Criticism 1: Slow Reading

What does it mean to be “slow”? Can it be smart to be slow? According to a famous philosopher, good reading requires its practitioners “to go aside, to take time, to become still” so that they may “read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and after, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers.” From this perspective, good reading is a careful, recursive activity—it is not speed reading or a search for mere information; it takes in both the highlights and the nuances of a text. Slow reading is not based on the shortest distance between the two points of text and reader, but on the most effective distance. It embodies the difference, for the game of reading, between joining a neighbourhood pick-up team and playing in the same league as a Gretsky or a Woods.

Criticism 1 is described in the calendar as “[a]n introduction to strategies of reading, interpretation, and analysis of literary and non-literary texts . . . .” The term “criticism” refers to the communication of the results of reading, interpretation, and analysis. It is a genre or type of student (and scholarly) essay writing. To perform well in this genre it is not enough to have good writing skills or an interesting idea about a text—one must also make effective use of standard kinds of textual evidence. Most of us can see that the Mona Lisa has a curious smile. Only an art critic, however, will be able to tell us how Leonardo painted this woman—detailing and examining the compounds, colours, brushes, and strokes Da Vinci uses, the conventional motifs he adapts, the artists or schools of art that influence him, and so on. As a result, those trained in art criticism will not only see the Mona Lisa’s smile; they will be able to explain a bit about why it is so curiosity-provoking.

In this class we will develop our ability to explain texts along lines very similar to those used art critics to explain a painting. All effective criticism begins with a careful look at the mundane construction of a text—its words and sounds, structure and plot, figures and forms, audience and speaker, echoes and borrowings. But although the material makings of a text may be mundane—i.e., right there, hidden in plain sight—they are usually only fully visible to a thoughtful, cautious, and well-trained reader. Good readers will hold onto the spontaneous insights and guesses that most of us have when we first read a text, but they will also go on to support those insights and guesses (or to rule them out) on the basis of a careful examination of textual details and subtleties. By considering all aspects of a text we will, of course, be more effective in getting our ideas across to others. But reading carefully is about more than making our criticism more persuasive; it is about our own satisfaction as readers, too. Good literature does not simply communicate information; just like a great painting, performance, or song, good literature enchants us with the beauty, mystery, and power of how it communicates.

In Criticism 1, then, we will work together to explore some of the standard ways in which literary critics understand the beauty, mystery, and power of how texts communicate—and we will practice putting that understanding into words of our own.
Course content and goals:

English 251A is an introduction to the method and craft of careful reading, and to the communication of the results of such reading, as practised in an academic setting. The course provides students with training in textual analysis, and in the canons of acceptable evidence for critical writing on literary and non-literary texts.

Fundamental to textual analysis is knowledge of the building blocks of texts. Texts are structures of words or images used to communicate, and the aim and purpose of textual analysis is to delineate and interpret the composition of these structures (and their role in what a text communicates). Some of the building blocks to be studied in English 251A may already be familiar to you (such as rhyme, metaphor, and point of view), while others are likely to be new (such as intertextuality, metonymy, and addressee).

The course has three main goals. On successful completion of the course, students will have improved their ability to:

- identify the building blocks of texts using accepted critical vocabulary;
- analyze the role of these building blocks in the construction of a text using accepted critical strategies; and
- support a thesis on the meaning of a text using accepted forms of evidence drawn from the building blocks of texts and their role in the construction of the work.

Class organization and format:

The class will function as a seminar, that is, as a workshop in which we will both test and refine our reading skills, and contribute to a team reading effort. Rather than listen passively to lectures, we will work together as a group to explore the art and strategies of textual analysis. We will do this primarily by studying a number of short poems and stories. Our main focus in class and in many of our assignments will be on the analysis of individual texts. Class time will be dedicated to practising the skills involved in such analysis, and in critical communication. We will also examine some non-literary texts—including ads, music, cartoons, and perhaps some videos—for the elements that literature shares with other forms of communication. According to the romantic writer Percy Shelley, poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Shelley meant that the metaphors created by poets exert a powerful—yet mostly invisible—influence over us in our ordinary speech, even becoming part of our common sense. From this perspective the techniques of criticism can help us to understand not only fine works of literature, but the texts and representations we encounter in everyday life.
English 251A is required of all English majors and honours students because the strategies of reading and analysis it introduces are foundational for the other English courses you will take over the next two or three years. The best way to meet the goals of the course is as an independent learner, practising the analytic strategies introduced in class at home.

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Logistics:

Office: Hagey Hall 257; Phone: 888-4567, ext. 2416
Office hours: 4:00-5:00 Tuesday and 1:00-2:00 Thursday, or by appointment

Required Texts:
Robert Scholes, et al., Text Book, 2nd ed. (St. Martin's)
M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 7th ed. (HBJ)
Course Packet (available next week)

Recommended Texts:
Joseph Gibaldi, MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 5th ed. (MLA)

Assignments: Attendance and active preparation for and participation in seminar discussions and exercises (10%); 15-minute seminar presentation on a text (10%); 1-page precis of a text (5%); in-class assignment on a text (5%); in-class essay on a text (10%); 3-page paper on a text (20%); and a final examination on several texts and on course terminology (40%).

Students are required to prepare course readings ahead of the relevant seminar meeting and to participate in class discussions. Seminar presentations (in groups of two) will be scheduled for dates throughout the semester (a sign-up sheet will be circulated in the second week of classes; texts will be assigned one week prior to presentation dates). The precis is due in class on September 26. The in-class assignment will be held on October 5. The in-class essay will be held on October 19. The paper is due in class on November 9. Papers must be typed and double-spaced; if using a word-processor, laser print and do not use right justification. A page is 250 words. Papers must follow the format for citation and quotation laid out in the MLA Handbook, 5th ed. Papers late without prior permission may be penalized 2% per day. Uncompleted assignments will be graded F-.

NOTE: Please keep a photocopy of any paper you submit, and never hand a paper in by sliding it under (or sticking it to) my office door.
Terminology Check-List

Textual Elements:

Poetic

(1) metres: accentual, stress-syllabic, free verse
(2) prosody: types of feet: iamb, trochee, anapest, dactyl, spondee, pyrrhic; line
lengths: monometer, dimeter, trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter, hexameter (Alexandrine),
heptameter (fourteener); caesura, end-stopped, enjambement
(3) musical devices: alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia
(4) rhyme: end, internal, perfect, imperfect (slant, half)
(5) stanza patterns: quatrain, couplet, octave, sestet, ballad, sonnet (Petrarchan,
Spenserian, Shakespearean), blank verse, heroic couplet, concrete poetry

Rhetorical

metonymy, synecdoche, metaphor, simile, paronomasia (pun), motif, personification,
parataxis, hypotaxis, apostrophe, image, oxymoron, parody, irony, paradox, word order,
diction

Hermeneutic

allusion, latent, manifest, connotation, denotation, ambiguity, ambivalence

Narrative

point of view (first person, third person, objective, limited objective, omniscient,
stream-of-consciousness), narration, narrator, episode, story, plot, suspense, climax, in
medias res, romance, tragedy, comedy, mode of address, addressee, speaker,
auditor, implied author, implied reader, soliloquy, dramatic monologue

Textual and other

sign, signifier, signified, text, textuality, intertext, intertextuality, montage, situation,
tone, mood, governing (extended, controlling) metaphor, genre, parody, translation,
quotation

Textual Domains:

Speech Situation (e.g., speaker/listener, author/reader, mode of address, tone, point of view,
etc.)

Figuration (tropes: e.g., metaphor, simile, metonymy, etc.; signifiers: e.g., puns, musical
devices, concrete poetry, etc.)

Intertextuality (e.g., parody, translation, quotation, allusion, etc.)

Narration (narrative: e.g., plot, narrator, point of view, etc.; style, structure, scheme: e.g.,
diction, word order, stanza pattern, genre, etc.)

Prosody (e.g., metre, stanza pattern, rhyme, musical devices, etc.)
That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou seest the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death’s second self that seals up all in rest.
In me thou seest the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong
To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

The little hedge-row birds,
That peck along the road, regard him not.
He travels on, and in his face, his step,
His gait, is one expression; every limb,
His look and bending figure, all bespeak
A man who does not move with pain, but moves
With thought--He is insensibly subdued
To settled quiet: he is one by whom
All effort seems forgotten, one to whom
Long patience has such mild composure given,
That patience now doth seem a thing, of which
He hath no need. He is by nature led
To peace so perfect, that the young behold
With envy, what the old man hardly feels.
--I asked him whither he was bound, and what
The object of his journey; he replied
"Sir! I am going many miles to take
A last leave of my son, a mariner,
Who from a sea-fight has been brought to Falmouth,
And there is dying in an hospital."