

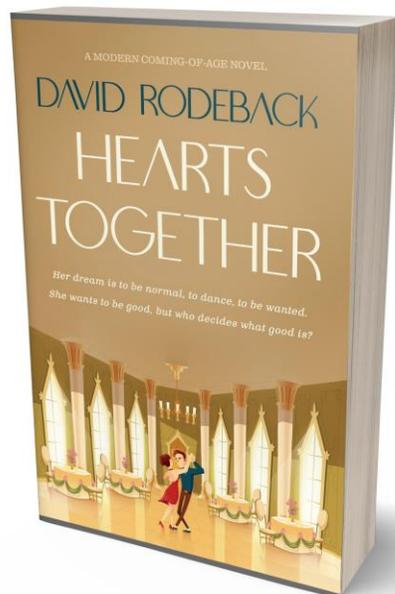
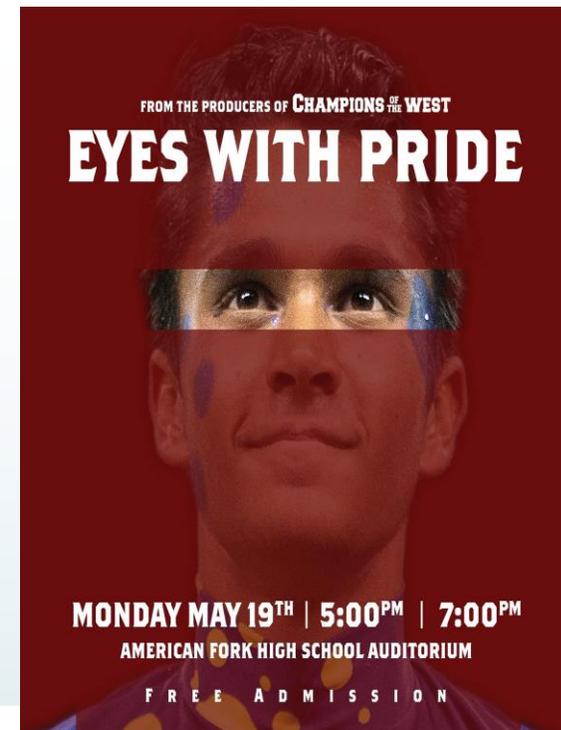
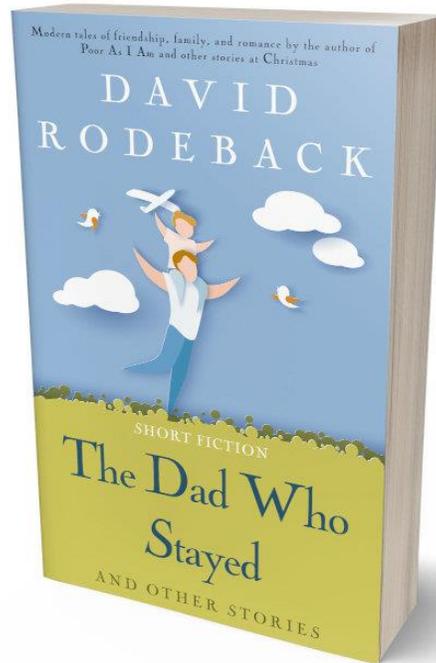
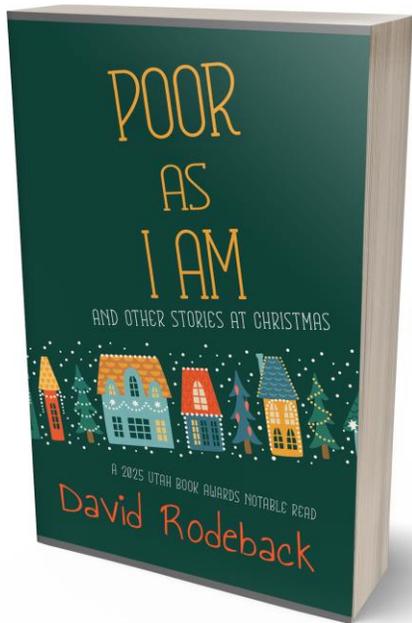


# Close Reading for Writers

David Rodeback

March 2026—EMAA Writing Conference—“Unleash Your Voice”

- 
- Husband of one, parent of four, grandparent of two, uncle of 18
  - CMT0 of a West Valley City manufacturing firm, where I write stuff: C#.Net code, SQL queries, marketing copy, video scripts, company policies, etc.
  - In a former life taught writing, Russian language, and Russian literature at BYU, Cornell, and elsewhere.
  - Current major writing project: a (short) book-length biographical essay about a soldier
  - 2025 LUW Writer of the Year



# American Fork Citizen

HOME AF CITY NEWS SPORTS SCHOOLS BUSINESS ART/CULTURE OPINION OBITUARIES SUBSCRIBE

## OPINION: This writer and that marching band

Published 2 months ago on June 23, 2025  
By AF Citizen

## OPINION: Poke the algorithms in the eye: Read books in 2025

Published 7 months ago on January 12, 2025

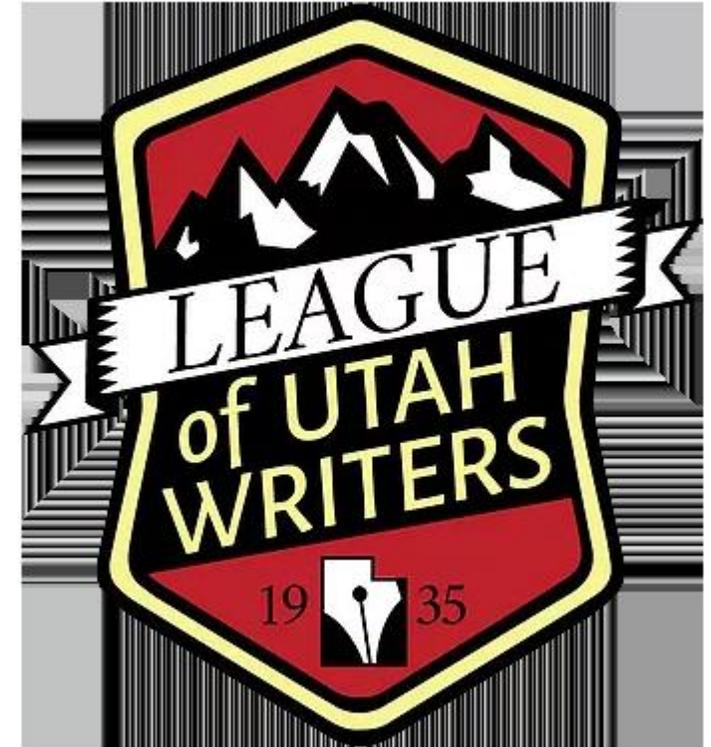
## COLUMN: "The Lusty Month of May"

Published 3 months ago on May 19, 2025  
By AF Citizen



# About the League of Utah Writers

- ▶ The League has 22 chapters around the state and online (some hybrid). They're all different, tailored to meet the needs and interests of their members. You can also join the League without joining a chapter.
- ▶ League membership is only \$30 per year, and \$15 for an additional chapter.
- ▶ You don't have to be a Utah resident. The League has members all over the country and a few international members.
- ▶ Two conferences for members and non-members:
  - ▶ Pre-Quill—one day—April—\$40
  - ▶ Quills—four days—early August—member discount
- ▶ Publication opportunities in two yearly anthologies and a quarterly literary journal.
- ▶ Discounted entry to our spring writing contests—awards announced at Quills—most offer written feedback from professional writers—some offer cash prizes



[leagueofutahwriters.com](http://leagueofutahwriters.com)



Mark Twain,  
“An Encounter with an Interviewer”

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Reading Time:

“An Encounter with an Interviewer”

Read as a reader. See how the story affects you.

Don't dawdle.

A dark grey arrow points to the right from the left edge of the slide. Below it, several thin, curved lines in shades of blue and grey sweep across the left side of the slide.

## Now that you've read it

- ▶ Is it funny? What is funny about it?
- ▶ Is he just trying to entertain, or is there more to it?
- ▶ Does anything puzzle you about it?



# Some background

- ▶ Mark Twain wrote it in 1874.
- ▶ In 1869 *The Nation* attacked a new fad, the interview:

In short, the “interview,” as at present managed, is generally the joint production of some humbug of a hack politician and another humbug of a newspaper reporter. The one lives by being notorious and the other seeking out notorieties and being “spicy.”

The next paragraph uses phrases like:

- ▶ “clumsily ridiculous”
- ▶ “printed impudence”
- ▶ “damage done to anything they give publicity”
- ▶ “a person who may be disgusting”
- ▶ “it is chiefly to be condemned”



## Some background (cont.)

- ▶ *New York Times* in 1873: Interview is “pest,” “an evil that has existed for some years in our midst, and which, we regret to say, is getting constantly worse.”
- ▶ *The Nation*: “a means of getting attention,” “as inefficacious as the revelations of spiritual mediums”
- ▶ *The New York World*: “a modern and American Inquisition”
- ▶ “Encounter with an Interviewer” was republished in numerous publications in the US and Europe, and Mark Twain regularly read it aloud at speaking engagements.

**Does the background change your view at all? Or add to your experience?**



# Back to the text

- ▶ We're 25% of the way through the story before the narrator learns what an interview is.  
  
(lines 70-86)
- ▶ Is the narrator really daft and addled, or is he playing with the reporter? Does he ever laugh at his own humor? Does he ever wink at us?  
  
(lines 104-118)
- ▶ Does the narrator seem sincere during the interview? How does Twain achieve this?  
  
(lines 149-161)



# Even more background

- ▶ In one instance Twain added a note: “I thought I could make this interview as unreliable and incoherent as the average newspaper interview. But that was another of my mistakes.”
- ▶ Twain’s first known interview was in 1874, after “Encounter” was published. He would be interviewed at least 258 times in his life.
- ▶ In 1882: “I have never yet met a man who attempted to interview me whose report of the process did not try very hard to make me out an idiot, and did not amply succeed, in my mind, in making him a thorough one.”

*Primary source of this background: Library of America*

*<https://storyoftheweek.loa.org/2024/11/an-encounter-with-interviewer.html?m=1>*

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Does the background change your view at all? Or add to your experience?

- ▶ Does this narrator make this interviewer look like “a thorough [idiot]”?
  - ▶ Explain by referring to the text.
- ▶ Does the story make fun of interviews?
- ▶ What are your favorite lines?



# Two Kinds of Close Reading

The two-minute version

(I started with an eight-minute whirlwind tour of literary theory. You're welcome.)



# Before the Deconstructionists

and the Formalists and New Criticism and the Pragmatists and Reader Response Theory and the Structuralists and the Post-Structuralists

Maninder Järleberg on “the older discipline of close reading”:

Real close reading does not replace the part for the whole; **it enters the whole through the part.** One paragraph becomes a door. You step through it and notice how tone, image, and argument echo and change elsewhere in the book. **The question is never just “what does this passage mean?” but “how does it live inside the larger movement of thought and feeling?”**

*Implication: Read the whole work, not just excerpts or summaries.*

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## 20<sup>th</sup> Century literary theory said . . .

- It doesn't matter what the author meant. The reader's individual interpretation matters.
- Objective reality no longer exists—and there is no objective meaning in literature.
- Nothing is inherently good or evil.
- Morality and sexuality are social constructs.
- Literature is about the oppressor and the oppressed—about pursuing social justice, not deep insights into what it means to be human or what constitutes a good life.

All those theories end up being used for mayhem, but they are useful tools.



## Tangent: useful tools

One of those modern branches of criticism is the Freudian school. A Freudian interpretation is a sexual interpretation—and sometimes that's useful.

In Nikolai Gogol's famous story "The Nose" (1836), a man's nose detaches itself from his face and takes on a life of its own.

In Russian culture back then, the nose was often a euphemism, a phallic symbol—so the Freudian reading highlights a layer of meaning that is actually in the story.



# Modern “close reading” is fragmentation, and that’s bad

Maninder Järleberg

Using excerpts is not the crime here. Teachers have always pulled passages for close attention. **But when the fragment no longer points back toward the whole**, something vital slips away.

Meaning in literature grows through time—through development, contrast, recurrence, the slow gathering of weight. Students trained mainly on pieces **learn to analyse moments with confidence while never learning how to dwell inside an entire imaginative world.**

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## TL;DR

- ▶ Traditional close reading moves inward in order to see more. It enters the whole through the part.
- ▶ Modern, fragmentary close reading reduces the field in order to see less.

*Which kind are we doing here?*

A dark grey arrow points to the right from the left edge of the slide. Below it, several thin, curved lines in shades of blue and grey sweep across the left side of the slide.

We're writers, not just readers

We're not looking just for meaning. We're also exploring how the written work does what it does for us (or to us), so we can do it for (to) our readers.



# Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address

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## Background: Second Inaugural Address

The Civil War is nearly over (but not quite).  
It's clear the Union will win.

Notice that Lincoln doesn't engage in chest-thumping,  
doesn't speak of grinding the enemy to powder.

He's trying to knit the country back together.

In about six weeks, he'll be murdered.

A dark grey arrow points to the right from the left edge of the slide. Several thin, curved lines in shades of blue and grey originate from the left side and sweep across the slide towards the text.

## Reading Time: Second Inaugural Address

Read as a reader, to notice the speech's effects.

Don't dawdle.



How did this speech affect you?



A dark grey arrow points to the right from the left edge of the slide. Below it, several thin, curved lines in shades of blue and grey sweep across the left side of the slide.

## Personally . . .

- ▶ I can scarcely read it without weeping.
- ▶ It's very Biblical; a prophetic tone.
- ▶ Some of its power comes from the beauty of its words.

A dark grey arrow points to the right from the left edge of the slide. Below it, several thin, light blue lines curve downwards and to the right, creating a decorative border on the left side of the text area.

## Lines 21-31: both sides together

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, **all** thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. **All** dreaded it—**all** sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to saving the Union without war, insurgent agents were in the city seeking to destroy it without war—seeking to dissolve the Union, and divide effects, by negotiation. **Both parties** deprecated war; but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came.

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## Lines 21-31: even the essential differences are in parallel structures

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it—all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, **devoted altogether to saving the Union without war**, insurgent agents were in the city **seeking to destroy it without war**—seeking to dissolve the Union, and divide effects, by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war; **but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would accept war rather than let it perish.** And the war came.



## Lines 42-49, 53-54

**Neither** party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. **Neither** anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. **Each** looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. **Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.**

...

The prayers of **both** could not be answered—that of **neither**, has been answered fully.



## Lines 49-53

It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; **but let us judge not, that we be not judged.**





## Lines 57-66

If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove; and that He gives to **both north and south** this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?

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## Lines 66-75 – judged together

Fondly do **we** hope—fervently do **we** pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. **Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword,** as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”



## Lines 66-75 – judged together

Fondly do **we** hope—fervently do **we** pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. **Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword,** as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

Rhyme:

Fondly do we hope—fervently do we **pray**—  
that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass **away**.

A dark grey arrow points to the right from the left edge of the slide. Several thin, light blue lines curve upwards from the bottom left corner towards the text.

Lines 77-83 – no distinction between victor and vanquished, no mention of enemy

With **malice toward none**; with **charity for all**; with firmness in the right, as God gives **us** to see the right, let **us** strive on to finish the work **we** are in; to bind up **the nation's** wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish, a just and a lasting peace, among **ourselves**, and with all nations.



# 1, 2, and longer 3 (and even longer 4)

1. With **malice toward none**;
2. with **charity for all**;
3. with firmness in the right, as God gives **us** to see the right,
  1. to finish the work we are in;
  2. to bind up **the nation's** wounds;
  3. to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—
  4. to do all which may achieve and cherish, a just and a lasting peace, among **ourselves**, and with all nations.



# Can close reading make us better writers?

American Fork's monument to Sgt. Cory Wride

It made me a better writer . . .





Cory Wride

Born September 28, 1968.  
Raised in American Fork,  
played in our community  
parks, and attended our  
church as his brother.



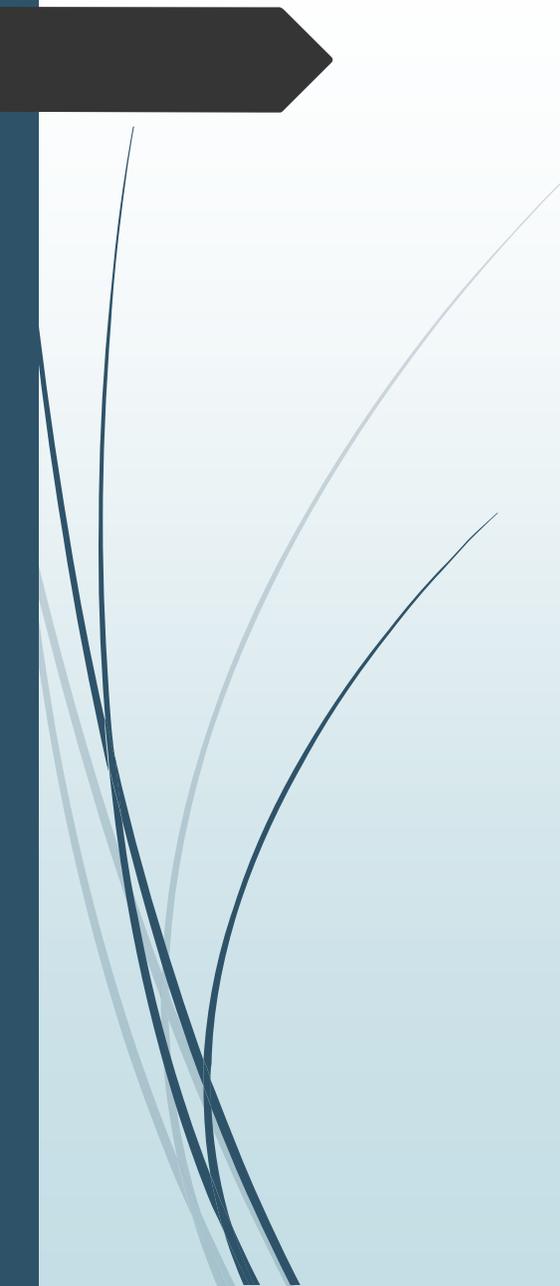
Boys play loudly at courage, conquering  
imaginary enemies in glorious battle.  
They do not know that, when they are  
men and foes are real, their courage will  
likely be quiet and their glory too often  
found in ultimate sacrifice, willing  
but unsought. In the shadow of such  
sacrifice, it is for us, beyond our  
weeping, to remember the boy, honor  
the man, and forgive the foe.



Sgt. Cory Wride

Utah County Deputy Sheriff,  
died January 30, 2014.  
He gave the ultimate  
sacrifice while serving





Boys play loudly at courage,  
conquering imaginary enemies in glorious battle.  
They do not know that,  
when they are men and foes are real,  
their courage will likely be quiet and  
their glory too often found in ultimate sacrifice,  
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In the shadow of such sacrifice,  
it is for us, beyond our weeping,  
to remember the boy,  
    honor the man,  
    and forgive the foe.

2014

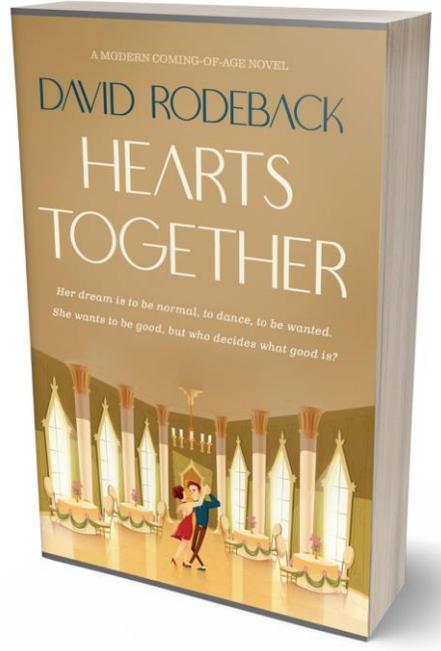
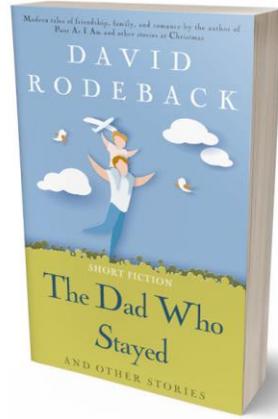
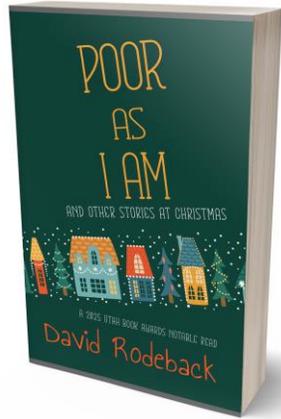


Q&A ASK ME **ANYTHING**



Thank you!

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(all the places to buy them online)





# Sources

Maninder Järleberg, “The Rise of Interpretive Conformity”

<https://maninderjarleberg.substack.com/p/the-rise-of-interpretive-conformity>

(March 8, 2026)

Liza Libes, “When Literature Lost Its Way”

<https://www.pensandpoison.org/p/when-literature-lost-its-way> (Feb. 16, 2026)





Reader Response Theory: a reader's *personal* experience is central; authorial intent is not. In fact, the reader's response should be independent of the author's intent. *It doesn't matter what the author meant.* The reader's individual interpretation matters.

Foreshadowing “the death of the author” 20 years later.

About 1916, Ferdinand de Saussure tried to explain how language works. This gave birth to Structuralism, which is all about signs, the signifier and the signified. That's innocent enough—until it falls into the hands of Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction.

Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss Lévi-Strauss demonstrated that mythology was created by humans to reconcile and examine opposing concepts in life and to help us understand binaries such as good/evil, day/night, man/woman, etc.

Along comes Jacques Derrida with some genuinely interesting ideas about those binaries and how they fit into hierarchies, which he wants to break down, which leads to trouble when we get to good and evil. Posit that evil is just as valid as good, and next you're telling us that nothing is inherently good or evil—and we have moral relativism.



# What I Mean by “Close Reading”

A eight-minute tour of the history of literary theory, in which I mostly likely do justice to no one and nothing at all, but try to define good and bad—or wise and foolish—close reading.



# 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

We read and study literature to explore the human condition. It's a well-rounded humanistic inquiry, asking fundamental questions about human nature—family, revenge, love, etc.

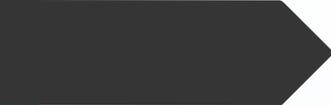
Literature is a repository of moral and cultural wisdom.

- ▶ Cultural preservation
- ▶ Moral guidance and the transmission of societal norms and values
- ▶ Empathy, through exposing readers to diverse views and personalities

Maninder Järleberg on “the older discipline of close reading”:

Real close reading does not replace the part for the whole; **it enters the whole through the part.** One paragraph becomes a door. You step through it and notice how tone, image, and argument echo and change elsewhere in the book. **The question is never just “what does this passage mean?” but “how does it live inside the larger movement of thought and feeling?”**

Implication: You read the whole work, not just excerpts or summaries.



# 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Russian Formalists (post-Revolution): rejected idea that literature should be evaluated for its ideological or moral messaging. Instead, focused on how narrative structures and poetic devices shape the meaning of a text. Close analysis of syntax.

New Criticism (T. S. Eliot): close reading, deriving meaning from word connotation and sentence structure.

Pragmatists: Evaluate a thing by its effects. Individual truths are predicated on one's surrounding reality. (This blurs objective truth.) Education should serve a social function.

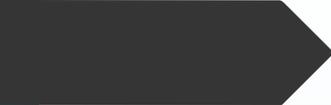


# 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Reader Response Theory: A reader's personal experience is central; authorial intent is not. In fact, the reader's response should be independent of the author's intent. It doesn't matter what the author meant. The reader's individual interpretation matters.

Structuralism, Poststructuralism, Deconstruction—all useful tools, but they were used to beat some things to death: literature itself and objective truth. But that's okay, because now nothing is inherently good or evil—and we have moral relativism.

Objective reality no longer exists—and there is no objective meaning in literature.



## 20<sup>th</sup> Century, cont.

Postmodernism shifts the meaning of literature entirely to the reader. Roland Barthes declares in 1967 that the author is dead. The author and historical context are now irrelevant to the meaning of a text. Only the reader's subjective, personal interpretation matters.

Foucault jumps in. Morality is a social construct; sexuality itself is a social construct.

A variety of overlapping schools become dominant: Feminist, Marxist, Postcolonialist, Queer—all applying their own version of the basic Marxist division between the oppressor and the oppressed.

All of these end up being used for mayhem, but they are useful tools.

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# Where we are

You might scoff at the idea of a Freudian interpretation of a Nikolai Gogol story, “The Nose,” where a man’s nose detaches itself from his face and takes on a life of its own. A Freudian interpretation is, of course, a sexual interpretation, but in this case that’s not random or gratuitous. As soon as you realize that in Russian culture back then, the nose was often a euphemism, a phallic symbol, you can see that the Freudian interpretation is highlighting a layer of meaning that is actually there in the story.

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the humanistic study of literature has largely been displaced by the pursuit of social justice, in which literary theory is not closely tied to literature at all. Literary theory morphs into critical theory, which spawns all sorts of critical-theoretical children. And everyone’s so busy with ideology that they don’t have time to study literature itself anymore.



# Where we are

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the humanistic study of literature has largely been displaced by the pursuit of social justice, in which literary theory is not closely tied to literature at all. Literary theory morphs into critical theory, which spawns all sorts of critical-theoretical children. And everyone's so busy with ideology that they don't have time to study literature itself anymore. Great books are rejected in favor of books which fit the ideology *du jour*.

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# Pushback: Liza Libes (among many)

“Literary study, once a place for deep intellectual engagement, has thus been reduced to an ideological battle, and literature itself has become nothing more than a political vehicle, abstracted from its former glory as an art form.

“But true lovers of the humanities know that the fundamental purpose of literature is not to create societal change but to fill the world with beauty through which we can better understand ourselves.



## Pushback: Liza Libes (cont.)

“I once thought that I was alone in loving literature in this peculiar way, but I know now that there are so many reasonable voices who are equally as disheartened. . . . We can do our part to encourage modern readers to consider literature in a different way and restore it to its . . . place. . . . Above all else, literature is an expression of human emotion and beauty, and if we are to salvage humanistic inquiry, we must emphasize literature’s ability to explore the human condition and foster empathy across cultural and historical boundaries. By re-centering the study of literature on its aesthetic and philosophical dimensions, we can preserve its relevance and richness for future generations.”



# Pushback: close reading

Maninder Järleberg

When reading is taught primarily through interpretive frameworks, the practice of working with fragments becomes increasingly common. A passage is lifted from its narrative setting, a phrase is detached from its dramatic context, and the resulting quotation is treated as evidence for the meaning of the entire work. As I noted in the previous essay, this kind of selective reading — the cherry-picking of passages that confirm a predetermined interpretation — has become a familiar feature of both literary scholarship and classroom teaching.

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# Pushback: close reading

Maninder Järleberg

Using excerpts is not the crime here. Teachers have always pulled passages for close attention. **But when the fragment no longer points back toward the whole**, something vital slips away. Meaning in literature grows through time — through development, contrast, recurrence, the slow gathering of weight. Students trained mainly on pieces learn to **analyse moments with confidence while never learning how to dwell inside an entire imaginative world.**



# Pushback: close reading (cont.)



I need to separate this **habit of fragmentation** from **the older discipline of close reading**. **Real close reading does not replace the part for the whole; it enters the whole through the part.** One paragraph becomes a door. You step through it and notice how tone, image, and argument echo and change elsewhere in the book. The question is never just “what does this passage mean?” but “how does it live inside the larger movement of thought and feeling?” Nor does it begin with a theory already in hand.



# Pushback: close reading (cont.)

If you open a scene from *King Lear* already knowing what you want to prove — power, hierarchy, whatever the framework of the month demands — you are not reading closely. You are confirming an expectation. When the framework arrives first, language turns illustrative rather than revelatory. **Close reading moves inward in order to see more. Fragmentary reading reduces the field in order to see less.**



Real close reading does not replace the part for the whole; it enters the whole through the part. . . . The question is never just “what does this passage mean?” but “how does it live inside the larger movement of thought and feeling? . . .

Close reading moves inward in order to see more.

—Maninder Järleberg



# Close reading: good and bad

Bad close reading (“fragmentary reading”):

- ▶ **the fragment no longer points back toward the whole**
- ▶ **analyse moments with confidence while never learning how to dwell inside an entire imaginative world**
- ▶ **You already know what you want to prove. (illustrative)**
- ▶ **reduces the field in order to see less**

Good close reading:

- ▶ **does not replace the part for the whole; enters the whole through the part; One paragraph becomes a door**
- ▶ notice how tone, image, and argument echo and change elsewhere in the book
- ▶ **Revelatory**
- ▶ **moves inward in order to see more**

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## Read this warning label!

Do not use Close Reading™, by itself or in combination with an AI- or human-generated synopsis or summary, as a substitute for reading entire works. In classroom trials this has been shown to stunt intellectual, social, civic, and spiritual growth in humans of all ages.

(Captain Obvious also says, Don't drink laundry detergent.)