

## Close Reading<sup>1</sup>

In the exams of this course, you will be asked to “close read” passages. What this essentially means is that you must explain how the passage is “significant” within its larger context, which could be the text in which it resides, its historical moment, or its place within literary or cultural traditions.

“Significance” generally means the importance to the intrinsic literary quality of the text or textual tradition, which can be addressed in the following standard ways.

- Character: helps the reader understand a particular character.
- Theme: expresses a central idea of the text.
- Structure: foreshadows other events in the text.
- Genre: says something about this particular, identifiable type of text (romance, epic, drama, etc.)

Since we are dealing with medieval literature, there are other special concerns. These are applicable to other periods as well, but I would argue that they are of utmost importance in the Middle Ages.

- Theology: demonstrates something about a particular doctrine (ex. the appropriateness of a particular punishment in purgatory for a particular sin).
- History: indicates something about a particular historical moment (ex. literary response to regicide).
- Gender: illustrates differences in behaviors and perceptions of behaviors associated with men and women.
- Audience: points out something important about the text’s audience.

Thus, when writing exam essays on selected passages, I strongly suggest that you choose one category above and state explicitly how you will address it. For example, suppose this were a Chaucer course and you were using the following passage to explain the significance of the Pardoner in The Canterbury Tales: “My theme is alwey oon, and evere was-- / Radix malorum est Cupiditas.” You would first identify that this is spoken by the Pardoner in the Pardoner’s Prologue [note: medieval poem titles are always underlined]. Then you would identify the type of significance you intend to discuss: “this passage is significant in relation to issues of \_\_\_\_\_.” Using specific words and phrases, you then explain why this is the case. Do not paraphrase the passage – you may feel like you’re addressing its significance, but you’re really not. You must be very clear about what you think is significant.

Here is a sample passage from essay exam:

Although it is possible to treat the Pardoner as a psychologically complex character, this passage highlights his relationship to “vice figures.” The passage shows the reader that the Pardoner never changes. His “theme is always oon and evere was,” meaning that his message is always the same. As a “vice figure” he gains the audience’s trust and allows them to take part in his tricks. Specifically, he works to con his “real” audiences into giving him money, and he thinks they will do this because he thinks they will do this because he has practiced his performance so completely. “Cupiditas,” avarice, is the “Radix,” root, or all evil, is his theme, but the Prologue shows him as an unreflexive character. He never understands himself or examines his own conscience, the purpose of confession via the 7DS, and instead simply performs his “trick” over and over.

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<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on Rebecca Krug’s “Significance” and the sample answer is taken directly from it.