Unit 3: How To Do a Close Reading of a Poem

A few ideas to get you started

1. **Circle or underline words or phrases** that "stick out" at you. What grabs you about the poem? What seems to clamor for your attention? What confuses you? Are there words you don't understand?

2. **Map out the poem**: draw arrows between words, phrases and images that seem related; make notes in the margins about the connections you find. React with your pen and you're more likely to remember later what struck you and what you discovered through your process of reading.

3. Sometimes it's useful to **list all the parts of speech** in a short poem or in one section of a longer poem. For instance, list all the adjectives or nouns or verbs; notice the kind of language the poet uses. Is it coy? Brash? Angry? Intoxicated? Joyful? Musical? Monotonous? Ebullient? (You get the idea. The list could go on forever.) Reattach the adjectives to their nouns and consider each noun-adjective pair against the other pairs in the poem. Place the verb with its subject or object and feel the action of the verb.

4. **Read the poem aloud**. Pretend you are the author and read it as you imagine he or she intended it to be read. Is it satirical, read with dripping sarcasm? Is it full of wonder, read with profound feeling? Romantic? Disparaging? Hopeless? Even-keeled? Now read the poem aloud as if it offended you, delighted you, fascinated you, confused you. How does it change with each kind of reading? This should help you get at the tone of the poem.


6. What about the **rhythm** of the poem? Can you get a sense of its meter? Pound out the rhythm on your knee. Try counting syllables in a number of lines. What about rhyme scheme, if any? Does the poem have alliteration (the repetition of consonant sounds) or assonance (the repetition of vowel sounds)?

7. **Who is the poet addressing** in the poem, if anyone? Why do you think he or she wrote the poem?

8. What's the **big idea** of the poem? How does each element of the poem contribute to this big idea? Try to write it out in a sentence or short paragraph.

9. Remember to **keep your conclusions firmly grounded in the text** of the poem, supporting your assertions with evidence in the poem. Using outside information (history, biographies, etc.) often can help us understand the poem, but the best way "in" (at first, anyway) is always through the door of the poem itself.

Adapted from Vanderbilt University College Writing Program website:
http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/site/liumxq/closereading