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A Companion to Literary Analysis

Six Moves for Reading with Attention

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Preface



This is a short book about reading. It is not a survey of literary theory and not a history of criticism. It is a working companion — six moves a reader can practice on any short story, novel, or poem, until the moves become as automatic as how you hold a fork.

I have taught literature for many years, in classrooms where some students arrived expecting to be told what a passage means and others arrived expecting to be told that meaning is whatever they say it is. Both expectations get in the way. The work of reading is something else entirely: a careful attention to what is actually on the page, followed by an honest description of what that attention notices.

Each chapter teaches one move. The six moves, in order, are close reading, character, structure, voice, theme, and form. Each chapter opens with the move named and defined in plain language; works through a single guided example from a public-domain text; closes with a writing prompt that asks the reader to perform the move on a new passage; and ends with a one-page bibliography of the texts used.

The example texts are drawn from a small canon: Hawthorne, Chopin, Dickinson, Henry James, Joyce, Crane, Wharton, Hurston, Whitman, Twain, Mansfield. The canon is not exhaustive and not exclusive; it is the public-domain shelf I have found rich enough to teach every craft principle a serious reader needs. A student who reads this book closely will leave able to read any text not in it.

— *J. F. M., Philadelphia, 2026*

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How to Use This Book



Read the chapters in order. Each move builds on the one before. Close reading is the foundation; character, structure, voice, and theme are the moves you make once close reading has shown you what is on the page; form is the last move because form is the discipline that holds all the others together.

Read with a pencil. Underlining is part of close reading. Marginal notes are part of structural analysis. Question marks in the margin are how voice and theme begin to ask their own questions back.

After each chapter, do the writing prompt at the end. The prompts are short — three to five hundred words — and they are the place where the move becomes yours. Without the prompts, the chapters are about reading; with the prompts, the chapters are about doing.

Where a guided reading quotes a passage from a public-domain text, the full text of the story or poem is referenced by its bibliography entry at the back. Read the example text in full before working through the guided reading. The chapter assumes you have done so.

Chapter 1 · Close Reading



Close reading is the practice of attending to what a text actually says — its words, its sentences, its rhythms, its choices — before deciding what the text means. It is the first move because every other move depends on it. A reader who has not noticed what is on the page cannot say anything true about it.

The move

When you close-read, you do three things, in this order. First, you describe what is literally on the page — the syntax, the diction, the order of information, the tone of voice. Second, you notice the patterns that emerge — repetitions, rhythms, returning images. Third, you ask why these particular choices, in this particular order. Not what the choices mean, yet. Just why these and not others.

Guided reading: the opening of Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (1894)

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

— Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour," opening sentence

Notice first what is on the page. One long sentence, twenty-six words. The subject is "great care" — not a person but an abstraction. The verb is passive: "was taken." Mrs. Mallard appears not as the actor but as the one to whom news is to be broken. The news itself arrives at the end of the sentence, after a clause about her heart and a clause about how to deliver it.

Now notice the pattern. The sentence puts caution before content. We do not learn that the husband is dead until the last three words. The sentence enacts the careful breaking it describes — slow, indirect, attending to the listener before the message. Even the word "broken" carries weight; it suggests something fragile, and it places the fragility in the hearer.

Now ask: why this opening, and not another? Chopin could have written: "Mrs. Mallard's husband died this morning." She did not. The choice she made puts the reader inside the management of a tragedy before the tragedy itself appears. We are positioned, before we know it, as someone who must handle Mrs. Mallard carefully. That is information about Mrs. Mallard's social position — protected, watched over, treated as fragile. It is also information about what is about to happen: a story whose central act will be a quiet act, a story in which what happens inside Mrs. Mallard will matter more than what is announced.

Close reading asks you to notice these things. It does not yet ask you to interpret. Interpretation is the next chapter; first, the page itself.

Exercise 1.1 · Close-read an opening

Read the first paragraph of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835).

Describe, in two or three sentences, what is literally on the page: the syntax, the diction, the order of information, the tone.

Identify one pattern that emerges. A repetition, a rhythm, a returning image.

Ask: why this opening, and not another? Write three to four hundred words.

Writing prompt

Take any short story you have read recently and read the first paragraph again, slowly. Then write five hundred words on what is on the page — only what is on the page, not what it means. Stop when you find yourself interpreting. The discipline is to describe before you interpret.

Chapter 2 · Character



A character in fiction is not a person. A character is a pattern of choices, gestures, dialogue, and described attention, assembled by an author to produce in the reader the experience of meeting someone. Character analysis is the practice of reading those choices, gestures, dialogue, and described attention with the same care you would read any other pattern in a text.

The move

When you read for character, you ask three questions. What does the character want? What does the character do to get it? And — most importantly — what does the character notice? The third question is the one most readers skip. Authors reveal character by what their characters see and what they walk past. The novelist Henry James called this the field of consciousness; the same idea applies in a paragraph of dialogue as in a hundred pages of interior monologue.

Guided reading: Mrs. Mallard, sitting at the window

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

— Kate Chopin, "The Story of an Hour"

What does Mrs. Mallard want? Nothing she has said. Chopin has not given her a stated desire; the story is not driven by a stated desire. What does she do? She has gone into a room alone and sat down. That is the whole action of the central scene.

What does she notice? Look at the catalog: trees aquiver with new spring life. The breath of rain. A peddler in the street. A distant song. Sparrows. Every detail is alive, in motion, fresh, ordinary, and outside her former life. Mrs. Mallard has just learned that her husband is dead, and what she is noticing is the world filling up with movement and breath.

The reader does not yet have the language for what Mrs. Mallard is feeling. Chopin will not give that language until two paragraphs later, when Mrs. Mallard says aloud, "Free, free, free." But the noticing has already told the reader what is coming. The character's field of consciousness is the character. What Mrs. Mallard sees is who she is becoming.

Exercise 2.1 · Read for the field of consciousness

Read the opening pages of James Joyce's "Araby" (1914).

List every detail the narrator notices — every sensory observation, every gesture, every name.

What does the catalog tell you about the narrator? Write three hundred words.

Writing prompt

Pick a character from a short story you have read. Without consulting the text, write a list of five things that character notices. Then go back to the text and check your list. What did you remember? What did you miss? What does the character notice that you did not?

Chapter 3 · Structure



Structure is the architecture of a literary work — the order in which information arrives, the proportions between scenes, the relation between the beginning and the end, the placement of the turn. Structural analysis is the practice of seeing a text as a built thing, not as a sequence of words but as a shaped object whose shape carries meaning.

The move

When you read for structure, you do three things. First, you map the text: where does it begin, where does it end, what scenes or sections divide it, what proportions does the author give to each part? Second, you locate the turn — the moment when the trajectory changes direction. Third, you ask what the structure does that the content alone could not.

Guided reading: the shape of "The Story of an Hour"

"The Story of an Hour" is two pages long. Map it: a sentence of news, a paragraph of grief, a scene at the window, a moment of recognition, a return downstairs, a final reversal. The proportions matter. Chopin gives one sentence to the death, two paragraphs to the grief, and seven paragraphs to what happens in the room with Mrs. Mallard alone. The scene she takes most time with is the scene where nothing visible happens. The shape tells you where the story's real interest lies.

Locate the turn. It comes at the moment Mrs. Mallard names what she is feeling: "Free, free, free." The story has been building toward this naming for two pages; once it has arrived, the structure of the story shifts from interior to exterior, and we are moved out of the room and downstairs to the ending.

The ending is the second turn. Mrs. Mallard's husband walks through the door alive. She dies. The doctors say it was joy that killed her. The reader, having watched the scene at the window, knows that joy was not the cause. The structure of the story has built a private knowledge — what Mrs. Mallard felt — and then enclosed that knowledge inside a public misreading. The shape itself is the irony. The story is two pages long because it is exactly long enough to teach the reader to see the private and the public at the same time.

Exercise 3.1 · Map a story's structure

Read Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" (1897).

Sketch a one-page map of the story's structure: the major scenes, the proportions, the turns.

Identify the turn. Where does the trajectory change?

Ask: what does the structure do that the content alone could not? Write four hundred words.

Writing prompt

Pick a poem of moderate length — twelve to fifty lines. Map its structure on a piece of paper: where does each section begin, where does it end, where is the turn? Describe what the shape does that the lines alone could not.

Chapter 4 · Voice



Voice is the texture of a writer's prose or verse — the rhythm of the sentences, the choice of diction, the angle of attention, the particular blend of formality and intimacy that makes one writer recognizable across hundreds of pages. Voice is not personality, and it is not style in the decorative sense. Voice is the writer's way of looking at the world made audible.

The move

When you read for voice, you do three things. First, you describe the texture: sentence length, diction, pace, rhythm. Second, you identify the angle: where does the voice stand in relation to its subject — close or distant, intimate or formal, ironic or earnest? Third, you ask what the voice withholds. Every voice is partly defined by what it does not say. The voice's silences are part of its meaning.

Guided reading: Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928)

I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it.

— Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me"

Describe the texture. The sentences are short, declarative, and direct. The diction is plain and unornamented. The pace is brisk. The rhythm has the cadence of a speaker who knows what she thinks and is willing to say it plainly, without hedging.

Identify the angle. The voice stands close to itself and at a sharp distance from the conventional pieties of its moment. The phrase "the sobbing school of Negrohood" is voice made visible: a coinage that names a school of thought, places her outside it, and refuses to participate in its grammar. The voice is unmistakably Hurston's. No other writer would have made these choices in this order.

Ask what the voice withholds. Hurston is not telling you that she has no sorrow about race in America. She is telling you that she will not participate in the rhetorical performance of that sorrow on demand. The voice withholds the expected lament, and the withholding is itself a position. Voice analysis is paying attention to that withholding.

Exercise 4.1 · Hear two voices

Read the opening pages of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) and the opening pages of Henry James's "The Real Thing" (1892).

Describe the texture of each voice in two or three sentences.

Identify the angle: where does each voice stand in relation to its subject?

What does each voice withhold? Write five hundred words.

Writing prompt

Pick a writer you admire. Type out three of their paragraphs by hand. Then type three of your own paragraphs on the same subject. Compare the two side by side. Where do your sentences differ? What does theirs do that yours does not, and the other way around? The point of the exercise is not imitation. The point is to hear voice as a measurable texture, beginning with your own.

Chapter 5 · Theme



Theme is what a text is about underneath what it is about. It is not the subject ("love," "war," "death") and not the moral ("crime does not pay," "love conquers all"). Theme is the specific, often unresolved, set of questions a particular work poses by the way it arranges its particular material. Two stories about love can have entirely different themes; theme is what makes them different.

The move

When you read for theme, you do three things. First, you resist naming the theme too soon. The first theme that comes to mind is usually the subject, not the theme. Second, you look for the tensions the text holds open — places where the work does not resolve, places where it presents two true things in friction with each other. Third, you formulate the theme as a question, not a statement. "What does freedom cost when the cost is paid in private?" is a theme. "Freedom is good" is not.

Guided reading: the theme of "The Story of an Hour"

Resist naming the theme too soon. The story is not about marriage; it is not about death; it is not about the limits of nineteenth-century womanhood, though it touches all three. Those are subjects. The theme is the question the story holds open.

Look for the tensions. Mrs. Mallard's grief is real, and her relief is real. Her husband loved her, and she was unfree. The doctors are wrong about how she died, and they are also, in a kind, right — there is joy in the moment of her death, and the joy is what kills her. These tensions do not resolve. The story refuses to choose between them.

Formulate the theme as a question. One version, available to a reader who has done the close reading of chapter one and the structural analysis of chapter three: How does a person, especially a person whose life has been arranged by other people, come to recognize her own freedom, and what does that recognition cost? The theme is the question; the story is its answer in the form of a refusal to answer.

Exercise 5.1 · Find the theme as a question

Read James Joyce's "The Dead" (1914).

List three subjects the story is about (love, mortality, snow, Ireland, marriage — pick three).

Identify two tensions the story holds open without resolving.

Formulate the theme as a question. Write four hundred words.

Writing prompt

Take any short story you know well. Write down what you would have said the theme was, in a sentence. Then rewrite the sentence as a question. Then look at the story again and ask whether your question is the question the story actually holds open. Revise the question. Revise it again.

Chapter 6 • Form



Form is the discipline that holds the other five moves together. Form is the difference between a short story and a novel, between a sonnet and a free-verse poem, between a memoir and an essay — and within each of those, the specific arrangement of voice, structure, character, theme, and close reading that makes one work of that form successful and another work of the same form fall short. Form is the rules of the game the writer chose to play.

The move

When you read for form, you do three things. First, you identify the form the writer chose. Second, you describe the formal conventions that form invokes — what readers of this form expect, what discipline they bring to the page. Third, you ask how the writer engaged the conventions: kept them, broke them, extended them, ironized them.

Guided reading: Emily Dickinson, common meter

Because I could not stop for Death — He kindly stopped for me — The Carriage held but just Ourselves — And Immortality.

— Emily Dickinson, "Because I could not stop for Death" (c. 1863)

Identify the form. Dickinson writes in common meter — quatrains alternating four-stress and three-stress iambic lines (or close approximations). Common meter is the form of the hymnal. Any reader who has sat in a Protestant church in nineteenth-century America would have heard this rhythm hundreds of times.

Describe the conventions. Hymns are short. Hymns address God. Hymns end in consolation. The rhythm of common meter carries the expectation that what follows the rhythm will be a kind of resolution — a settling of the soul.

Ask how Dickinson engages the conventions. She keeps the meter. She does not address God. She addresses Death, and not in supplication but in the social grammar of being called for by a gentleman caller. She does not end in consolation. She ends in eternity as a coach ride that has not stopped moving. The form is invoked and then twisted; the hymn rhythm carries the reader into a place the hymn never goes. The form is the meaning. A free-verse poem could say what Dickinson says here, but it could not perform the inversion of expectation that makes Dickinson's line shock.

Exercise 6.1 • Read for formal engagement

Read Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill" (1920).

Identify the form: short story, of what tradition.

Describe two conventions of that form.

Ask: how does Mansfield engage those conventions — keep, break, extend, ironize? Write five hundred words.

Writing prompt

Choose a poem in a recognizable form — a sonnet, a villanelle, a ghazal, a haiku — and a poem in free verse on a comparable subject. Compare what the formed poem does that the free-verse poem cannot, and the other way around. The exercise is not to argue that one is better. The exercise is to see what each form allows and forbids.

A Note on Method



The six moves are a sequence, but in practice they happen at the same time. A skilled reader is close-reading and noticing structure and hearing voice and watching for theme and feeling the form, all in one pass through a paragraph. The chapters separate the moves so that you can practice each one alone; the practice is so that the moves can rejoin each other in your reading life.

When the six moves rejoin, they become reading. Reading is what you have always been doing; the six moves only make it slower, more deliberate, and more honest. The aim of the discipline is not to produce critics. The aim is to produce readers — people for whom a sentence on a page is a built thing made by a person, and who can describe what they have noticed about it without lying.

Bibliography of Example Texts



Every literary example quoted in this volume is drawn from a work in the United States public domain. Below, the full citation for each source, in MLA format.

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James F. Mulhern is the author of the novels *Molly Bonamici* and *Give Them Unquiet Dreams* (a Kirkus Reviews Best Book of 2019), the novella *A Prayer for Home*, and the story collections *Assumptions and Other Stories*, *Mia Bambina and Other Stories*, and *The Weight of Small Mercies*. He has taught creative writing and literature at the undergraduate and graduate levels for over two decades. Silver Current Press is his imprint.

