

21L.021 Comedy

Close Reading 2 (250 *words*), specific instructions at end of document.

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and/or Spike Lee's *Chi-Raq*

Due Session 4

The assignment is a short and focused exercise in what is commonly phrased as *close reading*. Only 250 words are required; however, this is enough for you to work on a small piece of text in *detail*. The objective is for you to begin developing a practice of *sustained textual analysis* with a primary text. It also allows me to see how you engage with the *text* or, rather, how you *read* and how you *interpret*.

A few words on close reading to get the wheels turning ...

For your assignment, although you may use concepts from lecture, please do not treat your paragraph as a mere demonstration of these themes. Any claim you make about the passage (or scene or character) that you select must proceed from a very close attention to its voice, language, and structure. Remember, *close reading* is about effective reading. Go deep with your thinking. "If you were an artist, you'd be painting with a fine brush here, and not a roller," as a friend-scholar once put it.

One common weakness of student writing is its tendency to paraphrase or generalize. In an effort to make meaningful statements, students sometimes end up making broad pronouncements meant to apply to all mankind. Steer clear from this type of *distant* reading. Another pitfall is "padding," or saying the same thing over and over again in slightly different ways, as if an argument could be made through sheer repetition. *Close reading* is a remedy to both these well-meaning mistakes.

Put simply: *close reading* is at the heart of literary analysis. It is a *deep* engagement with language itself, or rather with *the words on the page* and *what they are doing there*. When we read for plot or summary, it sometimes seems that words get in the way, pushing literary language aside so that comprehension can plow its way through the details. This is often the first way we learn how to interact with a text: you are asked to "tell the story in your own words." But to paraphrase is always to stay on the *surface*, and satisfying literary criticism is never a surface phenomenon—that's why I call literary analysis a *deep reading*. Paraphrasing is exactly the opposite of *close reading*. In fact, it makes *close reading* impossible. Remember the primary text is not a "message" but an *act of representation*. As such, it displays thousands of choices about how to use language. Therefore, instead of moving alongside of (and eventually outpacing) the text, you will enter the text itself, and thus enter into a world of expression, manner, language, and meaning in all its richness and complexity.

The writing assignment ...

Feel free to write on *Lysistrata* and/or *Chi-Raq*. However, remain focused. This is a brief writing assignment, after all – 250 words maximum. A tip: remain focused by selecting one character to write about, or perhaps you'll examine a line or two from the dialogue of the men's chorus. You might even concentrate on language (consider the use of slang with two characters, or explore costume, cross-dressing, and the physical body). Always stay close to the TEXT – the words on the page – and allow it into your writing to support your claim and articulate to me the larger themes at play.

Happy writing,

Professor Martinez

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