



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

Video transcript

How can we close-read a poem? Part I

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So far, we've had a look at the origins, some of the core features, and some of the underlying assumptions of close reading. And we've also had a look at a specific example. Now let's have a look at a second example that I want to spend some time on with you. Here it is.

The apparition of these faces in the crowd, petals on a wet, black bough. So, this is all we've got-- two lines, no title, no year of publication, no author's name, no historical context. What can we say about this poem without any of this contextual information? Well first of all, it seems as if the poem works with an opposition-- an opposition between the realm of culture, which is visible in the first line, the realm of the faces and the crowd, the human world of culture in the first line-- and the realm of nature-- in the second line the world of the petals and of the wet, black bough.

So, the poem really seems to work by means of an opposition between the human realm of culture, which is visible in the first line, and the realm of nature, which is visible in the second line. The faces emerging from the crowd in the first line, the petals and the wet, black bough in the second line.

But are we really dealing with an opposition here? Let's have a closer look at the poem and let's focus on the first line, and let's look specifically at punctuation. The first line ends with a semicolon, and a semicolon both unites and divides. A semicolon contains both the dividing force of the full stop, and it contains the uniting, yet also dividing force of the comma, so that's what a semicolon is made up of-- a full stop and a comma. So perhaps we can't really talk about an opposition here, about a strict division.

Instead, we have to talk about a relation between culture and nature, and we have to talk, not only about this, we also have to talk about other kinds of relations in this poem. We have to talk about a relation between the plural, the faces, and the petals, and the singular-- the crowd and the bough.

If we look at the two lines individually, we see that they're both structured by the sequence plural- singular. In the first line the plural of the faces is followed by the singular of the crowd. And in the second line, the plural of the petals is followed by the singular of the bough. So, the poem, as a whole, works less in terms



of an opposition. We begin to see that its two lines work in terms of an analogy. In other words, and in one way or another, the faces relate to the crowd, the way the petals relate to the bough. The plural relates to the singular the way the plural relates to the singular.

And it seems like the poem highlights and privileges the one over the other. It seems like the plural-- the faces and the petals-- are foregrounded against the background of the singular-- the crowd and the bough. Note that the poem's colour symbolism in the second line supports such a reading. Not all petals are bright, but most of them are, and pretty much all of them are brighter than a wet, black bough.

So, in the second line there is yet another opposition at work, an opposition between the brightness of the petals and the darkness of the bough, and it's clear that it is the petals that stand out-- that they are foregrounded, while the wet, black bough is the darker background against which the petals shine all that brighter. And since the poem works in terms of an analogy, we may safely conclude that the first line functions in analogous ways. In the first lines the faces are the brighter foregrounded element, while the crowd is a darker, more diffuse backgrounded element.

So, what we have here is, after all, an opposition-- an opposition between the plural of the faces and the petals, which are brighter and foregrounded, and the singular of the crowd and the bough, which is darker and backgrounded. But whence all these oppositions? Now let me stop here and ask you to think about how this close reading could proceed further. I'll return to the poem and say more about it toward the end of this week. But for now, let me ask you to spin this further.