

Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

Video transcript

What is close reading?

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In the 1920s, the English literary critic I. A. Richards conducted an experiment with his students. He gave his students poems without any contextual information, no author's name, no title, no year of publication, no nothing. And he asked his students to interpret those poems. And well, the students, they failed miserably. And that was a real concern for Richards because he felt that being able to interpret a poem by itself was a very important skill that his students needed to have. For Richards, good readers make good, critical citizens.

And Richards called the skill that good readers needed close reading. The ability to read and interpret literary texts without the use of any contextual information. Close reading then, is a specific method within literary criticism. In his book *Practical Criticism*, Richards writes that 'all respectable poetry invites close reading', and he adds that readers should 'refrain from applying external standards' to their readings of poems. Instead, readers should seek to do justice to the text itself by paying supremely close attention to the words on the page.

Today though, close reading is most closely associated not with I. A. Richards, but with a group of critics that go by the name of New Critics. Critics like Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Allan Tate, and John Crowe Ransom, who rose to prominence in the 1930s and really dominated literary scholarship in the 1950s and 1960s. The New Critics defined close reading as a particularly precise and meticulous form of reading that manages to tease out all the semantic and syntactic intricacies of literary texts. Close readers always begin by making what Cleanth Brooks calls 'the closest examination of what the poem says as a poem'.

And the New Critics value those poems that bear out such a close examination. Poems that are characterised by multilayered relations between words, sounds, and meanings. Poems that are characterised by what the New Critics look



for in poetry: ambiguities, paradoxes, ironies, and tensions that are ultimately contained within the organic unity of the text. Indeed, for the New Critics poems are organic units, much like plants or human beings. And as such organic units, literary texts themselves demand our fullest attention.

Also, for the New Critics, literary texts don't need to serve any psychological or social functions. They don't need to educate us or strive to make the world a better place. Instead, literary texts carry their value in themselves. They are ends in themselves. And in this, too, they resemble human beings. Human beings are not means to other ends. They are like literary texts, ends in themselves. Close readers are not interested in authors' intentions. They're not interested in authors' biographies. And they're also not interested in the social, political, and historical contexts in which literary texts are written, published, bought, and read. Instead, they're interested in the literary texts themselves, their own forms and structures.

Today, the New Critics are the whipping boys of more politically and historically inclined critics that consider the New Critics formalist, ahistorical, and apolitical. In week four of this course we'll have a good look at some of these critics. They call themselves New Historicists, and they do that in direct opposition to the New Critics.

At the same time, no literary critic, no matter how historically and politically inclined, will deny that close reading remains a crucial tool of literary scholarship. And indeed, the ability to tease out and describe in great detail the forms and structures of literary texts, their intricate nexus of words and meanings, their linguistic and semantic patterns, this remains the bread and butter of people like myself, who actually get paid to read literature, write about it, and talk about it. And in this week, I want to show you just how useful close reading is as a tool for interpreting literary and other texts inside and outside of this course.