



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

Video transcript

What is social reading?

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By the very fact that you are taking this course, you classify as a hyper-reader. While you may have never thought about different hyper-reading strategies such as skimming, juxtaposing, and filming, before you registered for this course, you are all hyper-readers. But I suspect that only very few of you would consider yourselves social readers. So, what is social reading? Social reading is a collaborative form of online reading in which several internet users read the same text, comment on it, and respond to others' comments. Social reading promises to break with the practice of solitary reading and turn reading into a truly interactive, collaborative process, into an exchange among equals.

Dominique Pleimling has usefully defined social reading as an 'intensive and durable online exchange about texts'. And much of those exchanges take place in the right margins, just like you exchange ideas about this course in the right margins. So, let's have a good look at one social reading experiment, something that we've already had a look at in week 1. Let's return to it now, The Golden Notebook Project. The Golden Notebook Project is a social reading site that brought together seven women to read and discuss British Nobel Prize winner Doris Lessing's novel *The Golden Notebook*, which was published in 1962. Now, The Golden Notebook Project is special in that it restricted comments to these seven women.

They explained this by declaring that theirs is "an experiment in close reading in which seven women are reading the book and conducting a conversation in the margins". So, what we get here is really an elaborate collaborative close reading of one novel. But what is Lessing's novel all about? Lessing's concern in *The Golden Notebook* is both psychological and social. It's psychological in that it explores the mental breakdown of its protagonist, Anna. And Lessing's concern is also social in that she explores the breakdown of society, in that she critiques Stalinism, and most famously in that she explores the social and sexual liberation of women. When it was published in the 1960s, *The Golden Notebook* became an instant feminist classic.

Now let's start reading the book.



By clicking the appropriate hyperlink, we land at the beginning of Lessing's preface. And of course, we could just read from here and click our way through the text, switching back and forth between Lessing's novel and the readers' comments. Alternatively, we could do something else. Alternatively, we could scroll down to see what's at the bottom of the page.

And what we find there is a list with the pages that have received the most comments. For instance, page 376 has received 20 comments, and page 15 has received 5 comments. So, let's have a look at page 15.

This happens to be the beginning of the novel, where we find the protagonist Anna and her friend Molly gossiping as they await the arrival of a man named Richard. And five social readers already start commenting. Since we're still at the beginning of the novel, many of the readers' comments are speculative. They speculate about the relationship between Anna and Molly, about the relationship between Richard and the two women, about how the story will develop from here. Thus, one of the social readers, Philippa Levine, comments.

Here's what Philippa Levine says: 'I was really fascinated by the way gossip serves, right at the start of the book, as a form of intimacy between the two women. It's something that threatens and mystifies and frustrates Richard - he can't get past it and can't understand it. Is it serving, I wonder, as a kind of "women's language"?' That is certainly an argument that gets made about how 'women relate to one another'. Now another social reader, Nona Willis Aronowitz, disagrees with Philippa's interpretation, as she responds to her comment.

Here's what Nona writes: 'It seems less like a "women's language" and more like a freeperson's language versus someone who has already given up and submitted to the life they were "given" (that is, chose albeit listlessly).' And now if we really like one of these readers' comments, we can also check out all of their comments, just as you can follow any learner in this course.

For instance, we can check out all of the comments by Philippa Levine. And from here, we can get back into the literary text.

For instance, page 503, and this, what a surprise, happens to be the ending of the novel. And we can again see what the comments say, what these four women say that comment here on the ending of the novel. So, this is my example of social reading, a collaborative reading of an online text that endures, and in which you continually shift back and forth between reading the text, commenting on it, and responding to others' comments or following others' comments. Social reading is very much an interactive, collaborative form of online reading. Is this the future of reading?