and, in particular, New Critics—every stylistic shift marks a shift in meaning. In *A Matter of Style*, for instance, Matthew Clark urges readers to resist the idea "that meaning simply exists, prior to language, and that the job of language is merely to represent that pre-existing meaning" (45).

How Does One Do a Close Reading?

Often the most effective way is by first reducing our interrogation to a short passage, sentence, or even single word. For example, let's look at a passage from a text written during the period covered by this course:

> *"Everything was dead quiet, and it looked late, and smelt late. You know what I mean—I don't know the words to put it in" (Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn 27).*

Our first step is to think about what the passage offers us. Is there anything strange occurring syntactically? Are there any odd word choices? Or, alternatively, does the plainness of language mask something deeper? To my reading, Huck's assertion that it "smelt late" is rather odd.

The next step is to ask and then explain why it's odd. We might think about Huck's reading of time through sound and smell as a demonstration of intersensorality, with the latter keying in on a new way to determine time. By linking smell to the perception of time, Huck offers readers an alternative way to know; he gives us an epistemology that displaces—without eliding—ways of knowing both time and the world. Key addendum: while I have eliminated it in this guide for space purposes, you will also want to include a brief summary of the passage you will be speaking about. This will help readers situate themselves within the argument you will be making.

Now, it is true that the above offers an explanation, but it is equally true that it does so by making a huge and unsubstantiated claim. And your readers would be perfectly justified in asking 'why does this link between smell and time displace other ways of knowing?'. As such, this is the moment in which you must present an explanation (an argument) for the point you have made. For example, you might argue that this displacement is predicated on how sight is the primary modality through which time is perceived. Indeed, whether one looks at the sky or the clock, sight is the most common method for determining time. To be sure, this still doesn't fully explicate or substantiate the argument, but it does get us a bit closer to what we want to say, or, at the very least, it points the reader to the argument we are trying to make.

From here there are three major ways to substantiate the argument. Each has to do with supplying the reader with evidence.

The first (and, perhaps, most powerful) way is to find evidence from inside the text (but often outside the short passage). Do other characters, for instance, understand time strictly through sight? Alternatively, is there a divide according to status/position? Do outsiders perceive time with one sense, while enfranchised characters privilege sight? We might think about how Pap and the Widow or Jim and the Duke perceive time. Do they diverge?

The second way is to go outside of the text and provide a series of primary sources that establish sight as the primary modality through which time is perceived in the early to mid-19th century.

The third way would be to supply a secondary source in which the author has done the work of collecting and constellating primary sources. To be sure, there will seldom be a source that perfectly matches your argument. The goal is to find work that allows you to establish your point. For instance, if you wanted to make an argument like the one above, you might consult Mark M. Smith's work on sound and hapticity (the history of touch and skin) in the antebellum South.

So how much evidence is necessary to substantiate an argument? Unfortunately, there is not a satisfying answer, as it depends on the argument being made. My hope is that over the semester we can collectively think about what constitutes a substantiated claim/argument.

But even if we accept the above claim as substantiated, there is a new consideration we must take into account: why is the point important? Of course, there are innumerable reasons for why a point might be thought of as important, and rather than attempt—and fail—to list the reasons, I offer you two questions that I always ask myself at this stage of close reading: Is there an argument to be made that Huck's displacement of sight serves a social, political, or personal purpose? And leading from that question, can I be daring in how I point that purpose out? Let's attempt to answer the first question

daringly. I might argue as follows.

> *Sight's link to time, however, is neither innocent nor natural. Rather, labor—and its relationship to both— serves as a hinge between the two phenomenon. This is because the particular kind of time that comes to choreograph work is influenced by something equally basic: the necessity of sight and, therefore, light in nearly all work. More directly, one must see to work and, so, one must work when there is light.*
>
> *In the case of the field, the need for light means that the rise and set of the sun choreographs most schedules. Notions like day and night exist, in part, because of this need.*
>
> *In the factory, where the use of artificial light makes the rise and set of the sun less important, sight remains central; only the object of measurement shifts. Where the field worker uses the sun to measure time, the factory worker uses a clock*
>
> *In both spaces, however, sight becomes the privileged sense because of how it links to labor.*

Having established this link, we can now make a claim to why Huck's appraisal diverges from it.

> *Huck's social circumstance differs from most of his peers and acquaintances. From the very start of the novel, the usual filial and institutional structures that organize Missouri life are all but absent for him. As indicated by Tom Sawyer early in the novel, Huck is without proper documents or a stable family. And this absence of structure only increases as the novel progresses. When Pap returns and effectively seizes Huck from the widow's care, the boy does not find a more permanent structure. To the contrary, he is dragged further outside the normal streams of citizenry and responsibility. And when he finally runs away, faking his death, he effectively leaves behind the expectations and responsibilities that organize life in St. Petersburg, Missouri.*
>
> *This abandonment of institutional expectations is not without virtue. It is because Huck abandons them that he is free to learn about the world in ways that exceed their parameters and methods. Because he will no longer be attending church or school, and because he will no longer be expected to prepare for the job market, Huck's experiences are not hinged to the particular kinds of knowledge associated with them. Time need not be seen precisely because labor is no longer the primary organizing force in his life. And, indeed, we might even think of Huck's displacement of sight as a subtle denial of the various kinds of capitalist and slave labor that lurk in the background of the novel.*

Key caveat: daring readings are always worth exploring, but they can often lead us down anachronistic paths. In the case of the above reading, we might ask whether factory and shift work were common enough in the 1830s to allow the above argument. To be sure, this is where the use of evidence can save you. On the one hand, its lack might signal the anachronistic nature of the argument. On the other, its presence will guard against your readers dismissing the argument on the basis of it being ahistorical. More importantly, there are a variety of ways to negotiate these sorts of readings, which we can discuss in section if students are curious.

Our next step is to think about whether this is the only thing being said in the passage or if there is an orthogonally related concern to which the above points might lead. One potential direction: Huck's assertion is not merely—if at all—about labor. Rather,

it also invites the reader to consider how the body might know the world in ways that exceed or, at the very least, match the machine (clock). And this orthogonal point starts the substantiation process all over. However, I want to spare folks another long reading of the passage in order to get at two of the most important and potent ways to perform a close reading: an attention to word choice and form.

Analyzing Word Choice

We might return to Huck's use of the word "smelt." Like before, the first question to ask is how is it being used. Does it present plainly or is its use strange? One way to answer this question is to note that Huck uses the British/Canadian spelling of "smelled," which is, at least on first pass, a break from his usual dialect. This break in dialect cannot be ignored in light of the novel's opening passage that explicitly states the carefully rendered use of dialects.

But the break only draws attention to the word. It doesn't tell us much about its meaning, so we might say that its strangeness invites further consideration. And so we do: Does "smelt" have only one possible meaning? From a denotative perspective, it has three.

- It is a past and present participle of smell. We can immediately eliminate this definition, as Huck doesn't use the participle form.
- Noun: Small silver fish. I suppose we might think about the links to the Mississippi, and Jim and Huck's need for food, but this seems like a bit of a stretch.
- Verb: the metallurgical practice of extracting metals from their ores. This definition has some potential in that we might think about how it mirrors the kind of merging/melting of senses Huck performs in order to extract knowledge from the lived and embodied space. In short, smelting becomes an analogue for how Huck will perceive and know the world.

Analyzing Form

Even with all the work we have done above, we still haven't interrogated or considered how form might play a role in our reading. Let's attempt to do so:

- *Claim:* Huck's description forces us to think about how knowledge and language are always in tension with each other.
- *Evidence within text:* This tension is best demonstrated by the frustration expressed in the final clause of the second sentence ("I don't know the words to put it in."). What's important to note is that Huck's frustration doesn't occur because he lacks knowledge but, rather, because language can't (yet?) accommodate all the ways that he knows.

It's important to note that the above focus on language does not get us to the passage's formal elements. It merely points to a tension inherent to language itself. Consequently, we have to ask for a second time whether the formal elements of the passage communicate or embolden any of the above arguments. And because form is so particular to short passages, it is often helpful to focus on a single line or sentence. Let's stick to the second sentence of the passage: "You know what I mean—I don't know the words to put it in."

We might begin by noticing how the em dash used by Huck to link the two clauses indicates his mastery over syntax (and, perhaps, even grammar). This has three effects. One, it subtly chides the reader who would assume Huck incapable of complicated syntaxes. Two, it erects a physical distance between the "you" of the lead clause and the "I" of the end clause, effectively linking but not over lapping two perspectives. And three, it invents a grammar capable of maintaining the discursive, free-floating, and conversational voice (which Hemingway once identified as the start of American literature).

Having identified and explained how a formal element functions within the sentence, we can make an argument about why its matters. The linguistic meaning of the sentence anticipates and denies the reader's confusion (and potential dismissal) of how smell can indicate time, while, at the same time, the structure maintains a tone that invites exchange and engagement. When all three of these effects combine, we come to see a sleight of hand; Huck is not a boy who lacks the vocabulary and grammar needed to describe the world scientifically, empirically or even visually; rather, he is a boy who knows in a variety of ways and who has bent language so deftly that readers must grant him the unique use in order to learn from both it and him.

Relating to the Whole

The final step is to link this interpretation to the wider book. That is to say that the best criticism demonstrates how a single passage is one part of a larger pattern within the whole. One way to do this is to briefly turn to another scene or passage within the text.

Indeed, less than a page later, Huck will further expand his reading of the world to include sound. To wit:

> *The sky looks ever so deep when you lay down on your back in the moonshine; I never knowed it before. And how far a body can hear on the water such nights! I heard people talking at the ferry-landing. I heard what they said, too—every word of it.*

As with the initial passage, the social and material world—both in its landscape and its demands on the body—combine, and this combination influences how Huck comes to know the world. Free of the factory's clang and the hum of the urban space—indeed, free of even the Widow and Mrs. Watson's insistent voices—Huck can hear for miles and discovers that sound transports "a body" to places that it could not otherwise occupy. And, yet, the need to be transported is not shaped by sound; rather, Huck must rely on hearing because he cannot rely on sight. To see is always to invite the opportunity to be seen, and Huck—having faked his death—cannot afford to offer such an invitation. It is, then, neither the shape of land nor Huck's status that privileges the aural; it is their combination that encourages—or maybe engenders—his attunement to the possibilities of aural knowledge and, more broadly, to ways of knowing that were previously ignored.

Background and the Political Implications of Close Reading (an incomplete survey)

Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924)

Richards writes the monograph as a defense of literary criticism and aesthetics in general. In the very first pages he asks, "What is the value of the arts, why are they worth the devotions of the keenest hours of the best minds, and what is their place in the system of human endeavours?" (3). His answer to this question is a complicated one that exceeds the needs of our class, but, in short, Richards attempts to evacuate aesthetics of the post-Kantian idea that aesthetic experience is radically separate from all practical matters.

This separation of aesthetics and the practical is known by a variety of terms and phrases: Kant's phrase was "Purposive without purpose." Both of these terms concern our ability to judge objects. In a wildly reductive sense, an object's purpose is its accordance to the larger concept to which it was made (the concept of a table in the mind of the carpenter). An object is purposive if it appears to have some purpose but none can be found. For Kant, beautiful objects affect us precisely because they seem to have a purpose but no single purpose can be identified.

The consequence of Kant's purposive was a freeing of art from subject matter, a benefactor's wishes, the community's needs, and religion. Art, under Kant's direction, is given over to aesthetic pleasure—even delight. In short, art is seen to exist on its own merits.

And, indeed, 19th Century Aesthetics will seize upon Kant's ideas and begin to argue for an "Art for art's sake" (often thought to be coined by Benjamin Constant). This quartering of art remained a popular way to approach aesthetics into the 1920s. Clive Bell, a contemporary of Richards writes, "To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and a airs, no familiarity with its emotions," while the literary critic A. C. Bradley argued that art's "nature is to be not part, nor yet a copy, of the real world (as we commonly understand that phrase), but a world in itself independent, complete, autonomous" (as qtd. in Richards).

By contrast, Richards sees his task as one that places literature (and art in general) back into contact with what Joseph North has called "the material concerns of life." In order to do so, he argues that literature's value rests in its ability to help readers develop analytical skills and values. "It's less important to like 'good' poetry and dislike 'bad,' than to be able to use them both as a means of ordering our minds" (327).

I.A. Richards *Practical Criticism* (1929)

Most broadly, *Practical Criticism* is an account of Richards experiment with close reading in his classes throughout the 1920s. He would remove titles, dates of publication, author's names, and other contextual markers from poems and ask students to write commentaries on the poems. Given Richard's career-long project, we might think of this less as the moment when the New Critical notion of the "poem in itself" emerges and more as a method used to show how readers will always deploy the particularities of the worlds they know in their readings.

More specific to Richards' aims, he hoped this practice would force students to focus on "the words on the page" rather than parroting or relying on received ideas and

readings of the texts. The benefit of such a practice was that students would be forced to generate an "organized response," which was not a matter of reducing the poems to a single meaning but, rather, contending with and responding to the variety of emotions and meanings in the poems. Richards' believed that wrestling a text into clarity (but not singular meaning) would have a corresponding effect on their own emotions.

William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930)

Empson was one of Richards' students, and *Seven Types of Ambiguity* emerges from the essays he wrote for his mentor as an undergraduate. While Empson's celebration of ambiguity uses the term to describe other concepts, including but not limited to paradox, tension, irony and polyvalence, his lasting impact might be that he demonstrates how one might tease out multiple implications and meanings offered by the text itself. Under his command, a poem becomes multiply connotative.

New Critics and the Redeployment of Close Reading for Wildly Opposite Ends

New Critics were largely a group of Southern writers from the United States, many of whom united under the banner of the Fugitives. *In I'll Take My Stand: The South & the Agrarian Tradition* by Twelve Southerners (1930), the authors write, "Just what must the Southern leaders do to defend the traditional Southern life?" And to dangerously gloss the more complicated argument presented in the text, their answer was to push against what they believed to be a current order dominated by Northern industrialism and Communism, both of which stunted White, Southern men's ability to maintain and pass on Agrarian Southern traditions.

Nevertheless, the New Critics take to Richards' methods in *Practical Criticism* quite well; what they discard, however, is Richards' theoretical reasoning for the method. New Critic Cleanth Brooks, who did not write for *I'll Take My Stand*, writes that he was happy to "give full measure" to Richards' practices/methods, but he would not accept Richards as "theoretician." "If I did not gain an understanding of Richards' whole system, an understanding so clear that it compelled acceptance, I did at least sharpen my insight, ways of perceiving, and methods of analysis" (586).

John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism* (1941).

Ransom argues that New Critics' attempt to cleave a text from its various contexts so to be able to treat it purely "in itself" had not gone far enough. In fact, this cleaving had not been able to effectively evacuate "psychological" and "moral" readings from various close readings. He takes on Richards: "Briefly, the New Criticism is damaged by at least two specific errors of theory, which are widespread. One is the idea of using the psychological affective vocabulary in the hope of making literary judgments in terms of the feelings, emotions, and attitudes of poems instead of in terms of their objects."

And while it's not necessary to know this, he also takes on Yvor Winters: "The other is plain moralism, which in the new criticism would indicate that it has not emancipated itself from the old criticism. I should like to see criticism unburdened of these dregs" (xi). Having established these objections, Ransom—dizzyingly—turns back (though only implicitly) to Kant, arguing that the work in itself was the singular source of what we can know about a text.

Why is This Important to Know?

In one sense, it's not. I offer it more to flesh out the various turns the practice has taken within literary studies. In another sense, we might think about these turns as a warning of sorts. If a method like close reading can be deployed for opposite theoretical—and one might argue political—ends, then all methods offer opportunities for redeployment, and we might think about always considering the direction or theoretical framework through which a practice operates. In short, what the above demonstrates is that even when one's method seems to accord with our own, it serves us well to make sure that its aim does as well.

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