Close Reading 1: Observation vs. Analysis adapted from Inoue, 2009

In this class, you will be composing written arguments about texts, and the clearest and most convincing way of building an argument is by making sure you speak in terms of specific textual evidence instead of general ideas (including personal or moral judgments). It is not sufficient to make a claim about what a text means; you also need to show how you came about your understanding of the text’s meaning through your reading. Doing so requires you to be especially self-aware about how you are drawing conclusions as you read; it also requires you to be able to move skillfully between **observation** and **analysis**.

Observation and analysis refer to two different activities that we do when we write and think. Distinguishing between them can be difficult, however, because the two activities often occur very close together in a written text – or even at the same time. For instance, an analysis can explain an observation or a series of closely linked observations can make up an analysis. In general, observation requires little to no reference to the way the work of literature constructs meaning by linking ideas through language. Analysis, on the other hand, almost always involves connecting two or more different ideas; it requires breaking down a text into its constituent parts and looking at how they work together to produce meaning.

The following table further describes some of the different characteristics that can distinguish observation and analysis:

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| --- | --- |
| **Observation** | **Analysis** |
| Paratactic (everything equally important) | Hypotactic (some things more important) |
| May not involve a claim or reasoning (and is therefore difficult to disagree with) | Usually involves both a claim and reasoning, and I can therefore say why I agree or disagree with it |
| Brings something into view, draws attention | Connects multiple things |
| Your readers’ knowledge of the text is assumed; you are just pointing something out from a mass of details. (Some observations are still more obvious than others.) | You are creating the readers’ knowledge by arranging the details in a way that helps them understand the text. |
| Answers questions about who, what, and when | Answers questions about why, how, and to what extent |
| Asserts a *single* idea | Connects one or more *different* ideas |

To help you practice distinguishing between observation and analysis, here are some example passages that are all about Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Mark each with an **(O)** if the passage is an observation (or is made up of observations) or with an **(A)** if it successfully constitutes analysis. Make brief notes about why you think your answers are correct.

1. *Frankenstein* is a novel written by Mary Shelley and first published in 1818, and its subtitle is *The Modern Prometheus*.

2. Shelley makes Walton’s yearning for exploration of the unknown seem like the enthusiasm of an idealistic pupil. Walton’s admiration for Dr. Frankenstein stems from his fervent pursuit of knowledge of the unknown, which likens him to a student seeking instruction.

3. As the novel *Frankenstein* progresses, Victor’s physical appearance slowly deteriorates until he also can be considered a monster. When Victor gazes upon the corpse of his best friend, Henry Clerval, his appearance changes and he states, “the human frame could no longer support the agonizing suffering that I endured” (Shelley 127). His eyes turn “half open,” and his cheeks become “livid like those in death” (129). Victor’s physical appearance eerily resembles that of the creature. It is also important to note that Robert describes Victor’s physical appearance as “wretched.”

4. As the novel *Frankenstein* progresses, Victor’s physical appearance slowly deteriorates until he also can be considered a monster. The transformation first becomes apparent when Victor gazes upon the corpse of his best friend, Henry Clerval. At the sight of Clerval’s dead body, Victor’s eyes turn “half open,” and his cheeks become “livid like those in death” (129). Recalling that the Creature is constructed from corpses, Victor’s resemblance to a dead body also likens him to the monster. Later, the similarity is more thoroughly confirmed when Robert describes Victor’s physical appearance as “wretched.” Robert has consistently used the same word to describe the Creature; by calling Victor “wretched,” he confirms the reader’s understanding that Victor is becoming more and more like the Creature, at least in appearance.

5. For much of the novel, the Creature is consumed by a rage that leads it to acts of violence. The reader is led to believe that these acts, if not exactly logically valid, are motivated by human emotions. Because civilization had already made its prejudiced assumptions about the Creature, members of society hate and fear it without really giving it the chance to prove them wrong. This general assumption about the Creature angers it, and rightfully so, because his emotions and even his existence are not seen as worthy or valid. However, knowing that the Creature is deprived of love and attention from social interaction or close relationships, the reader can almost excuse the Creature’s violent tendencies because the reader understands the Creature’s loneliness. The characters in the novel, in contrast, fail to acknowledge that the Creature’s rage is actually one of its most human characteristics.

6. Write an observation (1-2 sentences) and an analysis (3-4 sentences) of the first lines of each of the poems you are assigned to read for next class (2 observations, 2 analyses total).

**Analysis and Close Reading**

Analysis is closely linked to the way we present evidence to our readers by artificially recreating our reading process for them. Perhaps the most basic practice of analyzing a literary text is “close reading.” To be clear: close reading does NOT refer to what you do when reading to yourself; it is what you do *for* your readers. We might think of close reading as a kind of performance done in writing. That said, you can practice close reading to yourself by asking how you would convince someone else to agree with you about the meaning of a particular passage.

When performing a close reading (again, a particular type of analysis), one pays attention to details in order to address questions about *how* and *why* a text works the way it does. It is an approach to a text that asks the reader to think not only about *what* a passage is saying, but *how* and *why*. For example, we all know that reading an analytical essay on friendship, reading a poem about two friends, and watching all ten seasons of *Friends* are all quite different experiences. Close reading is about being able to articulately, logically, coherently, and convincingly describe what makes each of those experiences a unique window onto the very general topic of friendship. In writing for this class, your essays should be structured around a series of close readings of particular moments in the text you are writing about. **In other words, the majority of what you write for this class should constitute analysis, not observation.**

Skillfully writing an analytical paper can be difficult. There is no way to know ahead of time what questions are worth asking of a text and thus what requires analysis. However, if you ever feel stuck when writing, the following tools can help you to start breaking down the text.

1. **Know your Text**

Because texts are categorized by their form (which is what we care about), knowing the kind of text you are reading or its genre can tell you a lot about what kinds of details matter. For instance, one generally would not read a novel as though it were a sonnet; only in the latter does enjambment (the breaking of a line of text) make a meaningful difference. If you try to focus your attention on locating the third person omniscient narrator in a classic drama, you probably will not get very far. That said, authors of literary texts can break conventions to achieve specific effects, so you cannot depend on the expectations of a form or a genre to explain everything you experience while reading. The appearance of a ghost in the third act of a realist drama should give you pause. You can learn a lot about your text by using the technique of Previewing discussed on the *5 Reading Habits* handout, available on bcourses.

1. **Notice and Focus + Ranking**

Step 1: List details. *These should include formal elements of the text such as “tone, mood, pace, genre, syntax, grammar, texture, rhythm, narrative structure, punctuation, ambiguity.” Also consider temporality, the relationship between the narrator and the characters, imagery, and literary/rhetorical devices like simile and metaphor.*

Step 2: Choose the most important details. (This is already analytical.)

Step 3: Say why you think these details are most important.

1. **“The Method” – Patterns of Repetition and Contrast**

Step 1: List the words or details that are repeated exactly, and include how many times they’re repeated. *See the details above in “Notice and Focus + Ranking”*

Step 2: List words or details that are similar (called strands).

Step 3: List the binary oppositions or organizing contrasts that you notice.

Step 4: Choose, one repetition, strand, or binary as the most important.

Step 5: Account for any anomalies (exceptions).

1. **Asking “So what?”**

Step 1: Describe the significant details you find, paraphrase key language, look for patterns of repetition or contrast.

Step 2: Make what is implicit explicit (the text will not always tell you directly when a connection is being made)

Step 3: Ask “So what?” to push towards interpretive conclusions.

1. **Paraphrase Three Times**

Step 1: Select a short passage.

Step 2: Find synonyms for all of the key terms.

Step 3: Rephrase the passage three times.

Step 4: Contemplate the versions and prioritize them. Which seem most relevant or faithful to the meaning of the text? Why?

Step 5: What do you now recognize about the passage? What does it appear to mean? What else might it mean?

*\* Remember that one of the main objectives of close reading is avoiding summary (giving an account of the content/plot without being analytical)*