

Close Reading: Making Sense in Robert Frost's Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

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Abstract

Close reading opens the way to comprehend a text critically, which provides surface and underlying meanings. It systematises a thoughtful reading with social interaction based on textual evidences and concludes to a proposition and argumentation. It enables the reader to observe the text and contextualize the meanings and ideas derived from it in the practical sphere of life as well. College students study to learn reading strategies and skills. The purpose of this paper is to present a sample of close reading in Robert Frost's poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." This paper has used qualitative descriptive method to qualify the essence of close reading in the poem. This research paper has described the stages of close reading to unravel the general understanding and underlying pattern of Frost's poem. This paper becomes more useful to teachers and advanced readers to read literary and non-literary texts effectively. The activities discussed in this paper stimulate them to read other texts closely. It broadens the horizon of understanding after dealing with very careful and precise details that evoke the insights of knowledge. This dynamics of reading, in this way, enriches the critical faculty of readers.

Keywords: annotation, close reading, reading skill, text, underlying meaning

Background

A teacher in the classroom comes across the students' reading problem- "I cannot understand the text, sir. It is difficult to comprehend what the text is about." Such queries occurred many times for me when I was a student, and have been recurring in my ears many times after being a teacher in Tribhuvan University. College students are from the stage of learning to read to the stage of reading to learn. They have been a part of my teaching career. College students being able to read and write the letters are not critical enough to comprehend and analyze the texts both literary and non-literary. They must know that reading is a challenging process. For this, they read to learn to overcome all difficulties in reading texts from any fields. Students read the texts without being familiar with some reading techniques. This condition discourages students to read literary and non-literary texts (academic or formal documents) even in their real life and workplaces. For critical and professional persons, reading is not only an act to read aloud the literary texts and documents, but to comprehend and analyze the messages and effects critically. Therefore, students read texts to approach critically and analytically in higher level. They have to improve their reading skills that will be more fruitful and applicable in their real life and the workplaces.

The college syllabuses incorporate less about the techniques and strategies of reading skills. If some are included, teachers and students ignore to adapt them in reading practices. The teachers focus more what to teach but not how to teach; the students also worry more in what to learn rather than how to learn. The students worry to pass the exam and earn the next degree. Many students have the same problem of reading critically and analytically the text.

Many literary and non-literary texts have been incorporated in the course of English at college. Students have to approach the texts critically and analytically. However, they face difficulties in reading the texts. There are the writer's purpose and the reader's purpose in the same text. The writer is physically absent in the text, as Roland Barthes said the author is dead in a text. "The pages before you will begin to speak only when the authors are silent and you begin to speak in their places, sometimes for them ... and sometimes for yourself, following your own agenda" (Bartholomae, 2017, n.p.). A reader can identify the writer's purpose: what, how and why does the writer communicate to whom? A reader should be clear: what and why does the reader read the text? A reader must be able to analyze the text to ascertain the writer's and the reader's purpose based on evidence from the text. The reader infers a meaning from the text and contextualize it in her/his worldly affairs.

Close reading is an essential skill for readers in and outside schools and colleges. Students should develop the close reading skills for their successful studies. After their education, people go in different fields for jobs and they have to read different texts. Teachers need the developed skill of close reading to read the literature and other formal documents and teach their students. Other public persons like members of the parliament, Ministers, Prime Minister, Judges, government personnel and other public figures continue to develop the close reading skill to serve effectively. They should be able to analyze the texts in the contexts of semantic, syntactic, thematic, iterative, generic and adversarial. Readers who read literature for aesthetic pleasure unknowingly go through these basic contexts. A close reading is a purposeful rereading of a text. Close-readers focus on words, sentences, repetition of words, socio-cultural, historical, political and theoretical concerns and messages of the texts. Active readers engage in close reading to dig out the meaning of complex texts. Some readers memorize some information, and the text whole; the textual memory is not enough for the academic and responsible readers. The textual memory cannot address the socio-cultural and human values. Wrong and superficial reading can lead to the transgressions. A close reading does not focus on specific information of a text as scanning reading, and general understanding as *skimming* reading, but it focuses on a thoughtful reading to develop a deep, precise message, meaning of the text. "Close reading is a particular way of approaching a text in order to uncover, engage with,

and understand the information and ideas it contains” (Moss et al. 2015 p. 47). Close reading skill engages readers into a critical and analytical reading of texts, and assists to dig out the meaning based on evidence from the texts. Therefore, among many reading skills like scanning, skimming, this paper discusses close reading skill.

Statement of the Problem

Students repeatedly have shared their problems of not being able to comprehend the texts critically and analytically. They feel difficulty to draw out the meanings, and infer the emotional and social effects. They fear to read the texts and respond to the texts. They ask hands-out about the texts from the teachers. This condition in the classrooms provokes me to discuss the strategies of close reading to overcome the problems of readers in reading literary and non-literary texts. Therefore, this paper formulates the research questions how close reading technique can be applicable in reading literary texts, and why the close reading is necessary in reading texts for the advanced readers.

Objectives of the study

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the use of close reading in Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, and the engagement of readers by intensifying their critical faculty.

Justification of the study

Readers of literature and languages feel difficulty to read texts critically and analytically inside and outside the classrooms. This research enables readers to paraphrase, interpret and assimilate the texts by adopting the stages of close reading. This research work adds the knowledge and process of close reading to literary and non-literary texts. This paper becomes useful to teachers, students, government personnel and others in and outside the classrooms.

Research methodology

This study has used qualitative descriptive method because this research paper is concerned with an idea and theory rather than with measurable and quantifiable data, and the description presents the relevant contents. This paper was based on the primary source, the selected literary work, and the secondary sources books and articles related to the close reading. Note-taking was used as a tool for data collection from the randomly selected text Frost's poem. In the procedure of data collection, tropes and strategies of close reading have been used in reading the text. Here, close reading was used as the tool to critically comprehend and analyze the text. This paper has been based on the textual analysis.

Close reading as a reading skill

Reading is one of the language skills. It is an active process and a reader uses reading strategies to make precise sense of texts. There is the problem of reading literary and non-literary texts. Many students and some teachers have faced the reading problem. Here, reading means not to recognize the letters and words, but to deduce and infer the meanings of texts by critical and analytical reading. There are many reading skills discussed in the education field, for instance, scanning, skimming, intensive and extensive, etc. Among them, a close reading skill is discussed in this paper.

Reading task is not easy because a reader should be able to dig out the writer's purpose and direct to the reader's own reading purpose. After reading a text, a reader should make his/her own proposition based on text evidence. Snow (2001) talks about the nature of reading complexity:

“Getting the gist” or “acquiring new knowledge” is too limited a definition of successful comprehension. In some cases, successful comprehension involves scanning quickly to find the bit of information one wants (as in using the internet) or reading in order to apply the information immediately but then forget it (as in programming an electronic device). Surely we want to include in our thinking about comprehension the capacity to get absorbed and involved in the text (as when reading a page turner), as well as reacting critically (as when disagreeing with an editorial). Good readers can do all of these, and can choose when each of these approaches to reading is appropriate. (para. 26; cited in Moss et. al., 2015, P. 1)

Close reading focuses on careful attention to both the reading object and subject concerning the texts. A close reading is needed for complex texts. However, what types of texts are complex? Moss et al. state that a complex text is a bit longer having longer words, sentences and many concepts bounded within almost each sentences. They suggest considering about quantitative features (length of texts, words and sentences), qualitative features (language uses, structures, styles, complexity of ideas, levels of meanings) and readers/text factors (readers level and texts) (18). Readers who use close reading technique reread texts for general understandings, key details, vocabulary uses and text structures, writer's purposes, inferences, inter-textual connections, opinions and arguments based on evidences.

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey (2014) define close reading as “an instructional practice that makes complex texts accessible using repeated reading, cognitive scaffolding, and discussion. All three of these conditions are vital in order for students to understand

complex texts and build the habits needed for deep comprehension” (p. 35). Fisher and Frey have discussed about types of texts, text-dependent questions focus on evidences in texts, bases of complex texts, close reading to the texts, ways of reading texts (annotation, sourcing, note-taking), teacher’s role, etc. Montgomery et al. (2007) have discussed basic techniques and problem solving of readings, language variations (time, place, context, register, gender and society), attributing meaning (metaphor and figurative language, irony, juxtaposition, allusion, intertextuality, authorship, intention, reader’s position) and elements of genres. They “relate readings of the text to readings of the world around reader” and “[the ways of reading] show comprehension to consist not just of passive assimilation but of active engagement in inference and problem solving” (p. 2, 8). The readers should identify the writer’s intended meanings, objective interpretation of text’s own meaning, and critical social meanings. The readers must go through general process of making meaning of texts. The readers “move back and forth in the two modes, reading with and against the grain of a text, reproducing an author’s methods, questioning his or her direction and authority” (Bartholomae, 2017, n. p.). Readers should have a close look at the text to analyze mentioning textual evidences and social issues.

Kimberly Goblirsch (2016) has done an action research entitled “Close Reading Strategies for Difficult Text: The effects on comprehension and analysis at the secondary level”. Goblirsch using both qualitative and quantitative data from grade nine attempts to explore the effects of close reading strategies of difficult text’s comprehension and analysis. It has positive effects on vocabulary and reading enrichment of students. It focuses only some annotated strategies and basic reading of texts. It does not focus on critical and analytical reading of texts. Spivak (2006) in “Close Reading” says, “The textual memory of a coterie is not enough” (1608). Spivak talks about close reading not limiting to improving reading skill and vocabulary in context of language learning. However, Spivak discusses further close reading in context of social, cultural, economical, historical, philosophical comprehension and analysis of texts. Elder and Paul (2009) explain the close reading as the development of intellectual ability in multiple perspectives, intellectual standards, use of argument and reasoning in texts. Intellectual readers identify an author’s purpose, issues, accurate and relevant information, significant and deep concepts, and logical thinking in a text. The readers detect the accurate and relevant thing from the texts and make judgments and their own opinions on the subject matters. Payumi and Hartati (2018) in “The Use of Close Reading Technique to Improve Students Reading Comprehension” present the significant effectiveness of close reading technique to improve students’ reading comprehension. It used quantitative data based on action research. They focus the close reading technique in teaching reading skill in the language classroom. Close reading develops thinking, speaking and writing skills essential for academic and

public communication.

Reading is not only an act of recognizing the letters and general comprehension of texts, but also critical comprehension and analysis based on evidences. Almost all texts have social ideas and values. Reading is not only to assimilate with the writer intended meaning, but readers should also make own opinion and inferences. Close reading a text means not merely finding information, topic sentences, supporting details and locating main ideas. Readers should question the author's position and make own inferences. The selected texts are closely read in this paper.

Discussion and analysis

Reading Frost's Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening Closely

Close reading practice is not a new technique in reading skills, but it builds the habits and skills of readers to read independently even complex texts. A close reading on a work begins in delight and ends in wisdom. Here is a close reading in Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening". This poem at first presents beauty, aesthetic pleasure, *rasa*, and later on, in deep level. It exposes an obligation and social responsibility in human lives. Readers enjoy the beauty, *rasa* experience and reveal the behavioural responsibility of human beings. The poem is:

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.

His house is in the village, though;

He will not see me stopping here

To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer

To stop without a farmhouse near

Between the woods and the frozen lake

The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake

To ask if there is some mistake.

The only other sound's the sweep

Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep.

But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep,

And miles to go before I sleep.

There is no prescribed and specific sequence in the close reading activity. Some general steps help readers to read a text closely and have deep understanding the text.

Step 1. First reading

This poem is an appropriate text for practicing close reading because this poem is short, offers a simple subject matter or story lines and vocabulary. College students can easily understand the vocabulary and subject matter of the poem. In the first reading, readers find the general subject matters of the poem: What is about the poem? In this poem, the readers can say that the poem is about a person who is going on horse through the forest in the snowy evening. They can learn those meanings if they find unfamiliar words in the poem. In this first reading, they can just tell what the poem is about. They find some clues from the poem for the subject matter of the text.

Stage 2. Second reading

When they read second time, they read the poem aloud independently connecting their own background experience and knowledge. They focus on key ideas and story elements for their understanding of the text. The students circle and underline the words, phrases and sentences that support their general understanding of the text. They can discuss the text based on key elements of the text. Students can interpret this poem. The speaker is passing through the woods. He thinks he knows the owner of the woods and his house is in the village. The owner cannot see the speaker "stopping" to look at his snowy woods. The speaker thinks that his horse must feel strange to stop between the woods and the frozen lake in the evening because there is not a farmhouse. The horse shakes its bell if its master has stopped mistakenly in the forest. Besides the sound of the bell, there is another sound of "easy wind and downy flake". Although the speaker finds the forest beautiful, pretty, dark and deep, he has promises to walk miles before he sleeps.

The subject matter is simple. Students enjoy and get pleasure connecting their experience or background knowledge with the poem. They get aesthetic pleasure reading the poem; they know almost all vocabulary and realize pleasant experience in reading the run on lines with the simple subject matter: the speaker on horse going through the beautiful forest covered with snow in the evening. The students assimilate or universalize this subject matter and realize the *rasa* experience, i.e. aesthetic pleasure. *Rasa* experience is a "psycho-physiological state" (Patnaik, 2013, p. 8) while reading a text. *Sringara rasa* (the feeling of love to nature) is experienced in the poem: the *sthayibhava* (dormant emotion) love is matured by the interplay of the *vishayalambana vibhava* (that is the snowy woods), *aashrayalambana vibhava* (that is the speaker), *uddipana vibhava* (that is evening environment), *anubhava* (consequences: the expressions of the speaker) and *vyabhicharibhava* (transitory emotions occurred in the poem). The students enjoy reading this poem. *Bharatamuni* in *Natyasastra* says, "Without *rasa*, no topic can appeal to the mind of the spectator"

(cited in Patnaik, 2013, p. 23). In this stage, students can also do the activities as in the skimming and scanning reading.

Stage 3. Third reading

In the third stage, students reread the poem more closely for the deep understanding. They should explore the elements and ideas from the poem for underlying meanings. The readers can annotate in the page of the text. They can add notes to the text giving explanation or comment. They can use one side margin to note the writer's saying and the next margin to dig out deep meanings of the text. In this stage, students can ask questions to dig out deep understanding of the text. After the general understanding of the text, they can think about words or phrases. What are special and important words that deduce meanings of the text? Does the poet use the words that could have more than one meaning? What does the poet tell in line(s) or the poem? What is the author's purpose in the poem? How does the language add the meaning of the text? What is the effect in the text? Do they evoke an emotion in the text? The students can discuss about the vocabulary choices and text structures in the text. In close reading activity of the poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", the students can circle the special and important words and phrases which draw a logical conclusion or meaning of the poem: woods, his house, not see me stopping, fill up with snow, little horse, queer, farmhouse, frozen lake, darkest evening, harness, mistake, easy wind, downy flake, lovely, dark, deep, promise, miles and sleep. These vocabularies chosen by the poet are simple for college students, but they should think whether the vocabularies have more than one meaning. They should find out the poet's purpose of using those words but not other similar words.

There are figures of speech like imagery, alliteration, personification, symbol and allegory. Imagery help the readers feel things through their five senses. The image is visual sight while reading lines "To watch his woods fill up with snow". The students can imagine based on the sensory description- "woods fill up with snow". The next tactile image is the speaker on "little horse" stopped "between the woods and frozen lake/ the darkest evening of the year". There are the sounds of horse's bell, "the sweep/ of easy wind and downy flake". This is auditory image in the poem. The "downy flake" is the visual image. These imageries make comfort and pleasant to the speaker as a traveler. There are uses of alliteration like "His house", "watch his woods", "sound's the sweep". The horse is personified in the second stanza- "My little horse must think it queer/To stop without a farmhouse near". Symbols are used in the poem to demonstrate deep meaning. The symbols are "woods" (place for shelter, beauty and peace), "snow" (purity), village and farmhouse (society and civilization), horse's bell (sub-consciousness), "miles" (length and distance of the period of birth and death), "dark and deep" and "sleep" (death), and the lonely journey of the speaker (journey of

individual in life). This poem is an allegory of life because the speaker travels a journey, and life is also a journey. The speaker is just in the “lovely, dark and deep” woods, we people are in the phenomena of life that is also lovely, dark and deep. We wish to enjoy life but the responsibility and duty of doing something keep us away from enjoying life. The poet uses a small and simple thing to show a whole human life journey.

The poem is a sixteen lines poem grouped into four stanzas. The rhymes of this poem are

Whose woods these are I think I know.	a
His house is in the village, though;	a
He will not see me stopping here	b
To watch his woods fill up with snow.	a
My little horse must think it queer	b
To stop without a farmhouse near	b
Between the woods and the frozen lake	c
The darkest evening of the year.	b
He gives his harness bells a shake	c
To ask if there is some mistake.	c
The only other sound's the sweep	d
Of easy wind and downy flake.	c
The woods are lovely, dark, and deep.	d
But I have promises to keep,	d
And miles to go before I sleep,	d
And miles to go before I sleep.	d

Here, college readers enjoy in rhyming words- aaba, like ‘know’, ‘though’ and ‘snow’. The rhyme of third line matches with the fifth, sixth and eighth lines- bbcb. Thus, the rhyme of this poem is aaba, bbcb, ccdc, dddd. The rhyme of third line of each stanza repeats in the next stanza and the same rhyming words in the last stanza. This poem is in iambic tetrameter and each line of the poem has four stressed syllables. These rhyming words add pleasure in first reading the poem. Although the vocabularies in the poem are easy for college students, these words and phrases are complex because these words can be used in multiple contexts and senses. These vocabularies leave the readers to think more than denotative meaning, and make them to reread the poem again. This poem makes the readers serious about their lives. The students can also discuss the next suitable title of the poem. Based on above discussion, we can synthesize the theme of the poem that the poet discusses theme of the tension of nature and society, personal choice and social obligation, and present a universal conflict faced by everyone in life. The last stanza means we people have promises to do many things in life before our death. The refrain (repetition of the last two lines)

contributes to the rhyme and the idea of doing things before dying through repetition of “And miles to go before I sleep” at end of the poem. This refrain creates rhythm and draws the attention of readers to highlight the theme; the main function of refrain in poetry is to retain rhythm and emphasis on an idea. The refrain focuses on premises of social obligation and duty. The poet wants the readers to believe on the social premises more rather than personal pleasure. They can annotate in the margins and they can comment on the page about the text in close reading. Annotating a text during close reading is to understand critically. The readers dig out contextual meanings and effects by annotating the text. The reading skills like scanning, skimming cannot deduce the deep meaning of the text.

Stage 4. Fourth reading

In this stage, the students can assimilate the idea of the text with their experience and their background knowledge. The poem reminds the readers their duty. People have instincts for pleasure seeking in their real life as the persona enjoys in snowy woods in the poem. They also have duty and responsibility of doing many things for human beings before dying. The readers can relate this poem with other texts that they have read. They can also discuss the effects of the text to their lives. They can discuss the poem through the different perspectives and theories, like eco-criticism, rasa theory, reader response theory, new criticism, etc. It can also be discussed how the poet uses nature in human life. They can focus the discussion and analysis based on textual evidences. Readers can explore different dimensions of poem, its messages and themes.

Close reading in the classroom for further practices

Close reading develops the students’ reading skills of a complex text. This technique digs out the meanings of texts layer by layer. A teacher can make practices of close reading in the classroom. She focuses on text and gives instruction about close reading activities. She may follow some strategies like (a) discuss procedures of close reading, (b) chunk the text, (c) read aloud the text, (d) circle, underline or highlight with a purpose, (e) one side margin for writer saying, (f) next margin for deep understanding, and (g) assimilate and connect the text with the experience, propositions and knowledge. The teacher may work together with the students and ask the students to read a text independently. The purpose of close reading is to enable the readers to comprehend critically and analyze literary and non-literary challenging texts. They may be able to identify even the effects of texts to audience. Diana Sisson and Betsy Sisson (2014, p. 36) suggest ten steps for a close reading lesson in a classroom: (1) identify the text, (2) determine purpose for reading, (3) choose a model, (4) decide how students will access texts, (5) complete first reading and task, (6) provide time for discussion, (7) complete second reading and task, (8) provide time for discussion, (9) complete third

reading and task, and (10) provide time for discussion. The students write a paper and present in front of the classroom. The students read first for general understanding second for literal comprehension, third for inferential comprehension and third for deeper analytical comprehension based on text evidence. Meyer (2008) suggests some tips for close reading a text:

Think about how the work makes you feel and how it is put together. [...] how the various elements of the text convey effects and meanings, the more confident you will be explaining whatever perspective on it you ultimately choose. [...] the author's words to work their magic on you [...] how the parts of a work contribute to its overall nature. (pp. 2114-15)

Readers can read closely more texts further keeping these suggestions in their minds and be able to dig out deep meanings of texts. This strategy keeps away their feeling of difficulty to understand texts. I suggest you to select a short text like William Blake's "The Sick Rose", Langston Hughes' "Harlem", and Emily Dickinson's "Much Madness is Divinest Sense". The application these stages of close reading is certain to help in longer texts like essay, story, or a formal document into short chunks, and then practice to read the text closely yourself.

Conclusion

A purpose of reading is to recognize the letters and take for granted what a writer communicates through the text. Further value of reading is also to understand the world and make an independent opinion after reading the text. Reading a text is a process of social interaction, and readers understand texts interacting social values and behaviours. Advanced readers read to learn and they should go through the texts to dig out messages critically. Close reading helps readers dig out deep understanding and effects of texts. It is applicable to read literary and informational texts. For a close look to a text, readers should pay attention at words, structures, multi-layers of meanings, effects of a text on society; that means social interaction of the text. Close reading can be useful for self-study. A teacher may select the text, chunk from the text, instruct students about close reading, read aloud, demonstrate a sample of close reading, and then make students practice of close reading. The teacher may instruct, guide and collaborate with the students for close reading a text. Here, this close reading becomes a fruitful sample for researchers and college students based on Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening". This close reading strategy starts with pencil in hand to add notes on a text giving explanation or comments while reading the texts. The readers may circle and underline the specific and important words and phrases to synthesize the message from texts. They may highlight the specific sentences in the texts. They may add comments in the margins which words or sentences mean what.

This close reading technique solves the students' problems of reading and critically comprehending texts in and outside the classroom. Readers equipping with close reading skill become empowered independent learners and analytical and critical thinkers. Close reading strategy put readers at ease in their profession.

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