Burstein English 213B **Paper #1**

**4 pages**—**I’ve here upped it by one page**—doublespaced.

**The Point:** In terms of its ideas this paper may feel tiny: the point is to demonstrate your skill with close reading technique. The purpose of this exercise is to continue to work with the mechanics of what you will later using as proof for a larger argument in this class, and hopefully for other text-based courses. I seem to have made a powerpoint designating levels of CR. Let me know if that proves useful. It’s in Files.

**How:** Do a close reading of a passage from Woolf. The passage you choose to close read should be no more than 20 lines, and *must be a complete section* (see section A below).

You may not use a passage we have discussed at length in class. One risk is that you end up repeating a discussion. That said, you’re welcome to email me ahead of time with a “This passage is irresistible, calling to me as if from the skies Septimus surveys, and my heart will break if I can’t settle down and chew over this structure” plea. *If we start on a passage you’ve started work on, unmute yourself immediately, identify yourself, and yell “Switzerland was neutral in World War Two.” I may ask you to lead our discussion, and you can point out to us what you’ve unearthed as notable.*

You will not need an introductory paragraph for this paper; begin with the passage’s first words or a structure or a pattern that kicks in in the first lines, and work your way through the passage. Your paper will end up grouping the material in paragraphs according to some general categories and/or patterns, since patterns will start to emerge: the repetition of a word, or its cognates, for instance will force you to cite move around in the text—see below for citational system.

Your conclusion will be teensy: “This stuff exists.” Avoid clichés. That’s a cliché. Do it anyway. Resist the anodyne.

## How To Give a Close Reading

A. Pick a passage of some note: you should find it particularly compelling. This passage should be a complete paragraph or series of paragraphs: do not arbitrarily divide a section of the text in order for it to conform to length requirements (see above). See me for specific questions.

B. Your job is to pick it apart. This does not mean rephrasing it. The urge to paraphrase will be cured by a statement about the passage, which reaches outside of the events at hand. Pretend we’re reading Dracula. Bad (although an accurate paraphrase): "In this passage, we see Lucy die. She takes a long time." Better: "This passage is an example of Bram Stoker using the image of a female to describe death; the word "dress" (l. 2) is used as a metaphor for "shroud" (l.3)." Another kind of paper might have the thesis statement that uses close reading in part to show that death is feminized in Draculabut here you are constrained both by the length and scope of the assignment.

1. You must be attuned to both (a) **grammar**—for instance, are there a lot of adjectives, and why is that? —and (b) **style**—for instance, is it a series of run-on sentences? Pay attention to **form**: does the text employ dialogue, internal monologue, description? What is the point of view?

2. Pay attention to the way language is used: metaphorical/literal levels of language; verb tense(s); stylistic tendencies and figurative language such as personification, synecdoche, or the repetition of language, etc.

3. If you do not know what a word means, look it up in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED).

4. What is the tone of the speaker or speakers? Does it change? If you don’t have an ear for it, just skip it. That’s ok. 5. Do not assume that the speaker is the author. If you do so, your paper’s grade will suffer.

6. Use concrete evidence from the passage to prove things.

C. **Do not use the first person.** Be very careful about **separating your reactions from other possibilities of reader-response**. **Do not say "The reader"**; this is a cloak for "I," and the point is to be authoritative without resting upon subjective responses. The evidence is found through your attention to the text's language. Similarly, do not employ the phrase "I think" or "It seems to me" or “To me.” I know you think these things, because you are writing them.

D. Avoid euphemism and colloquialism; do not write in the manner in which one speaks. Thou need not be stilted, though.

## Above all, focus on form in the passage: *how* the passage happens, rather than what the text "means" at a more global interpretive level. Do not "explain" or paraphrase the passage; show how the passage works at the most detailed levels.

## Formalities

1. Photograph the passage you have chosen and include it with your paper when you turn it in, with the passage marked as described below. If that’s an issue, ask us to spend 5 minutes of class time making sure that works for everyone, or that there are work-arounds. I’m semi-against transcription given the heightened possibility of error, but I’m also aware of pragmatic necessity. Regardless, make sure you’re working from an authorized copy, or you’ll be wasting your time on Fred-in-Louisiana’s theory of punctuation, and not Woolf’s.

**The point is to mark clearly on the version of the text you submit where your close reading begins and ends: its first and last lines. Number every five lines in the margins for the purpose of citation.**

2. All quotations in your paper from the passage must be accompanied by a parenthetical citation referring to its line number or numbers, which you should abbreviate as the letter *el*: "l." (for a single line) or for multiple lines, “ll.”, as in “ll. 2-4.” For example:

“Leda and the Swan” begins in a startling manner; the word “sudden” (l.1) is almost the first word of the poem. The adjective sets a pattern, for many adjectives follow in the poem: “dark,” “helpless,” terrified” (ll. 3, 4, 5).

3. When you are almost done

A. Check to make sure that your paper is littered with quotation marks surrounding individual words and word combinations from the passage you’ve chosen. This will ensure that you are focusing on individual word choices and their function. If your quotation marks are consistently around entire sentences, you are not close reading. If your paper has no quotation marks in it, or only a few, it means that you are at a remove from the text, and not reading closely enough. If you notice that you have only three quotations on a single page, and the rest is you talking about what it "means," you are interpreting, rather than schooling yourself in being sensitive to how the text presents its material. Go back and—yes—revise.

B. Review “Marginal Comments: The Lexicon” in “Files” before turning it in. Text, letter

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