INSTRUCTIONS FOR CLOSE READING

A *close reading* of a passage from a work of literature is meant to connect the details of the passage in question to the meaning of the work as a whole. Basically, you must argue that the shape, positioning, diction, images, figurative content, echoes, and other elements of the passage reflect the central idea of the entire work. In other words, you must offer an interpretation of the entire work by examining a small piece of it. The close reading for *Hamlet* is due on **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**. The passages will be given to you at a later date.

# METHOD

To decide which things you wish to discuss, refer to your ***Passage Analysis Template*** (next page).

# FORMAT

* A *title page* with a title containing a significant quotation from the text (similar to a literary essay title), plus the “tombstone info” that should go on every assignment (i.e. – your name, the course code, the teacher’s name, the due date).
* A short introductory paragraph
	+ This paragraph is on the *overall significance* of the passage within the meaning of the work as a whole. This is where your *central assertion* is made.
	+ This paragraph will also map out the *plan* for the paragraphs to follow, much like a *plan of development* in an essay.
* A short paragraph placing the passage in *context*.
	+ What just happened in the text?
	+ What is about to happen in the text?
	+ How do things change in the story either during this passage or because of this passage?
	+ (*If it is the first passage of the work*) Why did the author start here?
	+ (*If it is the last passage of the work*) Why did the author end here?
* A series of short paragraphs (three or four is suggested) breaking down and discussing the *salient details* of the passage.
	+ To determine what these paragraphs should be about, consult the ***Passage Analysis Template*** on the next page. Choose *three or four* things from the Template and discuss them in detail (e.g. – explanation of one metaphor, explanation of the irony of the passage, explanation of the humour of the passage, et cetera).
	+ This section of the close reading should be the “meatiest” section. Spend the most time on this part.
* A paragraph or two tracing the *echoes* from this passage into other parts of the work.
	+ Are there *recurring* themes, images, symbols? Look for *specific words and phrases* that are repeated.
	+ When have we seen these things earlier in the work or later in the work?
	+ Has the meaning changed at all?
* A *concluding paragraph* offering an *interpretation* of some kind.
	+ This is where you connect the form of the passage with the meaning of the passage (i.e. – the passage is written this way and these exact words are chosen because they contribute to the meaning of the work).

MARKING SCHEME

You will be graded on this assignment using the following criteria:

**KNOWLEDGE and UNDERSTANDING** (out of 20)

- knowledge of content of passage (i.e. – quality of the *context* section) and of work studied

- understanding of ideas, concepts, themes, and literary devices in passage

**THINKING and INQUIRY** (out of 20)

- processing skills (analysis, integration, synthesis, evaluation, conclusion)

- critical and creative thinking skills (critical and creative analysis, invention)

**COMMUNICATION** (out of 20)

- structure and organization

* title
* significance
* context
* analysis (3-4 topics, incl. vis. of world & met. for verse)
* echoes (1-2 pgphs)
* conclusion

- mechanics, language conventions, spelling, punctuation, sentence structure

- formal qualities

- quotation use

**APPLICATION** (out of 10)

- controlling idea/overall interpretation

- relationships among themes, ideas, and concepts (i.e. – quality of the *echoes* section); ability to make connections

THE “THREE BIG QUESTIONS”

* **What is this passage about? (*not* plot!)**
* **What effect is the writer trying to create in the reader?**
* **How is this effect achieved?**

PASSAGE ANALYSIS TEMPLATE

I.E. WELDON ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

***NOTE:*** *You will not want to cover all these aspects: stick to those that apply. No one passage has everything. The trick is to discover what it* ***does*** *have.*

1. **Vision of the World** (*always* do this)**:**
* writer’s *distinctive* (peculiar) picture of human beings, the universe, the nature of things
* probably strange or surprising (i.e. – not what you have always thought)
* this is your interpretation of the work
* meaning: what ideas are explored?
* some truth about people or the world
* **not** a lesson or moral: fiction is usually descriptive, not prescriptive
* remember: the writer only gives you details, specifics; you must unearth the general truth
* can be expressed in terms of a writer’s particular *values* (e.g. – Gogol: compassion, pity, understanding, open-mindedness, charity, tolerance, warmth, beauty, love, belonging)
1. **Meter** (*only* do this if the passage is in verse, such as a passage from a Shakespeare play)
* what kind of verse is it?
* how does the verse work?
* are there *breaks* in the verse pattern? what do these breaks tell you?
	+ feminine endings
	+ substitutions of different feet in the line (trochee for iamb, for example)
	+ headless lines
1. **Opposition of Voices:**
* look for characters who personify certain significant social values, certain ideas or attitudes to life
1. **Conflict:**
* what is the problem? what is the matter?
1. **Images and Details:**
* look especially for the odd or strange details
* connect details here to work as a whole
* appeal to the senses
1. **Language:**
* literary devices (similes, metaphors, symbols, et cetera)
* interesting and/or unusual word choices
1. **Moments of Revelation (true or false):**
* new knowledge
* new sight
* discovery of truth
* sudden realization of the way things are
* stripping away falsehood
1. **Humour:**
* corrective nature
* tonic or satire? if satire, Juvenalian or Horatian?
* sources: hyperbole, surprise, incongruity, superiority, sympathy
1. **Irony:**
* what kind (verbal, dramatic, situational, structural, cosmic)?
* what says the voice underneath? the writer?
1. **Change:**
* all stories are about change
* character, voice, attitude of narrator?
* identify **degree**, **speed**, **truth** of change
* account for it
* how does it occur? why? (motives)
1. **Character:**
* personification of ideas
* motivation
* role
* change

**CLOSE READING EXAMPLE — from *Hamlet***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **HAMLET:**So oft it chances in particular men **23**That for some vicious mole of nature in them, As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty, **25**(Since nature cannot choose his origin) By the o’ergrowth of some complexion, Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason, Or by some habit that too much o’erleavens The form of plausive manners that (these men, **30**Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,Being nature’s livery, or fortune’s star)Their virtues else, be they as pure as grace,As infinite as man may undergo,Shall in the general censure take corruption **35**From that particular fault. The dram of evilDoth all the noble substance of a doubt,To his own scandal. **38**  | ***Title***  Note that the title contains a *direct quotation from the passage*, and the *author* and *work title*.Mole of Nature:A Close Reading of a Passagefrom William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*(Shakespeare I, iv, 23-38)  John Q. Student ENG 4UR-04 Mr. Simmons February 27, 2015 Word Count: 1838 |

This speech of Hamlet’s from Act I, Scene iv is a treasure trove of analysis for the careful reader. It says so much about Hamlet’s character, and also about the themes and ideas that permeate the play. Hamlet is, without being fully aware of the deeper implications of his speech, making some very good points about **the nature of tragedy in general** and **tragic heroes in particular**. After **contextualizing** the speech, the salient details discussed will be how the speech illustrates Shakespeare’s **vision of the world**, how the **meter** of the speech works, and finally some **details of language** in the speech. After this, the parts of the speech that **echo** other parts of the play will be discussed, and finally some **conclusions** will be reached.

***Introductory Paragraph***

 In this paragraph, you hint about what your major areas of discussion about the passage will be, you state your **central assertion**, and you list the three or four specific salient details you will be analyzing.

This speech occurs in Act I, Scene iv of the play. The **context**is that Hamlet, Marcellus, and Horatio are on the battlements of Elisnore, standing guard on a chilly winter’s night, in the hope that the ghost of Hamlet’s father will reappear. This scene was promised to the audience earlier in the play, as two scenes prior to this, Hamlet makes arrangements with Horatio and Marcellus to “**watch** [with them] **tonight**” (Shakespeare I, ii, 242) while they stand guard on the battlements of Elsinore, in the hope that “**Perchance** [the ghost] **will walk again**” (Shakespeare I, ii, 243). The immediate circumstances of the speech are in reference to Horatio asking Hamlet about King Claudius’s custom of “**tak**[ing] **his rouse** [and] / **Keep**[ing] **wassail**” (Shakespeare I, iv, 8-9); in other words, Claudius’s custom of getting really drunk and making a fool of himself. Hamlet’s comments in this speech are in reference to the idea that other nations will think poorly of the Danes because of their national reputation for drunkenness. Immediately after this speech, quite literally in the next line, the ghost of Hamlet’s father makes his appearance, and beckons Hamlet “**to a more removèd ground**” (Shakespeare I, iv, 61) to have a private conversation with him. It is during this meeting, which the audience sees in Act I, Scene v, that the ghost tells the story about how Claudius murdered him.

***Context Paragraph***

 In this paragraph, you situate where the text appears in the work. What just happened and what happens immediately following are the two major things to cover in this section. You should use quotations from other parts of the work in this section, as is done here.

 Note that quotations from *outside* the passage are full act, scene, and line citations, but quotations from *within* the passage only need line numbers.

The **vision of the world** expressed in this passage is Shakespeare’s view of the nature of tragedy. The “**mole of nature**” (24) that Hamlet mentions can be compared to the Greek *hamartia*, which is often loosely translated to “tragic flaw,” but a better translation would be “excess of character.” Hamlet makes the point that one tiny flaw, or “**the stamp of one defect**” (31), as he puts it, can be enough to cause a man who is otherwise “**pure as grace**” (33) to fall in some way. Shakespeare explored this idea in all of his tragedies: Othello’s “**mole of nature**” (24) is jealousy, King Lear’s is blindness to people’s true natures, and Hamlet’s is indecision and inactivity caused by over-analysis of different situations. Hamlet’s “**mole of nature**” (24) is illustrated for the audience in this very passage, as he is overanalyzing the drunkenness of King Claudius and extending the King’s isolated flaw onto the entire Danish people.

***First Salient Details Paragraph***

 This particular salient details paragraph is about “vision of the world.” *All* close readings should analyze your opinion of the author’s vision of the world.

The **meter**of this passage is of interest as well, due to several feminine endings, some unmarked elisions, and a very interesting first-foot trochaic substitution in line 31. Hamlet as a rule is a character whose verse contains a large number of lines with feminine endings, as he is a character who is constantly asking questions. His most famous line in the play, “**To be** | **or not** | **to be:** | **that is** | **the ques-** | **-tion**” (Shakespeare III, i, 56), is of course a feminine ending. This particular speech has, over the course of its sixteen lines, six feminine endings:

***Second Salient Details Paragraph***

 This particular salient details paragraph is about meter. Any time you are asked to do a close reading of a passage that is in verse, you should address any interesting things about the meter.

**That for** | **some vi-** | **-cious mole** | **of na-** | **-ture in** | ***them,*** (24)

**As in** | **their birth,** | **where-in** | **they are** | **not guil-** | ***-ty,*** (25)

**Oft brea-** | **-king down** | **the pales** | **and forts** | **of rea-** | ***-son,*** (28)

**Or by** | **some ha-** | **-bit that** | **too much** | **o’er - lea-** | ***-vens*** (29)

**Shall in** | **the gen-** | **-eral cen-** | **-sure take** | **cor-rup-** | ***-tion*** (35)

**From that** | **par-tic-** | **-ular fault.** | **The dram** | **of e-** | ***-vil*** (36)

In five of those six lines (i.e. – all of the feminine endings but line 24), the feminine ending is the second or third syllable of a word. A feminine ending where the last syllable of a word is unstressed usually results in the word trailing off a bit, and it is interesting that this happens on the words *guilty, corruption,* and *evil*. It is as though Hamlet is unconsciously recoiling from these words. This serves to strengthen his role as the hero of the play, when the audience hears him recite these words with such distaste that he can barely finish them. The fact that the word *them* is unstressed in line 24 may be illustrating to the audience that Hamlet is unconsciously realizing that *he* is, in fact, the character in this play who has a “**vicious mole of nature**” (24), as though he were going to say “in *me*,” but somehow he unconsciously stopped himself. Also, Hamlet’s speech has several unmarked elisions (e.g. – line 35’s “general” must be elided to “gen-ral,” and line 36’s “particular” must be elided to “par-tic-lar”). These indicate the speed at which Hamlet’s mind works: he thinks so quickly that his speech cannot keep up with his thoughts. Finally, the most interesting metrical feature of this speech is this first-foot trochaic substitution: “**Carr-ying** | **I say,** | **the stamp** | **of one** | **de-fect**” (31). The word *carrying* is also elided, so that it is pronounced “care-ying,” which adds to the previous point about Hamlet’s quick speech, but the fact that it is a first-foot trochee gives extra emphasis to the word. Hamlet is worried about the idea of *carrying* anything, as he sees things like responsibility and duty as burdens, metaphorically piling onto his back. This idea will be further explored in the echoes section.

One very interesting **detail of language** in this speech is the repetition of the word *nature*. Hamlet uses the word *nature* three times in sixteen lines. It is profitable to examine how and why he uses this word, for it has some disturbing cosmological implications. The first time Hamlet says the word is when he makes mention of the “**vicious mole of nature**” (24) in “**particular men**” (23). Here, he is using the word *nature* in the sense of a person’s personality or character. The implication in using the word *nature* to describe this, however, is that one’s personality traits are *natural*, or, in other words, one has no control over them because they are innate, in one from birth. The second time Hamlet uses the word is when he says *“****(Since nature cannot choose his origin)****”* (26). This is in keeping with the previous point, that something *natural* is something uncaused, something unchangeable, something even *random*. An interesting detail here is that *nature* is personified (“**nature cannot choose his origin**” – 26). This may suggest that nature should be thought of as a capital-N “Nature,” a deity or force of some kind, which suggests that there is a plan of some kind for why men are the way they are. This brings up issues like fate and destiny, which are also often themes in tragic stories. The final mention of the word *nature* occurs when Hamlet mentions “**nature’s livery**” (32) as being what “**the stamp of one defect**” (31) “wears”, for lack of a better word. *Livery* is the clothing of a servant, so the personality trait that is the “**mole of nature**” (24) or the “**stamp of one defect**” (31) is, effectively, the *servant* of *nature*. This adds to the idea that nature (or Nature) is a force of some kind with some sort of plan for man. It is a negative force at that, because, if it is true that nature (or Nature) gives man faults and flaws on purpose, then it (he? she?) must *want* the tragedy to occur. This is cosmologically troubling, as it implies some sort of negative supernatural force at work in the world.

***Third Salient Details Paragraph***

 This particular salient details paragraph is about “details of language.”

 One very interesting **echo** in this speech was briefly mentioned in the discussion of meter. Hamlet says that men with a “**mole of nature**” (24) or a “**stamp of one defect**” (31) are “**Carrying**” (31) it, like some sort of weight or burden. This image of carrying a burden is one to which Hamlet returns a few times in the play. It is apparent to the audience members who are carefully listening to Hamlet’s speeches that he resents the duties and responsibilities that are imposed on him, especially those imposed on him by the ghost of his father, involving the revenge of his father’s murder. He says a bit later in the play, immediately after he has been given the responsibility to avenge his father’s death, “**O cursèd spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!**” (Shakespeare I, v, 188-189). Several scenes later in the play, during his famous “**To be or not to be**” (Shakespeare III, i, 56) speech, he *twice* mentions *bearing* (i.e. – carrying) loads or responsibilities: “**For who would bear the whips and scorns of time**” (Shakespeare III, i, 70) and “**Who would fardels**[footnoted in the Signet text as *burdens*] **bear / To grunt and sweat under a weary life**” (Shakespeare III, i, 76-77). Hamlet, as a scholar, does not want the responsibilities of revenge and violence that he is about to be given by the ghost just one scene later in I, v.

***Echoes Paragraph***

 This section is where you discuss how things in your passage relate to other parts of the work. This might take the form of repeated words, phrases, ideas, themes, characters, or situations.

 Key: you must connect a *specific line* in your passage to a *specific line* from somewhere else in the work! This means a *bare minimum* of two quotations – one from your passage and one from somewhere else in the work! You can (and usually *should*) have additional quotations in this paragraph.

Another **echo** in this speech has to do with the idea that Hamlet is describing a situation that he will eventually play out himself. Hamlet is, in “**virtues else** […] **as pure as grace**” (33), and the audience knows this because Ophelia says of him that he is “**a noble mind**” (Shakespeare III, i, 153) who is “**The glass of fashion and the mold of form, / Th’observed of all observers**” (Shakespeare III, i, 156-157); in other words, he is beloved of virtually everyone in Denmark (with the exception of Claudius, of course). Hamlet suspects, though, that once his story is played to its conclusion, he will “**in the general censure take corruption / From that particular fault**” (35-36) in his nature. Just before his death, this concern manifests itself when he admonishes Horatio not to kill himself, but to stay alive and tell his story. He is worried about “**what a wounded name, / Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind**” (Shakespeare V, ii, 345-346) him. He is worried about the “**general censure**” (35) of those who are actually left alive in the Danish court, people who once regarded him as a great man who would, as Fortinbras puts it, “**have proved most royal**” (Shakespeare V, ii, 399) had he been king.

***Second Echoes Paragraph***

Remember that the second echoes paragraph is *optional!*

***Concluding Paragraph***

 This paragraph is used to give the close reading a sense of finality and completeness, and to reiterate, in your opinion, the *most important idea* (i.e. – the *central assertion*) of the passage.

This speech of Hamlet’s is such an important speech in the play, because it essentially *contains* the important themes and events of the play. Hamlet’s description of men brought down by “**vicious mole**[s] **of nature**” (24) describes both his own fate and the fate of all tragic heroes in drama. The tragedy arises both from the fact that the tragic hero is a person “**as pure as grace**” (33) who is brought down and destroyed, and the fact that nature (or Nature) has it in for the person from the start. Such is the *nature* of tragedy.