Notice & Focus + Ranking

In this activity you will practice noticing and naming significant details in a literary text, focusing on how they alter the meaning of the text, and ranking the details in order of importance. This activity is intended to give you the tools for performing a close reading, which is essentially a detailed analysis that attempts to articulate a literary texts' meaning by very closely describing its details. A close-reading does not need to make an argument about the text, but it can begin to lay the groundwork for an argument by beginning to think about and demonstrate what the text is about. Close reading is an essential practice for critical reading and for this class, and it can be understood as one method that helps you think about what a text means, and how it creates this meaning. Now, most of these skills you’re probably familiar with from your WA reading over the weekend and your work on the Richard Hamilton collage on Tuesday, so we’ve provided you with some useful terms that can help you see different aspects of the text, and three steps to complete.

Key Terms

Form vs. Content: content is what is being said, form is how it is being said. Every use of language, from the way in which you greet your roommates to a lyric poem, has a form of some kind, and this form always impacts the meaning of the utterance.

Imagery: What images, metaphors, smilies, or other literary figures are being employed? What effect do they have? Are there recurring images, symbols, or figures?

Diction: Look at the word choice: are there any surprising, strange, or perplexing adjectives or descriptors that the narrator is using? Are there many or few adjectives and adverbs? Are there any patterns in the type of word-choice he is employing?

Style: Can you find any stylistic choices, like repetition, assonance, alliteration, meter, or sentence structure, that seem significant?

Tone: How might you characterize the narrator’s tone? Does it stay constant, or does it shift over the course of the story?

Time: What is the timescale of the story—does it take place in a day, or over a longer period of time? Is it fast-paced, slow-paced, or something else? Is it set in a specific historical moment? Do the verb tenses suggest that some actions came before others?

Note: This list is by no means exhaustive. Other things to look for might include: mood, punctuation, ambiguity, characterization, etc.
1. On your own, list as many details as you can about the text. (4 min)

2. Now, select the 4-5 most important details from the list above and circle them. Below, write why you think these details are the most important. (3 min)

3. Now, in the groups we formed while you were practicing close reading, compare your details and reasoning with those of your peers. This is a very perplexing story—what does it mean? What is it about?
Tip: help your group-mates make the leap from explaining why a detail is important to thinking about what it means by politely and non-confrontationally asking “so what?”