

Close Reading Assignments
ENG 205-004: Poetry

Close Reading One (No Alternate Options Available)
Traditional Close Reading & Explication: Early Modern Poetry

Suggested Due Date: October 28
Publication Optional

Your translation projects—in which you strove toward modern, yet intelligent and entertaining translations of Old and Middle English poems—were concerned with making your chosen texts accessible to a modern audience and illuminating the sometimes difficult and subtle shifts our language and poetry made during its journey to Modern English.

We have moved forward in time, language, and poetic sensibilities to the Early Modern Period (or the Renaissance, if you prefer), and thus the task of “translating” is of slightly less concern. Most readers would not have trouble with the Englishes of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers: spelling is more uniform and words are more recognizable thanks to the printing press and the continued prevalence of London’s dialect (sprouting from the East Midlands dialect of Middle English, if you’ll recall); syntax and word order are often clearer to modern readers due to the almost total eradication of inflections; and these words frequently exist in some form or fashion in our own Modern English.

It is that phrase “in some form or fashion” that concerns us in this assignment as readers of Early Modern English and its poetry. First, we must never forget that English is a living language, always evolving and changing with each and every word we speak: words might have taken new meanings in the centuries since these poems were written; uses popular during those times might have dropped out of vogue in recent years; and English was evolving even then (neologisms are *everywhere* in early modern poetry). Next, we must consider our situation in history and literature. Writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were highly aware of the possibilities and promises of English, especially in light of its long maligned reputation as a language unworthy of poetry and learning. These centuries were also a time of major political and social upheaval, necessitating careful subtlety and cunning on the part of the poet. Finally, we must realize that much poetic work of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries draws on texts which, for better or worse, are not as familiar to twenty-first century readers as they were to our earlier counterparts. Allusions to the Bible and religious turmoil, references to Greek and Roman mythologies and cosmologies, nods to the Ptolemaic theory of the universe and other scientific concerns of the Renaissance, etc., might be misunderstood or missed completely by modern readers not well schooled in these traditions.

So many things to remember and consider! Your task? To shine light upon these subtleties and references and make these poems more clear for modern readers—including yourself—through close reading.

Choose a short poem or passage from a longer poem by an author from the early modern period and explicate it fully using the *Oxford English Dictionary* and other sources as necessary. You should aim for about five pages.

A close reading paper needs a thesis, evidence, and analysis. The best close readings are explorations. Does the poem raise questions for you? Go to the text with your questions. It will answer you. Do you believe your poem means something different than most people do? Use the text to provide evidence via close reading.

My best advice is to explicate a small portion of the poem and explain how that section works within the larger landscape of the text. Pay close attention to the features of poetry you’ve learned thus far, including but not limited to meter, rhyme scheme, form, prevailing sounds, poetic devices, and figurative language. It will probably be worth your while to research your chosen poem and see what has already been said, what remains to be said, and what you can say better than those who have worked previously with the text. While you are not absolutely required to use outside sources, doing so will surely result in a better argument, a clearer explication, and thus, a better grade. You might find yourself using the Bible, a history text, or an article from a peer-reviewed journal. Document your sources using MLA Style.

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Close Reading Two (Three Options Available)
The Paper of Choice

Suggested Due Date: November 11
Publication Optional, but Highly Recommended

For this assignment, choose one of the options below. You are free to write about any poem you'd like, though I ask that you choose a poem written in Modern English if you go with Option One.

Option One: Traditional Close Reading

Apply the instructions for your Traditional Close Reading to a poem in Modern English. You'll probably rely less on dictionaries for this paper and more on poetic devices, but the end result will be similar. Once again, you might find it useful to research your chosen poem. No fewer than four pages, please. Document sources according to MLA Style.

Option Two: Reply In Kind

Throughout history, poets have responded to one another via poems. One of the most famous examples of this kind of poetic conversation was sparked by Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." Replies include Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," John Donne's "The Bait," C. Day Lewis' "Come, Live With Me and Be My Love," William Carlos Williams' "Raleigh Was Right," Ogden Nash's "Love Under the Republicans (or Democrats)," W.D. Snodgrass' "Invitation," Emily Dickinson's "I Cannot Live With You," and others.

For this option, choose any poem you'd like. Read it carefully, considering both its purpose and its poetics (rhyme, meter, form, devices, etc.), and compose a reply. You may choose to follow the form of the poem closely, as Raleigh, Donne, and Lewis do. Or, you may choose to deviate from the form, as Williams and Dickinson do. Whatever you decide, explain your method and choices in a 3-4 page process letter. I'll also need a copy of the poem to which you're replying. Document sources according to MLA Style.

Option Three: Soundtrack

Think about the last film or television program you saw. How did its soundtrack shape your viewing experience? Often, music helps us to understand how we should feel or what we should notice. It adds depth to our experience—it adds a *sense*—and moves us in ways we sometimes fail to realize.

We've spent a lot of time talking about poetry's relationship to music. For this option, you'll provide an 8-12 song soundtrack for the poem you've chosen. Your soundtrack should aim to explore the text and educate readers in much the same way a traditional close reading paper would. Along with your soundtrack, you'll prepare a 3-4 page process letter explaining your method and choices. I'll need a copy of the poem you've chosen and your soundtrack, too. (You might embed a playlist on your website or, if you're not publishing this work, burn a CD with the soundtrack for my use.) Document sources according to MLA Style.

Close Reading Three (Choice of Text)
Poetry in Context

Suggested Due Date: December 9
Publication Optional, but Encouraged

This assignment asks you to perform a close reading of a single poem, much the same as you've done previously. The twist here is that you must consider the context of the poem. That is, you must consider the poem as part of the larger work—the book—in which you first encountered it. We are devoting the last four weeks of our time together to studying three single-author books of poetry:

Laura Newbern's *Love and the Eye*
Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary*
Albert Goldbarth's *Budget Travel Through Space + Time*

Choose a poem from one of the three books above. Or, choose a book and *then* choose a poem. Once you've chosen your poem, write a paper (minimum five pages) reading the poem within the context of its book. That is, consider how (or if) the poem you've chosen fits with and within the collection as a whole. If the book has a purpose, how does this particular poem help to achieve it? How does the poem's relationship to the larger work enrich its meaning?