Close Reading Assignment

Due date: in class Tuesday, October 23

Format: 3-4 pages (minimum of 3 full pages), typed, double-spaced, in Times New Roman 12 pt font, standard margins, works cited in MLA format.

Overview: Please respond to one of the following prompts. You must respond to one of these prompts unless you meet with me outside of class at least a week before the due date to discuss an alternative option. In 3-4 double-spaced pages, perform a close reading of a single key passage from one of the works described. Your paper must make an argument about the work in question and use evidence provided by the close reading you perform to support this argument. Read the attached description and explanation of close reading. Additionally, Buell’s “Glossary” from Week 1 might provide you with effective techniques, motifs, or modes you could use to guide your close reading and argument.

1) Civilization and Nature in Tension
An issue seen repeatedly in the literature we have examined is a tension between nature and civilization/society. Some environmental literature scorns human society and says humans should retreat to the wild to be purified or to escape. Some literature depicts nature as barren wilderness and views society and civilization as superior. And some literature never resolves this tension, presenting either a paradoxical vision where both civilization and nature are good or a pastoral vision of some ideal middle meeting place.

Explore the depiction of civilization and uncivilized natural space in (choose one): a) a passage from Crevecoeur’s “What is an American” letter; b) a passage from one of the “removes” from Mary Rowlandson’s Narrative of the Captivity . . .; c) a passage from one of the chapters we read from Thoreau’s Walden.

NOTE: You must write about a passage that we did not discuss in depth in class.

2) The Relationship Between the Human Mind and Nature
One paradox that environmental writing often explores is how humans can only experience nature – that which is not-human or that which is more than human – through the human mind and through human language. This paradox is at the root of many literary comparisons of the mind and nature/environment, as well as explorations of how humans perceive or know the natural world.

Talk about the relationship between the human mind and the natural world in (choose one): a) a passage from Emerson’s essay “Nature”; b) a passage from Thoreau, either the chapter “The Bean Field” or the chapter “Spring”; c) a passage from Darwin, either from the chapter “Struggle for Existence,” the chapter “Natural Selection,” or the chapter “Recapitulation and Conclusion.”

NOTE: You must write about a passage that we did not discuss in depth in class.
What is close reading?

Close reading is the most distinctive and important tool of the textual critic (i.e. anyone writing a paper that analyzes or draws on literature, film, or other cultural texts). It is the chief means by which we support our large interpretive claims with evidence. Close reading helps to sharpen, specify, and develop observations about a text’s subject matter. Close reading allows us to see what a text is offering in its content, style, and through its form that is new or distinctive and how it represents its component ideas and images—how it generates meaning. Close readings will always include one or more of the following:

- Description: evocative characterization of what you see as an important dynamic, image, tone, or other textual feature;
- Paraphrase: restatement of textual contents to show a reader their meaning and ambiguities or to foreground problems they raise;
- Explanation of an important or difficult component of the text relevant to your discussion;
- Analysis of patterns or distinctive features in the text, patterns of images, of grammar, word choice, tone, rhetoric, figurative or literal language, of contradictions or other features that subvert expected conclusions or patterns, of repetitions and variation;
- Quotation AND explanation of what you quote. That underlined “and” is important. Do not assume that others will understand and think about the words in the same way you do. We will all understand them a little differently. You must explain HOW you are understanding the words, tone, terms, images that you quote as working, or your reader may not follow your argument.

Every important claim about a text in a close reading will offer evidence from the text to support it. If you assert that a certain passage “deploys pastoral imagery as a way to critique industrialization,” you must identify and explain how the imagery is pastoral and how it functions as critique. If you characterize a poem’s speaker as “enacting a movement from confidence to self-effacement as a way to become more ecocentric,” you must show where in the passage he or she is represented as confident, where in the passage he or she is represented as self-effacing, and where this movement corresponds to a move towards ecocentrism. (As above, you cannot assume your reader will see things as you do, but must go over your thinking about the evidence explicitly.) Your claims should be presented in this way as debatable: a reader of your paper must be able to evaluate how convincing your argument is by assessing the evidence you present and how well it connects to the claims you are making.

In explaining the specific content and describing the textures of a given example, close reading makes arguments more interesting and rigorous. Close reading tracks how the text makes its meanings and characterizes the text’s central or otherwise interesting components. Thus, close reading takes a general, fuzzy, abstract idea or claim, such as “the poem is about nature”—meaningless if left unqualified—and by specifying it, makes it interesting and worthy of discussion: “the poem presents an argument that nature cannot be accessed through human language, even as the poem’s speaker continually attempts to translate natural phenomena into words.” The latter is a good thesis statement and even hints at the evidence that the close reading will have to provide. The former is vague and says nothing. Close reading techniques get you to focus on the contents of a work at the molecular level, so to speak: they slow down your reading and can help draw attention to noteworthy features of a text—both central ones and minor points of interest. Making as many of a text’s visible and invisible claims and operations explicit as possible can help you get a purchase on a paper topic or an argument, turning a fuzzy, vague claim into a lively, specific one. You are showing your readers how the engine of the text is put together.