

Suggestions for Shakespeare Close Readings

TO START:

- » Read the section a handful of times carefully
- » Look up unfamiliar and intriguing words
- » Pay attention to stage directions
- » Be able to summarize clearly what is going on

NEXT, CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

How are the characters developed?

- » Is this the first time any of the characters appear? If so, what sort of a person does s/he seem to be? How does s/he speak, move, interact?
 - » Does the person change over the course of the scene in any way?
 - » If a soliloquy, what does the character reveal to the audience and how does s/he do so?
 - » If this is not the first time the character appears, how are they in this scene compared to how they have previously and how they are later in the play?
- ***How does all of this contribute to meaning?**

How do the characters interact?

- » Are there significant stage directions?
 - » Are there any significant objects that the characters are mentioning or interacting with (based on speech or stage directions)
 - » Are there any significant movements or actions that characters make (based on speech or stage directions)
 - » Who speaks more frequently, with more length, with more emphasis, etc. Does this change? Why?
 - » How do they address each other - e.g. respectfully, with putdowns, with double entendres?
 - » Do characters complete each other's rhyme? Reiterate each other's words? Twist each other's words? To what end?
 - » Do characters speak differently in different contexts?
- ***How does all of this contribute to meaning?**

How do the characters speak?

- » Are the characters speaking in:
 - blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter)
 - prose
 - couplets (two subsequent rhymed lines)
 - other meters (occasionally expands or contracts deliberately)
 - Does the form stay consistent throughout - the same among all characters?
 - Is there a character speaking in a form different from earlier, later?
 - » Examine punctuation.
 - » Notice when sentences get longer or shorter.
 - » Look for: enjambment, caesuras, alliteration, consonance, assonance
- ***How do these aspects contribute to meaning?**
- E.g. Does a rhyme or sound pattern reinforce something a character is saying?
How? Does it undermine it? How?

What particular language is being used?

- Is a word/phrase used in more than one way - by one character, by various characters? Why?
- Was a word used previously in the play - or will it be used again later in the play? Was it used by the same/different character? In the same/different way?
- What is remarkable about the syntax? How are phrases structured to create meaning? What images are prevalent? Are there contrasting images? Are they in just one character's speech? More than one?
- Find other figurative language (allusion, metaphor, personification, synecdoche, hyperbole, etc.) Are these in one character's speech? More than one? Do they vary over the course of the scene? How?
- Is there any use of irony - verbal or situational irony that a character uses consciously, or dramatic irony that the audience appreciates?

****How does all of this contribute to meaning?**

FINALLY, MAKE SURE YOU ADDRESS:

How does this scene fit into the context of the whole play?

- Is this a pivotal moment in any way?
- Is something new introduced about a character?
- Is there an important plot element?
- Does the scene foreshadow anything to come later?
- What is revealed later in the play which gives further meaning to the scene?
- Is something introduced that is difficult to reconcile, given other aspects of the play?
- What further questions are raised, given your close reading of this scene?

ACTING QUESTIONS - helpful for moving toward a deep understanding of a scene

- What is each character's motivation in the scene: why is s/he there? What does s/he want to achieve - to convince another, to learn something from one of the others, etc.?
- If a character is trying to convince another of something, what methods does s/he use?
- What does the character know but isn't saying? Why isn't s/he saying it?
- What doesn't the character know? Does this lack of knowledge drive the interaction?
- Is there a power imbalance of some sort (or multiple) in the scene? Explain.
- Who needs whom? Why?
- From the perspective of an actor saying lines, what words are important? How do the words in the lines sound? How should they be said? At what volume? With what tone and inflection? Why?
- What movements are necessary to convey the character and the actions?
- What props and/or scenery are crucial to the scene?
- What ambiguity in the scene leaves room for artistic interpretation? What implications would differing interpretations have on the meaning of the scene?