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21L.007 World Literatures: Travel Writing
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Doing Close Reading

Some Guiding Thoughts

- Close reading entails slowly and carefully thinking about how a piece of writing is constructed in order to better understand what impact it is trying to have and what meaning it wants to convey. You will be dividing sentences and paragraphs up into little pieces, but not at the expense of some larger unity. Think of the book as a machine made up of many parts, or, if you like a less mechanistic vocabulary, as a gourmet meal made up of many courses. For it to function most perfectly, each part of the machine – Or the meal – must relate to the whole of which it is, then, an integral part. Of course the “machine” you are studying may be dysfunctional, in which case your argument might identify a problem you have located in the way it works.
- Language is a communications technology. Because it is largely deliberately organized and hence less “natural” than speech, fiction often reveals the artificiality of all language, clarifying how we arrange sounds and words into units that take on meaning within specific social and culture situations. It might be useful to think of fiction as deliberately organized units of socio-cultural meaning. Usually, this involves three main parties – the reader, the narrator/speaker, and the author – who share a triangulated relationship.
- The reader doesn’t come to this triangle with nothing. Your brain is a powerful and active organ. Remind yourself of this each time you sit down to read. I know this is often difficult, but you should try to force yourself to think about each word you are reading on the page. With pencil in hand, devote yourself to the task, because you will be rewarded. Remember, you already HAVE knowledge – immense amounts of it – and we can produce more together in the classroom if we are all prepared to do so.
- One of the glories of close reading is that it allows us to get beyond the basic question of “what happens,” to ask how the writer gives us the impression that anything happens at all (or doesn’t, of course), while convincing us that it matters. When you interpret something you don’t describe what happens. Instead you contemplate why the text is significant or meaningful. Sometimes it is important to point out certain things that happen in a story (plot moments), but the real work of reading literature requires a much larger purpose.

- Think about reading as a process without one necessary end or goal. This might be unlike what normally happens in the sciences. The process of generating questions about the text, and about texts in general, is valuable in itself, and answers aren't always forthcoming. Sometimes good close reading is just about finding contradictions or complications in the text. Many problems in life aren't easily resolved, so why should literature be different? Many of the agreed upon "great classics" work precisely through thwarting our expectations and telling us that there are no simple answers to all the big questions.

The Basic Steps

1. Start by finding a passage that interests you for some reason, either because you are intrigued by it, or impressed, or annoyed. Often it helps to identify a passage with clear boundaries within the larger text. Can you find the beginning and the end?
2. What is the literal meaning of the passage? Do you understand it fully? If not, why not? Are you supposed to not? Are you missing something? Sometimes it helps to paraphrase, in your own words, what you perceive to be going on.
3. Read the passage more than once, indicating all the parts that you find interesting. Think about how you respond to a passage or word, and then think about how the author has created that effect in you. Think about diction, perspective, tone, punctuation – anything, really. I encourage you to write in your text, and to make an accompanying list of things as you read, recording your questions, thoughts / feelings, but also your understanding of the literary devices that are producing responses in you. What do the formal elements of the passage – for example, the diction (word choice), or the tone – tell you about the writer's attitude toward the subject, and toward you? (MF: we've added a few other things to look at: what is the position of the author in the passage, as character observed by others, as observing eye, or somewhere in between? How much does he claim to know or to understand? How is he located with respect to time? You may remember other kinds of questions from our discussions in class).
4. Is there another meaning, beneath the obvious literal surface, that you can identify at this point?
5. Do more than note these things, though. As you read through the entire work you will want to connect your initial thoughts to the longer process of piecing together the overall meaning of a text. The details you note initially will be added to some aggregate list in your mind, until you gradually develop a full picture of the narrative and of the relationship between its recurring literary techniques and its meaning. Ultimately our goal is to

discover the significance of a work of literature. Close attention to detail is only the beginning.

6. What overall concerns of the work are evident in this passage? How does this passage relate to the whole? Does it add to it, or complicate it, or undermine it, or something else? Try to compare the passage to other ones. Is it like or unlike the rest of the narrative?
7. What conclusions can you come to about the larger work based on your analysis? Answering this question may involve revising your initial thoughts about the passage, rethinking what originally drew you to it.

Writing It Down

1. Try out your ideas about the passage: in class, in tutorial, or in other discussions.
2. (MF: this suggestion may be less helpful for our materials). Consult critical sources if you are curious to see how your own results jive with those of others. You can search the most comprehensive bibliography of essays and books of literary interpretation, which is the Modern Languages Association bibliography, through the MIT libraries website: http://collections.chadwyck.com.libproxy.mit.edu/home/home_mla.jsp. You may also find Google Scholar useful.
3. Find a compelling way to convey your results in prose. Remember that your own writing is a narrative, and that it is designed to have a certain impact for your reader. Written notes you make about the process of close reading will help you immensely when you write your papers.