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English 167
(Adapted, with thanks, from Professor David Zimmerman)

Close Reading (see too the reading poetry handout)

Critical or close reading, like writing, is a set of skills we expect you to develop and master this semester. Basically, reading actively and originally means **thinking about the text as and after you read it**. You may already have your own system of marking a text and taking notes so that you remember and can later think about what you have read. If not, now is the time to develop a system that works for you. Some readers mark texts in the margins, writing notes to themselves about parts of the text (a line, a word, a sudden development) that are significant, worth returning to. Others prefer to take notes separately, by hand or on a computer, that record the points (and pages and lines) that they found important. Such notes and marks help readers develop and remember insights, observations, and claims that they can use for discussion or papers. Above all, this kind of reading plus notes practice helps readers to think critically and imaginatively about what they read. There are two advantages to reading this way and thus to taking this course: you learn about how productive it is to read “close to the bones” of a text and you prepare yourself for writing about texts, in this course literary texts, in ways that are imaginative and disciplined rather than pat and blandly generalizing (always a bad idea).

In effect, reading leads to rereading and should because if a work is worth reading we need to do so slowly, returning to sentences or words that interest us and cause difficulty. Your notes to yourself should take up odd and interesting words, noting their meanings and whether they recur in the text (the *Oxford English Dictionary*, now on line via the UW Madison library website, is your first port of call when you need to track a word, its origins, its nuances); guesswork (as in: why does this scene occur here in the work?); hypothetical musings (what would happen if this scene weren’t here?); curious or finely written passages; and observations that don’t seem related to a claim or argument but that you can’t get out of your head. Watch for repetition of all kinds: words, phrases, structures: comparing how these repetitions do or do not map onto each other will allow you to identify important aspects of the text.

The next step (which should ideally happen right away, but which you may find yourself doing as you prepare to write a paper or ask a question) is to reread all your notes, asking what matters in all of this, what you gain from thinking about the work thus far, asking too whether you’ve missed some feature of the work that now demands rereading. At this point your ideas, your sense of what emphasis is emerging should still be exploratory: in fact, it is always a good sign if you find yourself revising your points as you think about them again. At this point in your reading, some kind of summary, in a paragraph or two, rounds out the work of reading and rereading, so that you can take it up again to write. By this time, if not before, you will have found yourself making notes on the computer.

Finally, identify **key concepts** in the work itself or in your critical thinking about the work. A key concept is a topic, concern, or theme that seems really important or interesting in the book--a topic that you might want to discuss or write about. It is often helpful to organize all your notes under these concepts, that is, using cut and paste to group them under the concept that works best to summarize them. It’s critical too to carry the page and, in the case of poems, line numbers all the way so that you can go back to the work (always) to think about how its words and sentences and narrative shape affect your thinking.