

Sinykin Dan, and Johanna Winant (eds.). 2025. *Close Reading for the Twenty-first Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 289 pages.

For decades, paradigm shifts in literary studies have been driven by the arrival of new theoretical concepts, often from other fields of study. The past years, literary method itself—and close reading in particular—has come (back) in vogue. Several recent publications examine this literary method, with its roots in New Criticism and Practical Criticism: books such as Yael Segalovitz's *How Close Reading Made Us* (SUNY Press 2024), David James's edited volume *Modernism and Close Reading* (Oxford University Press 2020), Jonathan Kramnick's *Criticism & Truth* (University Of Chicago Press 2023) and John Guillory's *On Close Reading* (University of Chicago Press 2025). In the background, it is possible to see the 'method wars' of American academia at work, an ongoing—and in large part theoretical—struggle to chart the value of literature and of literary studies as a discipline. It is in this somewhat crowded field that Dan Sinykin's and Johanna Winant's edited volume *Close Reading for the Twenty-First Century* appears. The book promises 'an instruction manual' (2025: 3) to the practice of close reading, and aims to show its readers 'how understanding close reading can make us better readers, thinkers, and writers'.

Sinykin and Winant note that close reading is 'the foundation of literary studies as a discipline in the modern research university' (2025: 2) and define it as '*the practice of paying attention to a passage of a text to account for at least one aspect of its meaning and to make an argument about how it works*' (2025: 2; original emphasis). It is important to clarify from the outset that with 'close reading', Sinykin and Winant do not mean a method for *reading*, but rather a method for *writing out* a close reading. In this, they follow Jonathan Kramnick's view in *Criticism and Truth* (but differ from John Guillory in *On Close Reading*).

Close Reading for the Twenty-First Century consists of a long introduction, 21 brief chapters, and an appendix of practical materials that are specifically designed to be used in the classroom. The book, published in the Princeton University Press 'Skills for Scholars' series, puts a premium on readability: the introduction and additional materials are informative but never theory-heavy, and will be accessible also to undergraduate students; the individual chapters all have similar, relatively

easy-to-follow structures and the book's overall arrangement feels unusually coherent for an edited volume.

The first part of the book's substantial introduction sets out the five steps of close reading: *scene setting*, *noticing*, *local claiming*, *regional argumentation*, and *global theorizing*. Sinykin and Winant see these as the basic elements that structure most scholarly close readings: a written-out analysis first gives the reader a minimum of contextualization (*scene setting*); it then moves on to notice a particularly important detail (*noticing*). Then, the critic makes a claim about this detail's meaning in its immediate context (*local claiming*), which is scaled-up to an argument that connects this detail with other meaningful elements within the literary work (*regional argumentation*). The final step 'reaches further to connect the reading to the author's body of work, the text's genre, form, or period, or historical context' (2025: 8) (*global theorizing*). While global theorizing is rarely achieved in undergraduate papers, Sinykin and Winant note that it is important to include this stage even in introductory contexts, since it constitutes 'the horizon at which all your work is aimed' (2025: 9).

The sections that follow the introduction are each structured around one of these five steps. Each section contains three to five chapters that all have a triple structure: first a brief introduction by Sinykin and Winant, then a reading of a scholarly text that itself provides a reading of a literary text: for example Adrienne Brown's chapter 'What Beauty Hides' (Chapter 6), in which Brown reads Toni Morrison's reading (in Morrison's critical work *Playing in the Dark*) of Marie Cardinal's text *The Words to Say It*, all from the perspective of noticing (step 2 in the five steps of close reading).

Overall, *Close Reading for the Twenty-First Century* does a magnificent job showcasing the wide applicability of close reading as literary method. The different chapters deal with a wealth of different genres, including non-fiction, poetry, prose, and drama. At best, the triple structure of each chapter is to see three artists (or five, including the brief introductions by Sinykin and Winant) at work in ways that show to the reader how their craft achieves what it does. Robert Stagg's reading of Eric Griffiths's reading of a brief quote from *Hamlet* (Chapter 4), for example, is a wonderful exploration of how to do a close reading of drama by zooming in on the situatedness of utterances in the play. The didactic usefulness of the chapter comes in part from the way in which Stagg

explicitly lists those elements that have struck the reader. The article shows us not only the end-result of Griffiths's masterful process of interpretation, but the steps that have gone into it, and students will be able to trace these steps by following the 'basic set of questions that we can all ask and all begin to answer' (2025: 78).

Several chapters explicitly spell out that their aim is to make visible what is so often left out of a finished literary study, all the 'togglings' back and forth between text, historical research, writing, and back that is 'normal procedure but is usually occluded by the final [written-out] close reading' (2025: 107). To make that 'togglings' visible means to unpack concrete methodological choices, as Elaine Auyoung does with the 'side-by-side comparison' (Chapter 14), or as Julie Orlemanski does when she shows how Auerbach's development of argumentation is circular, in a way that moves from general theory to selection and analysis, then back to a more general argument (in Chapter 9).

One of the criticisms of close reading has been that its shift of scale from small detail to high stakes entails the risk that it overreads: as Stephanie Insley Hershinow notes (Chapter 19), such 'claims for the significance of small things are sometimes convincing, and sometimes not' (2025: 195). Perhaps inevitably, the same can also be said of the chapters in *Close Reading for the Twenty-First Century*. Some chapters are utterly compelling, not only as close readings but also as didactic materials. At its most tentative, however, the argumentation in some close readings rests on a double 'sleight of hand', by which the minutest of details is extrapolated in bold statement not once, but twice, as in Farah Bakaari's reading of Eleni Coundouriotis's reading of Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de violence* (Chapter 12). Much of the analytical heavy lifting, in chapters such as these, tends to happen in the intricacy and density of the language, rather than in any step-by-step argumentation, and it is not always clear how students will be able to retrace these steps.

My students—especially first- and second-year students—do need guidance writing up a literary analysis, but they also, and perhaps even more so, are in need of instruction for how to carry out the preceding steps. How do you know you have noticed something relevant? What work has to go into connecting this one detail with other relevant details? If the first section of the book's appendix of 'practical materials' focuses mostly—and somewhat counterintuitively—on materials to 'practice reading close readings' (2025: 218), the second section provides highly useful

guidelines specifically aimed to address questions related to noticing and local claiming. These sections (2025: 238–241) are some of the most useful parts of this book, for students and teachers alike, and will undoubtedly find their way in numerous classrooms in the years to come.

For all its merits, *Close Reading for the Twenty-first Century* is not without its shortcomings—although these will be largely relative to expectations. As a teacher of literary methods and as a literary researcher based in the Nordics—and writing this article for a journal that caters to Nordic teachers of English studies – I would have wanted to hear some more about how contemporary (teaching) practices of close reading come into dialogue with almost a century of critical responses to New Criticism. And I would also have been interested in critical reflections that consider close reading outside of the Anglo-American context, e.g., in European academic institutes, where close reading has been much less dominant.

Although it gives an excellent overview of the history of close reading, *Close Reading for the Twenty-First Century* never gives a comprehensive overview of the criticisms leveled at its method, nor of how the examples explored in the individual chapters refute (or remain complicit in) the possible limitations of close reading. In many respects, this relative lack is dependent on the specific aims of this book, which focuses on method (and on readability!), rather than on theory. And yet it would have been helpful to hear more about how the practices at work in so many of these chapters can be squared with the critique leveled at close reading. To what extent do close readings enforce particular poetical canons, and potentially neglect others? Is the criticism leveled at close reading's tendency to resolve textual tensions by way of a rhetorically compelling, unifying analysis (a practice evident in many chapters) still relevant, or not, and why? Is the strong focus on individual citations potentially problematic—or not?—and how does contemporary close reading relate to surface reading or distant reading?

A second question is the contextualization of close reading in the current place and moment. For this book's primary readership, the immediate cultural-geographical context will probably need no explication. But students working within other regions—such as my own students, with their Nordic background—operate within very different institutional contexts from their American counterparts, and also within quite different paradigmatic contexts. Close reading and the legacy of New Criticism are seen with considerably more suspicion this side of the

Atlantic, and handbooks of literary studies methods put much less focus on close reading. To give but one example, a comprehensive and highly useable new handbook in literary methods, conceived largely by German scholars (*Methods of Textual Analysis in Literary Studies*, edited by Vera Nünning and Ansgar Nünning, WVT 2020), features no chapter on close reading—instead, chapters on narratology and hermeneutics cover most of the relevant ground. Some reflections of how *Close Reading for the Twenty-First Century* functions within its cultural and geographical moment, and of the institutional reasons behind a renewed emphasis on close reading's potential, would have helped situate close reading for global audiences, but might have also enabled American readers to question some of the seeming inevitabilities at work in this particular mode of practicing literary studies.

But these are for the most part quibbles. *Close Reading for the Twenty-First Reading* achieves everything it sets out to do, and more. It provides a step-by-step methodology for reading literary texts and for writing out a full analysis, and showcases an impressive array of close readings in clearly structured and accessible chapters. In addition to an easily applicable methodological framework for reading and writing, moreover, it offers students of literary studies something that is rarely spelled out in explicit terms: an ethos of caring. Sinykin and Winant emphasize that to write a close reading is to care about texts, about authors and readers, and about the conversation between these. Sinykin and Winant remind their readers that, even if allowing a text to matter is not without its risks, 'the reward, if it works, is intellectual community' (2025: 20). When I discussed this with students of my second-year literary methods course (autumn 2025) at the University of Tampere, Finland, some had difficulties grasping how they were supposed to understand a literary analysis as an act of caring. But others gained a new sense of their field of study and of their profession, a sense which they may carry into their work as educators, as writers and readers. No mean achievement for a self-proclaimed instruction manual on literary method.

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