

Critical Approach to Close Reading

Exploring the Secondary Literature Classroom in an International Context

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Close Reading

- Investigate short extracts of text (prose or poetry)
- Reading to uncover layers of meaning (Boyles, 2012)
- Analysing patterns in language and focused on text itself (Hinchman & Moore, 2013).
- Form, style, tone, figurative language and significance of word choice and syntax (S. Brown & Kappes, 2012).
- Richards gave his students poems (no names, dates, details) and asked them to interpret them (Richards, 1929).
- Ideological shift in pedagogy that is still relevant (McKee, 2001).
- Continued throughout school curricula as there is no such thing as a single 'correct' interpretation of any text (McKee, 2001).

Boyles, N. (2012). Closing in on close reading. *Educational Leadership*, 36-41.

Hinchman, K. A., & Moore, D. W. (2013). Close reading: A cautionary interpretation. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 56(6), 441-450.

Brown, S., & Kappes, L. (2012). *Implementing the Common Core State Standards: A Primer on 'Close Reading of Text'*. Washington DC: The Aspen Institute.

McKee, A. (2001). A beginner's guide to textual analysis. *Metro Magazine*(127), 138-149.

Relevance in an international classroom

- Students improve their ability to comment on stylistic features and writing craft, consider word choice and become more critical of texts.
- New era of multiliteracies and digital media stresses the importance of critical reading skills and understanding of a writer's use of particular literary features (Zhang, 2017).
- Students increasingly need to be able to read expertly, think critically and communicate effectively.
- Read, comprehend, make judgements in an immediate manner is applicable to many university courses and occupations.
- Close reading has remained a valid and worthy portion of many literature courses and is thus the focus of this paper.

Close Reading in the IB Classroom

- International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme, two-year course, students study two languages and all students are examined on the skill of close reading in Language A.
- Exam conditions, students have a choice of two unseen extracts: one of poetry and one of prose of varying complexity.
- Students given title, the author and date.
- Write a literary commentary - a close-reading essay that explores components such as content, technique, style, structure, theme and language (IBO, 2011).

Close Reading Extracts

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M16/1/AXENG/HP1/ENG/TZ1/XX

2.

The Machinist, Teaching His Daughter to Play the Piano

The brown wrist and hand with its raw knuckles and blue nails
packed with dirt and oil, pause in mid-air,
the fingers arched delicately,

- 5 and she mimics him, hand held just so, the wrist loose,
then swooping down to the wrong chord.
She lifts her hand and tries again.

*Drill collars¹ rumble, hammering the nubbin-posts.
The helper lifts one, turning it slowly,
then lugs it into the lathe's chuck.*

- 10 *The bit shears the dull iron into new metal, falling
into the steady chant of lathe work,
and the machinist lights a cigarette, holding*

*in his upturned palms the polonaise² he learned at ten,
then later the easiest waltzes,*

- 15 *etudes, impossible counterpoint*

like the voice of his daughter he overhears one night
standing in the backyard. She is speaking
to herself but not herself, as in prayer,

- 20 the listener is some version of herself,
and the names are pronounced carefully,
self-consciously: Chopin, Mozart,

Scarlatti, ... these gestures of voice and hands
suspended over the keyboard
that move like the lathe in its turning

- 25 toward music, the wind dragging the hoist chain, the ring
of iron on iron in the holding rack.
His daughter speaks to him one night,

but not to him, rather someone created between them,
a listener, there and not there,

- 30 a master of lathes, a student of music.

B. H. Fairchild, "The Machinist, Teaching His Daughter to Play the Piano" from *The Art of the Lathe*.
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on behalf of Alice James Books (www.alicejamesbooks.org) and The Waywiser Press UK, 2002
(<http://waywiser-press.com>).

¹ drill collars: drill collars, as well as nubbin posts, a chuck and bits are all machine components. A lathe (line 9) is a machine for shaping wood, metal and other materials.

² polonaise: polonaises and waltzes are dances; études and counterpoint are also terms associated with music

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M16/1/AXENG/SP1/ENG/TZ2/XX

Write a guided literary analysis on one passage only. In your answer you must address both of the guiding questions provided.

1.

They'd been distracted ever since the cat had run away, and even more so after they'd learned about Benoit's dog being eaten by wolves. Every time Oliver heard a noise outside he would stop what he was doing and go to the door, open it, and listen. He listened to the screech of the owls, the howling of the wolves, and even the cawing of the ravens with equal trepidation.

- 5 "I'm sure he's fine," he said, trying to make himself feel better. "He's such a little guy. Just a scrawny morsel. Who would bother to eat him?" But they both knew that the forest was full of predators who would love to eat a little cat for dinner. Finally, he couldn't stand it any longer, and when the wind picked up he went out to search for him.

- Ruth felt bad. It was her fault for getting angry and scaring Pesto out of bed and into the night. She wished she'd been able to contain her anger. She wished Oliver hadn't made her mad in the first place.

- The rain was starting to fall in earnest, so she went downstairs to throw some wood on the fire and found that the stack was getting low. She put on her raincoat and gum boots, grabbed a headlamp and the firewood sling, and headed out to the woodpile. The wind had really picked up and the cedar limbs were thrashing. Where was he? It wasn't safe to be out in the woods in high winds like this. The trees were groaning and creaking under the gale's assault. For such tall trees, their roots were surprisingly shallow, and the forest floor was soggy from rain. She thought for a moment she should go out and look for him, but then realized that was foolish. She started pulling the split logs from the pile and stacking them up in the leather sling. Just then she heard a harsh cry from overhead. She looked up. It was the Jungle Crow, perched on its usual spot on the branch of the cedar. The crow looked down at her, fixed her with a beady eye. "Caw!" it cried, with an urgency that sounded like a warning. She looked behind her at the house. The windows had gone black. The power was out. Suddenly, she felt afraid.

- 25 "What should I do?" The rain beat against her face as she turned back to the crow. "Go," she said. "Please, go and find him."

The crow just continued to watch her.

- Stupid, she thought. Talking to a bird, but there was no one else nearby and somehow just hearing her own voice helped to calm her.

- 30 The crow stretched its neck and shook its feathers. She heaved the heavy sling filled with firewood onto her shoulder and headed toward the darkened house. "Caw!" cried the crow again, and when she turned back, she saw Oliver emerging from the wind-lashed trees, dripping with rain. Seeing her standing there with the wood, he spread out his arms. His wet hands were empty. No cat.

Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013).
Used with permission from the Abner Stein agency and
Canongate Books Limited and The Random House Limited.

- (a) What do we learn of the characters through their reactions to the loss of the cat?
(b) By what techniques has the author built up the atmosphere in the passage?

Evidence in practice

- Cambridge Teacher Seminar
- Language A classroom teacher and examiner
- Taught in Australia and Germany
- MEd and MLiteracy
- Samples of student writing (sentences) from secondary students (16-18 years) undertaking close reading
- Examples – successful and problematic approaches

Successful approaches

Successes include:

- being critical
- understanding character
- exploring figurative language

A critical approach

The first section features a bridge that is 'quaint and clumsy', imagery that better describes a tottery old neighbour than a solid wooden structure.

A critical approach

- Commentaries should be personal and independent and supported by evidence (A. Brown, 1999).
- Teaching strategies: thinking out loud.
- Demonstrate thought processes, emphasising critical reflection (Harl, 2013).
- Switching the focus to oral expression can also potentially remove some of the intimidation students feel about critical writing (Harl, 2013).

Brown, A. (1999). On the subject of practical criticism. *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 28(4), 293-327.

Harl, A. (2013). A historical and theoretical review of the literature: Reading and writing connections. In A. S. Horning & E. W. Kraemer (Eds.), *Reconnecting Reading and Writing* (pp. 26-54): The WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press.

Understanding character

He describes himself as an 'excellent driver' and he has 'never had an accident' which are stereotypically masculine qualities, which he is reassuring a somewhat precarious woman about. This tough, overbearing and controlled reaction characterises him as in-charge and fully capable.

Understanding character

- Teaching strategies: allowing students to share their interpretations by discussing their ideas in small groups (Fisher & Frey, 2014).
- Comparing, analysing together and finding patterns, students develop their ideas better when sharing critical judgements.
- Alternative strategy involves leaving aside a text and returning to discuss it after an extended period (Fisher & Frey, 2014).
- Helps students notice new aspects and in turn be critical of their first and second readings.

Effects of stylistic choices

Lawrence describes the ice as being 'pure, like flesh'. The surface was 'soft' like a 'soft epidermis'. This use of similes portrays the ice as being vulnerable, like humans, with soft skin that can be penetrated and wounded.

Effects of stylistic choices

- Teaching strategies: students should closely scrutinise specific words and short phrases (Freedman, 2015).
- Focus on individual word meanings and connotations.
- Terms should be taught in context and repeatedly.
- Show contrasting uses of a term in alternate readings and explore the different effects these can have (Freedman, 2015).
- Students identify different examples that use completely different words and language to convey the same distinct literary feature (Zhang, 2017).

Problematic approaches

- Students in international classrooms often make similar and repeated mistakes.
- Some issues arise particularly from students being second or third language learners and some are common to all learners of English.
- Common problems include: overly descriptive writing, the mechanical application of literary terms, misinterpreting language and writing in a judgmental manner.

Description over analysis

In this extract, Carter describes a town that believes in the supernatural and a girl heading out of the town and on a path through the forest that she knows by heart. On this path she is attacked by a wolf.

Description over analysis

- An account of 'simple narration, summary and paraphrase' (IBO, 2016).
- Usually occurs when students feel uncomfortable
- Teaching strategies: use visual images
- Describe – analyse - interpret - evaluate
- 'Chunk' sections of text, as the entire page can be overwhelming, especially for struggling students (Marzano, 2007).

Description over analysis

Describe – Analyse - Interpret - Evaluate



Roy Lichtenstein *Thinking of Him* (1963)

Describe

What do you see?

Analyse

Style? form?
Composition?

Interpret

What is being
suggested?
Relationships? What is
painting saying?

Evaluate

Is it effective? Why?

Mechanically applying literary terms

This extract most prominently features the literary devices of connotation, characterisation and foreshadowing.

The following will explore the impact of the third person omniscient narrator and the role of nature in the excerpt.

Mechanically applying literary terms

- Listing techniques one by one can often create a stultified response and a disconnected feel (A. Brown, 1999).
- Structuring ideas around finding literary features is mechanistic, lacks authenticity (IBO, 2016).
- Teaching strategies: encouraging students to construct arguments around ideas rather than devices.
- Extract explores loneliness, desperation and desire – analysis set up to explore these

Teaching strategy – focus on ideas

In this extract from 'The Road', McCarthy portrays the hopelessness and suffering that father and son experience in their isolation. ① ② ③ ④ ⑤

In the passage from 'The Road', McCarthy not only conveys a sense of isolation in a dystopian world, but also the protagonists' perseverance for their survival. ① ② ③

In this extract from 'The Road', McCarthy conveys the hopelessness of a post world and the way in which humanity merges into the dystopian environment. ① ② ③ ④

In this extract from 'The Road' McCarthy highlights the difference in mentality between his two protagonists, establishing the world around them as a desolate and pervasively hopeless place as he does so. ① ② ③

In the passage from 'The Road', McCarthy conveys the importance of caution in withstanding the suffering in a dangerous world. ① ② ③

In this 'day in the life' extract, McCarthy displays the daily struggle of the man and his son to adapt and survive in a world marked by man and fire. ① ② ③

-Elliot and Oliver

Thesis Statement (contention)

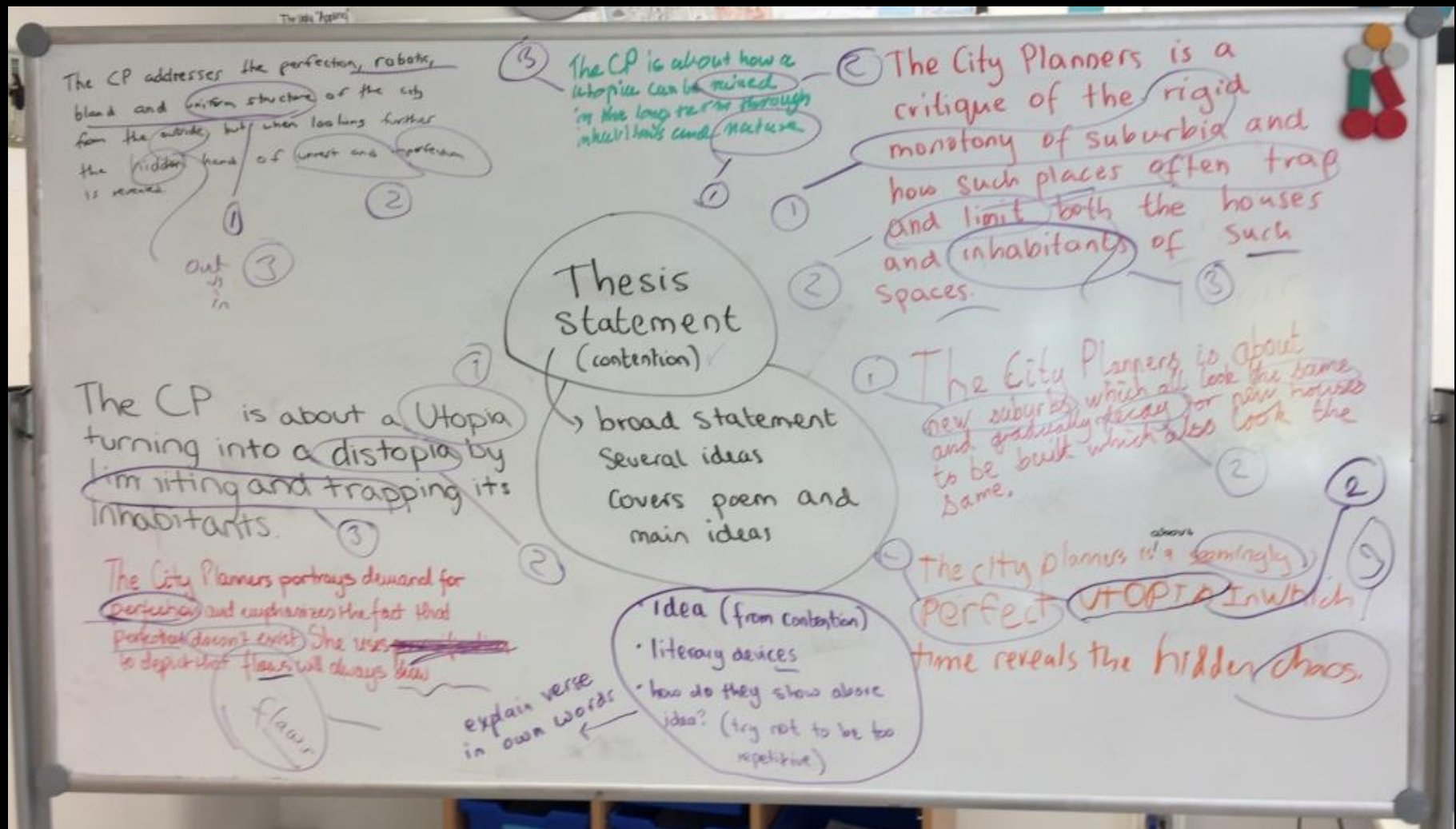
- about the big ideas
- must have three or four ideas
- Can only be one sentence

In this passage taken from Cormac McCarthy's 'The Road', the novelist not only vividly portrays the desolation of the characters' environment, but also hints at a recurring theme regarding the environment's hostility, as well as the father's rigour in his struggle for survival. ① ② ③

In this extract from 'The Road', McCarthy not only ~~is~~ conveys the ruined world and ~~the~~ decaying countryside, but also the diligence of the father in his continuing struggle for survival. ① ② ③

McCarthy illustrates the hostility and desolation of the surrounding environment and hence conveys the helplessness of the father and son, highlighting the intensity of the struggle for survival. ① ② ③ ④ ⑤

Teaching strategy – focus on ideas



Understanding complex vocabulary

Grenville describes the bank of having 'a rip down the dirt of the bank'. Through the use of the word 'rip' the reader gets a sense of death through the connotation rip meaning Rest-In-Peace, further emphasising the danger of the bridge.

Understanding complex vocabulary

- Complex language, which creates a barrier to understanding (Fillmore & Fillmore, 2012).
- Misled by personal and limited associations (Richards, 1929).
- 'Levels the playing field' - it removes the differences in background and contextual knowledge or cultural capital (Snow & O'Connor, 2013).
- Students may not have the cultural knowledge or decoding skills to decipher meaning (Hinchman & Moore, 2013).
- Beyond reading more widely, and practicing close reading on difficult passages, this issue is a constant and continuing challenge for teachers of students in an international context.

Judgements

The title of the poem, though suitable for the most part of it, can be seen as too simplistic and not fully reflecting the deep, personal emotions that the child experienced.

Judgements

- Students equate 'critical' with 'fault-finding' - condemn and blame author for a failure to understand (A. Brown, 1999).
- Suggest a lack of understanding about the task and also a lack of attention to stylistic aspects such as tone (A. Brown, 1999).
- Ultimately, close reading does not ask students whether they think the author is doing a good job or not.
- Leading classroom discussion away from the simple 'did you like the piece or not' helps move students away from judging the piece in their analysis.

Conclusion

- Immediacy of responses
- Sound approaches are critical, without being judgmental, uncover character traits and comment on stylistic features
- Teaching strategies include teacher modelling and verbal thinking routines, group discussion, re-reading texts, and providing contrasting extracts
- Weaker students often describe, list terms they find, they stumble on unfamiliar words and they judge texts
- Teaching strategies include using visuals, teaching structure through ideas, and encouraging wider reading
- Close reading is a difficult and challenging approach to literacy but is certainly a skill that can be improved through strategic teaching.

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