

Why should we care about English and close reading?

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Abstract

Marked declines in the number of English majors across the United States since 2009 pose a threat to English's existence as an academic discipline. In American culture, English is not perceived as having the same kind of practicality or material necessity as other disciplines, such as STEM. This is due in part to the fact that English lacks a concrete body of knowledge such as that which characterizes the STEM fields. English scholars and teachers who believe English belongs in the university have been forced to consider questions including: What kinds of ideas or skills should English education teach? How should these skills be taught? Are these skills still valuable and somehow applicable in the modern world? This essay examines one way that English scholars and academics have attempted to assuage the reservations around the institutionalization of English: close reading. English scholars have utilized and advertised the practice of close reading as a method for adapting and organizing English into a more systematic, teachable subject. As a result, close reading's place within English study possesses similarities to English study's position within the university. Like English, literary critics and scholars do not agree on close reading's definition or value in English education. Looking more closely at the relationship between close reading and the English discipline sheds light on the nature and value of English in the modern world.

Although the value of English and close reading is contentious, the world does need English majors and the English major does benefit from teaching close reading. This essay supports synthesizes historical evidence, contemporary scholarly articles, and a personal performance of critical reading in order to support this claim. The evidence reveals a quantified correlation between reading and empathy, as well as a relationship between close reading and learning. These results suggest reading and close reading may not be as systematic or definitive

as other disciplines, but the skills developed through English education are, in fact, widely applicable. Therefore, this essay argues, the university should value close reading and English education and ensure they do not disappear.

Introduction

English majors worry a great deal about the relevance and purpose of their educational pursuits in today's society. On one hand, literacy appears to be nearly universally accepted as an invaluable skill, an essential pillar of primary education. On the other hand, studying literature in institutions of higher education occupies a much more tenuous position. Literacy is a prerequisite for success in developed societies; schools will not discontinue the practice of teaching students the ability to read. However, studying literature in an institution of higher education lacks social and scholarly credence. The tenuousness of the position is partially due to the fact that close reading skills developed through the study of literature are not perceived to be as lucrative or practically useful as skills attained through other disciplines, such as those in STEM disciplines. The 2016-17 Association of Departments of English Ad Hoc Committee on the English Major noted the dramatic national decline in the number of students considering and pursuing a major in English literature since 2009. Between 2012 and 2016, the rate of bachelor's degree completion in English has declined by almost 20.4 percent, from 53,840 to 42,868 (ADE 49). English is not unique, of course; a slump in student attention confronts all departments within the humanities. But the decline within the literary constituent of the humanities deserves scholarly attention.

It is not difficult to understand what deters undergraduates from pursuing an English degree. Studying literature takes time – time most people have no interest in devoting to memorizing technical literary terms such as anaphora and metonymy, searching for rhetorical devices in literary works, and ultimately contemplating the meaning of the abstruse rhetorical devices in a given text. This laborious process is characteristic of English study and has come to be known as “close reading.” The close reading process is long, arduous, and not quantitatively

rewarding. Further, the process lacks the benefit of clear, real-world applicability. While an engineering student will utilize the knowledge and skills acquired in his calc-based statistics and fluid mechanics courses almost every day, few professions necessitate that employees rhetorically analyze a piece of writing. Additionally, knowledge or understanding of literary theory rarely slips into everyday life. Because of this perceived gulf between close reading and social and professional life, the atmosphere around the notion of studying literature flows thick with condescension; those who study literature must be idealistic, romantic, even a little impractical. If they were not, they would presumably go into a more pragmatic field like business. It is incredibly frustrating to put in the work required for successful close reading only to be met with condescension and indifference from the people who dismiss English study as useless. This becomes especially discouraging for English students given the rising costs of college tuition.

Obstacles to English gaining respectability as an academic discipline do not merely stem from students, however; literary study is also challenging from the teacher's perspective. An English student's success or progress cannot be measured by statistics gleaned from bubbles filled in on an answer sheet, unlike empirical disciplines. Empirical disciplines, like Earth Science, physics, psychology, etc., ground themselves in observation and experience. The knowledge in empirical studies can be proven and retention of the knowledge can be assessed fairly easily with traditional examinations. Literature, on the other hand, is theoretical in nature. Skills and abilities developed in English classrooms are difficult to measure, challenging to articulate, and their value is nearly impossible to define. English does not revolve around a structured body of knowledge or set of skills, so there is no perfect formula for English students to memorize and apply to every text. Teachers cannot provide students with clear solutions or

answers to their inquiries because clear answers do not exist. Therefore, English knowledge and abilities cannot be assessed simply through examinations. English scholars and teachers have thus been forced to consider questions such as: What kinds of ideas or abilities should an English teacher attempt to instill in their students that are unique to English study? How should these ideas or skills be taught? Are these skills and ideas still valuable in the modern world? While these questions are fundamental to the existence of the English discipline, they have yet to be definitively answered. The inconclusiveness of these questions within English study operate as a debilitating impediment to the survival of the academic discipline.

The debate over the necessity of teaching literature is hardly a new phenomenon; the argument has existed since the origin of the university. Recent trends, however, suggest the presence of English as a discipline within higher education is becoming increasingly vulnerable. For example, two-thirds of English departments contacted by the ADE reported lower or sharply lower number of undergraduates majoring in English in the 2016-17 survey (ADE 28). Further, the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point has proposed restructuring their system and demoting English to a study, rather than a discipline with a departmental structure (Willard). These trends reflect the national shift away from subjects within the humanities toward more “practical” areas of study like engineering and psychology, which feature greater dependence upon verifiable conclusions and procedures. The fact that fewer people choose to study English jeopardizes the existence of English as an academic discipline. However, English studies should not be erased from the university. The world still needs English majors.

Despite not having the practicality or material necessity of some empirical studies, studying literature expands readers’ capacity to feel empathy. Studying literature invites readers into the lives and minds of other people, which exposes them to people, places, times, and

problems that would remain foreign to them otherwise. Reading, and studying literature by extension, increases empathy through the generation of connections across a multiplicity of boundaries. This phenomenon is so palpable that even scientists have taken strides to examine the relationship between empathy and English, and the results of these studies support the idea that literature can act as a civilizing agent. In an experiment conducted by PLoS ONE, investigators assessed how engaging with fictional narratives influenced a person's self-reported empathetic skills. Participants in the experiment reported their level of "emotional transportation" or engagement with a fictional text written either by Arthur Conan Doyle or Jose Saramago and provided a measure on an empathy scale. After two weeks, participants who reported being emotionally transported while reading also had a higher level of self-reported empathetic responses (Bal Veltkamp 8). In other words, the people who were more emotionally affected by a text had a greater empathetic capacity following the reading of the emotionally affective text. Though it cannot be proven that reading literature caused the rise in empathetic capability, the results clearly reflect a correlation between reading and empathy.

Other scientific studies have supplemented these claims. In October of 2013, *Science* published results from five studies conducted by social psychologist Emanuele Castano and Ph.D. candidate David Kidd, in which participants completed varied reading assignments: popular fiction, nonfiction, literary fiction, or no text. Castano and Kidd administered a test to measure the participants' "ability to detect and understand other's emotions" (Castano, Kidd 377). Coming as no shock to literary critics and literature professors, there was a statistically significant difference between scores of participants who read genre fiction vs those who read literary fiction (380). Readers of literary fiction had more empathy. Literature presents situations, conflicts, characters, and relationships that resonate with readers as realistic, yet also often

subverts expectations and norms. Reading literary texts allows people to connect more intimately with different kinds of people both within and outside their community. A lack of this ability “has been linked to the breakdown of positive interpersonal and intergroup relationships,” and psychopathologies (Castano, Kidd 377). Again, neither the scientists nor literary scholars can claim literature *caused* an increase in respondents’ abilities to empathize with other people. The *correlation* between reading and empathy, however, can be safely asserted.

Possessing the ability to empathize allows for greater exposure and acceptance of different ideas and ideologies, which cultivates the possibility for innovation and successful complex relationships. In an increasingly globalized society, the ability to successfully navigate a variety of relationships, ideologies, and perspectives is invaluable. Literature has the power to transport a reader into a wholly new and unique environment. For example, reading Dickens’s *Great Expectations* offers insight on the novel’s context that a reader may not otherwise obtain. After reading *Great Expectations*, the reader would have a greater understanding of what life in Victorian England looked like from the perspective of a young boy of limited means. Additionally, the reader would have gained a cursory glimpse into the social, historical, and political context surrounding the main character of Pip. Reading about Pip’s life through Pip’s perspective allows the reader to recognize the similarities between Pip and the reader themselves, ultimately encouraging the reader to better understand and sympathize with his interpersonal and societal conflicts. Although the reader will never meet a person in real life in Pip’s situation, a better understanding of the challenges facing a poor person in an industrial society facilitates empathy for the impoverished people during the reader’s time. The more people read, arguably, the more that people will be able to empathize with the multiplicity of varied identities operating

within contemporary society. A literary background instills an openness to transcending cultural and physical boundaries, and therefore remains worthwhile.

An English education curates empathy most tangibly through close reading and critical analysis. Critical reading requires students to find important connections between apparently unrelated ideas and argue for their importance in the context of the written work, in addition to its importance in the context of the social, cultural, historical, political environments. Through the process of critical reading, English students must recognize and then effectively assert the larger meaning behind literary patterns. English students have the additional obligation of imparting the importance of their claim to their readers. If noticing and interpreting a challenging text weren't laborious enough; convincing a reader that seemingly insignificant syntactical and rhetorical characteristics impart meaning is even more challenging, especially considering the decreasing number of students studying English at all. It is time to turn the methods of the study back on itself and consider: Why should we care about the practice of close reading? Why should we care about close reading literature?

The following study forms a response to Carol Atherton's book, *Defining Literary Criticism*, which elaborates upon the history of English and literary criticism in scholarship and academic institutions. While Atherton provides a valuable summary of the study and history, her analysis remains inconclusive. She illuminates the struggle of the English discipline to "define and claim ownership of the knowledge that English represents: a knowledge whose nature is still contested, and still indistinct" (Atherton 182), without asserting a prescription for its future. English study is clearly important to Atherton and many others, but is the study worth the contentious debate it engenders?

While Carol Atherton's book provided an invaluable background on English study, its scope remains limited. Atherton notably neglects to assert whether English and close reading should survive in the universities or, if so, how English will survive in the long term. The following study aims to pick up where Atherton left off. The analytical aspects of the following examination shall remain within works from and about Charles Dickens's repertoire. As a canonized nineteenth-century author whose writing has remained relevant long after its publication, Dickens's writing is emblematic of both the possibilities and limitations of English literature's place in the universities. This study will only scratch the surface of the questions surrounding close reading and larger issues surrounding the English discipline, but it shall provide new perspective on a practice that is widely considered to be essential to the study of literature.

Close and Critical Reading

The term "close reading" is an academic catchphrase that lacks clearly identified parameters, and the debate over this practice serves as a poignant entrance point into the subject of my investigation. Close or critical reading embodies a fundamental pillar of English studies. High school and university English teachers toss the term around like salt, hoping to add some intellectual or scholarly flavor to their curriculum and entice students' interest. However, no teacher ever really explains what close reading is or why they want students to do it. What does a student gain from being able to identify an author's use of synecdoche, chiasmus, or malapropism? At the time most students become introduced to the techniques of close reading, they only care to absorb whatever skills the AP Literature test required in the rhetorical analysis essay. It does not occur to many students to question why "critical reading" abilities need to be tested; they only want to test well. Given the disciplinary uncertainty surrounding the English

major, the question of the intrinsic usefulness or value of close reading as a practice becomes more important.

Close reading is altogether nebulous; literary critics themselves cannot agree on a concise description of the concept. Michael Warner writes in his article, “Uncritical reading,” “Critical reading is the folk ideology of a learned profession, so close to us that we seldom feel the need to explain it” (Warner 14). As this quote suggests, critical reading has become so ingrained in English teaching that it would be difficult to conceptualize teaching English without it. It currently lacks a coherent argument for engaging in it; however, encouraging others to appreciate and engage in the process will require academics form a conceptual, teachable explanation for why we need to read closely, or critically. If the English discipline is to survive within the university, we must construct a sound, persuasive argument about the importance of literature, close reading, and the critical thinking abilities close reading hones.

Attempting to define the process of close reading may begin with identifying what close reading is not. The qualifier of “close” in front of the generally accepted and practiced activity of “reading” clearly indicates some sort of special requirements. It suggests a proximity to a text, a kind of impalpable intimacy. Franco Moretti’s idea of “distant reading,” which gathers multitudes of literary or written works and siphons them into a computer to analyze, presents one possible contrast to the idea. Distant reading focuses on the science of literature, compiling and investigating huge amounts of data gleaned from computer analyses (Culler 20). This suggestion for an antithesis seems plausible, as its emotionless focus on statistical data certainly opposes the often emotional interpretation involved in close reading. Yet this practice does not require reading a given text at all. Computers do all the dirty work in distant reading, while close reading requires students read a text not just once, but many times over. Any conclusions gathered from

“distant reading,” though arguably valuable in literary contexts and wholly different from close reading, should not be taught as the definitive antonym to close reading if anyone wishes to have any understanding of what actually makes “close reading” a valuable and unique intellectual pursuit.

Jonathan Culler suggests an infinitely more credible antonym to the concept. He writes in his essay, “The Closeness of Close Reading,” “Perhaps what contrasts with close reading is ... something like sloppy reading, or casual reading, an assessment of ‘life and works,’ or even thematic interpretation, or literary history” (Culler 20). This contrast offered by Culler appears to be the most accessible and appropriate. While only the academic elite may have any idea what “distant reading” means, almost everyone understands “casual reading.” Casual reading may be interpreted as the kind of reading performed when one reads a work such as, *Fifty Shades of Grey* or *Twilight*, both of which would likely yield little intellectual value to even the most skilled close reader. In the context of Culler’s suggestion, close reading may be defined as an intellectual endeavor, with its antonym being simply reading for one’s own pleasure. Based on knowledge of Paul de Man’s writings, Culler identifies a crucial facet of close reading: “Close reading ... [involves] attention to how meaning is produced or conveyed, to what sorts of literary and rhetorical strategies and techniques are deployed to achieve ... the effects of the work” (Culler 22). To Paul de Man, and by some extent to Culler as well, close reading is important because it considers how writers generate emotional responses in readers. Or, put more simply, they are interested in considering what literary strategies and techniques make us care about the literary work overall.

Jane Gallop also provides instructive insight for scholars considering the difference between “close reading” and casual reading. During casual reading, she suggests, readers see

what they expect the author to have written based on the author's type and the book's genre. However, Gallop asserts that close reading interrupts this kind of literary projection, so readers will see something they did not already presume (Gallop 16). Thus, close reading encourages readers to consider new perspectives, while casual reading reinforces already held beliefs and ideas. Gallop's perspective suggests that close reading has a greater capacity of increasing empathetic feelings in readers. Because close reading has interrupted literary projection characteristic of casual reading, readers become more open to considering and absorbing new ideas and perspectives the novel present. If more people are encouraged and inclined to engage in the process of close reading, the more empathetic capabilities and responses to different ideologies and ideas within that community will rise as well.

While the concept of close reading rose with New Criticism literary theory, the practice should not be limited to those who consider themselves New Critics. Rather, "close reading is a widely applicable skill, of real value to students as well as to scholars in other disciplines," as Gallop writes (Gallop 15). The method of close reading has been applied to subsequent theoretical approaches to literature, such as post-structuralism, literary deconstruction theory, and the theory of reader response. Disciplines outside literature and the humanities have adopted close reading techniques as well. Literary-trained scholars may be able to notice patterns and details different than those a traditionally-trained historian or sociologist might, and therefore may also provide new and insightful perspectives for the historians and sociologists to consider. The techniques and skill-sets inherent to close reading as an activity easily transform into the skills required by many other occupations and practices, an idea this paper shall explore in greater depth later. English study must be considered valuable because of the remarkable versatility of close reading abilities. Close reading skills are not limited to use within the English

discipline or literature; the methods of close reading are widely applicable and may be fruitfully applied to other disciplines as well.

Dickens's writings, as well as most great works within the literary canon, have been analyzed through a great many perspectives and from a great deal of angles. *Great Expectations* alone has generated a tremendous wealth of literary criticism. Literary critics have examined the novel through lenses such as feminism, psychoanalysis, formalism, new historicism, and more. Considering the substantial body of writing that already exists on the subject begs the question: why does the world need another close reading on Dickens generally or *Great Expectations* specifically? Close reading differs from studies employing similar inductive processes like archaeology or detective work. By employing a deeper, more thorough consideration from a different angle or perspective, archaeologists may uncover historical, factual truths about past civilizations and societies. A detective utilizing the critical process can solve crimes and locate dastardly criminals. However, a modern literary critic or student approaching *Great Expectations* from a feminist or queer theory angle cannot reveal more precise, empirical knowledge about the natural world, no matter how hard they twist their take. Close readers engage with theory and ideology, they do not produce empirical truth or knowledge.

All this continues to beg the question: What place does close reading have in modern society? Should teachers continue instructing and evaluating their students on close reading skills and should English scholars continue to generate literary criticism? Critical reading remains a foundational pillar within many English departments and courses and the profession of literary criticism grounds itself on this practice. Michael Warner writes, "Critical reading has allowed literature departments to sell themselves as providing a basic element of education ... The rich overdetermination of such fables in modernity allows us to imagine ourselves as the bearers of a

heroic pedagogy” (Warner 14). As this quote from Warner suggests, it may be time for English scholars and academics to consider the value of close reading. Although the practice has become ingrained within English in the universities and literary criticism, not many scholars have truly contemplated the practice. Awareness of the reasons why close reading became so valuable to the English major in historical context shall provide further insight on whether close reading remains valuable in the contemporary context.

Historical context of close reading

Early stages of the English discipline foretell the anxiety professionals and teachers feel about literature’s place in universities. Carol Atherton writes, “The continuity that can be located within English is therefore not so much a continuity of ideology as a continuity of confusion” (Atherton 182). In other words, the problem with English is not that it generates debates and confusion among scholars, but that its status and function as a discipline is uncertain. Science and math did not require justification or extensive explanation for scholars and academics to accept them as legitimate disciplines in the university. However, it was necessary for literary scholars to establish literature’s intellectual validity through rigor and systematization before the universities would accept English as a legitimate academic discipline. Throughout the process of establishing English’s place as a discipline, objectivity, rigor, and precision characterizing scientific research seeped from the sciences and infected literary study with similar pragmatism. As a result, universities took a historical approach to teaching English when the academic discipline became institutionalized in the nineteenth century. This historical approach succeeded in making the subject more “teachable” and, consequently, more “examinable” because it was grounded in biographical details and historical facts that could be memorized. English required a

definite body knowledge to fit with the other academic disciplines at the university, so scholars and academics logically turned to these more examinable facets of English literature.

It is undeniably easier to determine how much a student has learned about literary history and biography as opposed to depth of thought or analytical skills. Students can memorize historical and biographical information and teachers may test students' retainment of the knowledge through traditional methods including multiple choice and short answer questions. Measuring depth of thought or analytical ability requires a more subjective test with a more subjective grading scale, and this often comes in the form of the critical essay. The historical or biographical approach to literature entailed dividing up the literary canon into broad and undefined historical periods. Each class focuses on a given period of literary history, studying selected canonical authors from those periods. Some colleges added additional studies such as the outlines of English literature, the history of literary criticism, etc. Technical terms related to meter, rhetoric, and genre were also included in the examinations. It was important for students to be able to condense knowledge, exhibited by examination instructions such as "Make a list of Pope's chief works in chronological order, with brief descriptions," and "Write notes ... [on] the Interlude, the Opera, and the burlesque or satiric drama before 1800" (Atherton 31). Studying literature this way provided the body of knowledge English "needed" to enter the academic world as a discipline, and many of these practices remain in use today.

The historical approach could not and cannot function on its own. The kind of rote learning involved in historical and technical approaches seems wholly discordant with the depiction of literature as a "humane, moralizing subject which could harmonize an otherwise anarchic profusion of 'dry facts'" (Atherton 28). Literature consists of a great deal more than facts and figures; literature and close reading are subjective, emotional, not methodological or

precise. Salman Rushdie poignantly expresses this sentiment: “Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart.” This quote alludes to the part of literature that cannot be reduced to any one method or procedure. Aesthetically pleasing, artistic elements of literature become lost when students limit themselves to a technical or historical perspective. The humanistic and artistic considerations of literature must not be lost in its study, and in fact may serve as the single best argument for studying English in the first place.

This “humanistic” approach to English may be divided into two strains of literary philosophy, embodied by the strategies and writings of Walter Pater and Matthew Arnold. Matthew Arnold proposed literary criticism – and by extension literary study – could function as a powerful agent of social change and restore social harmony. A bold claim perhaps, though not entirely unprecedented or unsupported. If literature has the power to instill and encourage sympathetic feelings, it could be possible for a particularly moving novel to instigate social change. Walter Pater focused more on the aesthetic experience of literature. Pater valued literature for its beauty, for its ability to make the reader *feel* something. Attaining the ability to consume and critique literature (among other forms of art) is the objective. He writes, “The aesthetic critic, then, regards ... all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind” (Pater). These philosophies differ greatly, but the two critics grounded their theories on a baffling shared faith. While both Arnold and Pater strongly believed in the importance of criticism and its warranted place in the university, yet they also did not believe the critical process could be taught.

The irony, of course, lies in the fact that both Pater and Arnold functioned within the academic institution. Walter Pater attended Queen's College, Oxford and served as a professor at Oxford, teaching classics, philosophy, and modern German, while Matthew Arnold attended Balliol College, Oxford, and eventually became elected Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford. This perfectly exemplifies the contradiction at the heart of the debate over the purpose and value of studying English literature. Both men believed in the profound importance and power of literature, yet even these men struggled to form curricula for teaching English literature and literary criticism.

The struggle of English study is not really whether English literature belongs in the university, but whether the study of English literature deserves its own discipline within the academic institution and, if so, how professors should approach teaching it. The situation at the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point emphasizes this point particularly well. As mentioned in the introduction, the midwestern university has eliminated its English major. However, though the English major has been cut, the university still offers courses in the subject of English literature, such as ENGL 106: Reading Fiction, ENGL 320: American Realism and Naturalism, ENGL 309: Forms and Modes in Literature, among others (UW - Stevens Point Course Descriptions). This transition represents the fact that while reading itself is generally respected, it is still unclear if exclusively or at least primarily studying English literature provides students a unique and valuable skill set.

Most paths for the contemporary English major include a mix of foundational writing courses, historically-based survey courses, and more specific, elective courses. The Association of Departments of English noted in their report on the English major, “Few [English departments] have dispensed with literary history as a framework for the major” (ADE 9).

Historically-based classes can be deeply beneficial to students' understanding and appreciation of different styles of literature. ADE identifies two models of literary history training: "one with a required survey sequence ... in combination with some subsequent distribution requirements among historical periods or one with distribution requirements only" and defines a historical survey course as "a standard, historically broad course with a largely common reading list" (8-9). Reading texts after learning about the authors' historical and biographical contexts allows readers to feel more connected to both the author and the story in its real context. In other words, the historical lens provides angles from which students can interpret a piece. *Great Expectations* can be analyzed more easily when the reader understands the nature of England's political environment during the time Dickens wrote the novel. Understanding literature and art as a constantly evolving body of ideas, perceptions, and perspectives became easier after the survey courses provide political and cultural background. Therefore, English should continue to provide instruction on biographical and historical information. Students must have a foundational knowledge of the sociological, historical, and cultural context surrounding a work of literature before they can successfully consider – much less critically analyze – a text from a given perspective.

However, as previously mentioned, the ability to learn and remember historical facts in an academic setting does not make one a literary scholar. It is one thing to be able to understand a text within its historical context; analyzing and critiquing the work is quite another. The incorporation and increasing dependence upon close or critical reading represents English scholars' attempt to fill the gap between historical and theoretical proficiency in literature. Atherton writes, "Such a view places great emphasis on ... 'critical literacy,' legitimizing students' own knowledge and experiences and encouraging methods of reading 'against the

grain” (Atherton 162). Within contemporary English study developing critical literacy generally entails performing close and critical readings of canonized texts. The ADE writes, “English departments of every type advertise their programs to prospective students as training in critical analysis, writing, and close reading” (ADE 22). As this quoted material reflects, critical analysis and close reading have become a foundational aspect of the English discipline. These practices have come to supplement – and in some cases overwhelm – the more mundane historical approach.

Close reading has become an integral feature in English study, and the practice now plays an essential role in both formats of the university English class: historical and theoretical. Almost every English class in English undergraduate education entails writing an essay that “critically analyzes” a text read for class, and the “goal” is generally explained as the ability to build an effective argument through critical reading. The Association of Departments of English cites an English department’s website addressing English majors, “You’ll hone your written and critical thinking skills, while developing intellectual curiosity, creativity, independence, and an ethical framework that will prepare you to make a difference in the world” (ADE 4). This quote exemplifies how close and critical reading has been incorporated into the English major as manner of systematizing the more abstract elements and aims of English study, including “intellectual curiosity, creativity, ... and an ethical framework.” Yet despite being an essential part of studying English in the university, not only do professors and scholars not agree on what critical analysis and close reading actually means, not all who study English subscribe to the importance or value of close and critical reading. Further, critical reading has ironically become one of the aspects of English study that discourages students from declaring an English major. English students become lost in unanswered questions: what is the point of close reading? What

purpose does it serve in education, and how can these skills be translated and utilized in contemporary society? In order to consider these questions, it shall be helpful to analyze an exemplary piece of modern literary criticism.

Close reading in practice

A contemporary critical essay by Elaine Freedgood by the name of “Realism, Fetishism, and Genocide: “Negro Head” Tobacco in and around *Great Expectations*” serves as a model for successful literary criticism and interpretation. Freedgood’s approach reveals how modern readers may adjust the traditionally accepted approach to close reading practices and literary study. The next section, therefore, shall consider the questions: What does critical reading look like in practice? What, exactly, do critical readers do?

In her essay, Freedgood offers an exemplary illustration of a successful study of literature. “Realism, Fetishism, and Genocide” argues that “the presence of ‘Negro head’ tobacco symbolizes the crime of Aboriginal genocide, without requiring conscious acknowledgement of it” in the context of Dickens’s novel *Great Expectations* (Freedgood 27). “Aboriginal genocide” in this context refers to the atrocities committed by British colonialists against native Australian peoples during the time of British expansionism. An incident known as the Myall Creek Massacre, in which forty to fifty people were killed by white settlers, exemplifies the horrors taking place (31). Freedgood’s thesis, therefore, is that Dickens’s text contains tangible references to violent interactions between British colonialists and native Australians. This connection may seem ludicrous at first because Dickens’s use of the now-obscure term “Negro head” may not register in readers’ minds. Yet it is the initial improbability of Freedgood’s claim that makes her argument such an excellent introduction to a consideration of the enduring importance of English study. Freedgood’s contention is valuable in its own right; however, it is

her methodology that is most important to this study of close reading and the English discipline. The following paragraphs will focus on evaluating the strategies and effectiveness of Freedgood's argument, rather than its implications. This essay is not an analysis of Freedgood; it is a consideration of close reading and analysis.

Freedgood's essay exemplifies the possibilities of successful close reading that is grounded in a broad, historical perspective. Although Freedgood's connection between Dickens's eponymous Victorian novel and Aboriginal genocide in Australia requires a few leaps in readers' judgment at the outset, the argument's validity grows remarkably firm as she conducts her analysis. Most contemporary readers assume that English people in the Victorian Age remained largely unaware of the brutality and extent of Australian Aboriginal extermination or genocide, a fact Freedgood herself acknowledges. Prominent literature during Dickens' time rarely mentions facts of the British empire or its consequences, which has led literary scholars and readers to believe information on the subject was lacking during the time. Therefore, it is highly unlikely to modern readers that Dickens intended a throwaway reference such as his identification of tobacco as "Negro head," to "encode fetishistically" the horror of Aboriginal genocide by European colonialists in Australia. So Freedgood's connection between the infrequent occurrence of an obscure, derogatory term in a nineteenth-century British novel and Australian Aboriginal genocide appears tenuous at best. However, Freedgood convincingly elucidates her historically-grounded hypothesis.

How, exactly, does a literary critic or a close reader support such an incredible connection? Freedgood identifies her incredible proposition in the beginning of her essay. She writes, "I am going to argue in this essay that there is a particularly overwhelming horror that cannot be named but only encoded fetishistically in the most apparently negligible details"

(Freedgood 26). This line serves a crucial function in the context of Freedgood's essay; this is ultimately her thesis for the whole work. It also answers the question of why readers should care about her ideas. People need to care, Freedgood's thesis asserts, because the connection she notices between Dickens's novel and Aboriginal genocide in Australia reflects a larger trend within literature: the tendency to fetishistically encode "particularly overwhelming horror[s]." Literary critics and close readers notably begin their writings in this manner, starting with their conclusions or thesis statements and following these claims with substantive clues supporting the provided claim. In this way, the literary critic's process clearly echoes a scientist testing a hypothesis; rather than starting her essay by outlining the clues that led her to her conclusion, Freedgood starts by telling us her conclusion, providing us with her thesis statement. For the literary critic, the conclusion is not the important aspect of the process; the literary critic does not engage in deductive reasoning. The more challenging part of Freedgood's job – and the job of literary critics in general – is providing readers with convincing evidence supporting her claim. In this case, the claim is that Australian Aboriginal genocide has been fetishistically represented in a novel with little connection to the subject otherwise.

The literary critic's challenge of drawing connections reflects the inductive nature of literary examination and illustrates a fundamental connection between literary criticism and scientific research. Deductive reasoning seeks to reach a conclusion from one or more premises; this process is also known as a top-down form of logic. Scientists engaged in researching a particular hypothesis utilize this form of reasoning during the scientific process. This process begins with the hypothesis, the general statement, and proceeds to examine evidence through experimentation, ultimately reaching a more specific conclusion. Inductive reasoning, on the other hand, is denoted as bottom-up logical reasoning. A person engaged in this kind of

reasoning makes a broad generalization based on more specific observations. From the specific, comes the general. The inductive reasoner discerns a pattern from their collected observations and makes their generalization based on the perceived pattern. The literary critic engages in this process, collecting rhetorical, historical, contextual observations in order to support a broader claim.

Freedgood subsequently performs two noteworthy functions in her critical analysis, definition and qualification, which further align the role of a close reader to roles within empirical professions. Freedgood follows her thesis statement by defining key terms in her analysis, like any good scientist or psychologist testing their hypothesis. She highlights Abel Magwitch's use of the word "Negro head" and the repeated use of this unconventional term. Citing the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Freedgood writes, "The second entry, which hails from Virginia, where this form of tobacco originated, describes 'Negro head' as 'a strong plug tobacco of a black colour' (1839)" (27). This distinction is essential, as the antiquated term would be unfamiliar to most modern readers. Because readers are likely unfamiliar with this term, it is even more likely its use and larger historical, social implications would go unnoticed by the casual reader. She continues, defining the concept "fetishistic remembering": "The fetish communicates its meaning awry, so that it need not be consciously understood. Fetishistic representations ... do not demand the massive efforts required by repression" (28). This is a crucial aspect of Freedgood's piece; defining the terms ensures readers follow the progression of her analysis, mirroring the scientific method. Scientists always define their key terms and variables before proceeding into the methods and results of their experiment.

Freedgood makes a notable and incredibly effective concession. She writes, "When I began to research the connections between *Great Expectations*, the transportation of convicts to

Australia, and 'Negro head' tobacco, I assumed that the links between this tobacco and Australian Aboriginals resulted from my own postcolonial acuity" (28). The importance of Freedgood's move here is twofold. To begin with, she more directly addresses the reason that readers may find her argument particularly challenging to digest. "In the enduring cultural monuments of the nineteenth century, including the canonical novels," Freedgood writes, "the vibrant and various discussion found in journalistic writing suffers considerable compression" (Freedgood 31). What Freedgood refers to here is the fact that canonized fiction from the Victorian era shunted discussions of "empire and its consequences" to the fringes of the text. Victorian literature did not depict the uglier consequences of British imperialism. Because of this, modern readers assume most people in Victorian England were unaware of the atrocities their fellow countrymen committed in British colonies. Yet, as Freedgood's essay asserts, this does not necessarily mean the cruel facts of imperialism remained entirely compressed to the fringes of Victorian societal awareness.

Additionally, conceding that her claim appears to rest on shaky ground furthers the comparison between her close reading and a scientific experiment by anticipating a likely counterargument. During psychological or scientific experiments, the researcher often identifies a possible confounding variable. In this case, Freedgood's awareness of and attentiveness to the effects of colonialism, and in particular how they manifest in literature. Freedgood admits it may seem like her interpretation of *Great Expectations* lacks empirical validity; it may appear she has fabricated this tenuous connection out of her own desire for the connection to exist. While this admission would otherwise appear to undermine her argument, ultimately serves as its strongest support. Admitting the superficial implausibility of her associations only makes the evidential support she subsequently provides more convincing.

The abundance of historical evidence Freedgood offers in the following paragraphs leaves little doubt regarding the validity of her conclusions. She fashions an astounding argument, synthesizing evidence from Dickens's own letters with articles from the Victorian periodical press. To her own professed surprise, Freedgood notes the surprising appearance of words such as "extirpation," "extermination," and "decline" (29) within articles from the Victorian periodical press, as well as "a massive chronicling of Australia in general and of the Aboriginal everyday life – and everyday death" (28) near the time Dickens published *Great Expectations*. Further, individual letters between Dickens and correspondents document his personal interest in the Australian situation. The Secretary of the Society for the Protection of Aborigines in the mid-nineteenth century, L.A. Chamerovzow, even sent Dickens a copy of his book, *The New Zealand Question and Rights of Aborigines* in addition to a collection of writings from 1850. With this cultural and historical context in mind, it seems much less outrageous that a recurring appearance of "Negro head" may in fact serve as a symbol for the peripheral knowledge and discomfort of the European extermination of Australian natives. Despite initial reservations, readers will find it incredibly difficult to refute Freedgood's argument after she has provided such convincing and copious evidence.

Reviewing the progression of Freedgood's analysis reveals the similarities and differences between close readers and individuals engaged in more empirically-based inductive processes. The process of close reading and empirical experimentation possess striking similarities, which defies the perception of English study as entirely amorphous and intangible. Like a scientist conducting an experiment, Freedgood begins by outlining her hypothesis. She proceeds to logically and systematically expound upon the specific evidence and details that led her to this broad generalization, effectively stripping down the reservations and doubts of her

readers. This process is highly replicable and methodological, which is what makes this piece of criticism so exemplary and ultimately parallels the study of literature to more empirical disciplines. The almost-scientific model exemplified here echoes T.S. Eliot's "doctrine of impersonality," "rejection of subjectivity," and "analysis of form and language," which allowed criticism to adopt a kind of methodology (Atherton 127). Students of English can easily deconstruct Freedgood's essay in order to understand and eventually reproduce the process of building an effective literary argument. In this way, Freedgood effectively represents the systematic close reading techniques adopted by universities and critics of the modern era.

It is crucial that Freedgood's analysis reveals that the process of close reading literary works is essentially repeatable and logical because the replicability of the critical process has served as a crucial support for English's status as an academic discipline. Students can read, reconstruct, and use pieces of literary criticism such as Freedgood's as a guide for their own close reading, and this means that the process of critical reading can be taught. The introduction to my investigation highlighted the uncertainties English teachers feel over how best to teach English skills. The methodological nature of close reading revealed through Freedgood's systematic essay suggests the English discipline does contain a replicable process students can study and reproduce in different literary contexts. Although critical reading will look different and result in very different conclusions, the process and skills required for the process are strikingly similar. Additionally, close reading's dependence upon logic advances the intellectual rigor of studying literature. Close readers must utilize logical reasoning as they construct and elucidate upon their literary interpretations. Even though the definition of close reading remains unclear in the minds of scholars and students, its process possesses more transparency and articulateness. Therefore, through a dependence on inductive logic and replicable processes,

close reading provides proponents of literature's disciplinarity with evidence that literary study possesses intellectual rigor.

However, the conclusion of a scientific experiment grounded in the deductive process is different from an inductive conclusion. Deductive reasoning is generally assumed to produce logically certain conclusions, and therefore seeks empirical truth by reducing the realm of possibility down to conclusive fact. Inductive reasoning, on the other hand, concludes with generalizations and extrapolations, which forges a space for uncertainty that does not exist with deductive reasoning. Although the process of close reading is systematic and repeatable, it does not result in tangible or verifiable conclusions. And this difference is the major point of contrast between English and empirical disciplines. A conclusion derived from the inductive reasoning process can be wrong. It is a fundamentally arguable claim that extrapolates from observations and evidence. Although Freedgood provides a profoundly convincing argument to support her claim, it is not inconceivable another literary critic may argue a very different claim and provide evidence that is almost or just as convincing. Another literary critic may refute Freedgood's conclusion, for example, which suggests readers should simply remain aware of the limitations inherent to realistic fiction rather than condemn it for such limitations. To another critic, the fetishistic representation of Australian Aboriginals may very well represent a fundamental flaw in Dickens's fictional world. English study does not operate in the realm of absolute fact or actuality, and this uncertainty deters many people from pursuing the subject in higher education.

The success of Freedgood's critical essay embodies another idea expressed by T.S. Eliot regarding the function of a literary critic or close reader. In his writings, Eliot distinguishes between the literary scholar and the literary practitioner, i.e. the close reader. He writes, "The scholar can teach us where we should bestow our admiration and respect: the practitioner should

be able ... make an old masterpiece actual, give it contemporary importance, and persuade his audience that it is interesting, enjoyable, and active” (Atherton 128). The analysis of “Negro head” within the context of *Great Expectations* simultaneously reveals to Freedgood’s readers something about the modern world as well as the nineteenth-century world of Dickens. Her critical analysis exposes the simultaneous obsession with and intentional rejection of colonialist abuses and genocidal actions by the British people in the Victorian era. As Freedgood uncovers, people in Dickens time *were* cognizant of the abuses taking place in their colony across the ocean, despite literature of the time not paying explicit attention to it. Dickens’s use of the term “Negro head” reflects an awareness of Australian Aboriginal situations without directly addressing the atrocities. By revealing this connection, Freedgood offers her readers a new way to perceive a nineteenth century novel that has been critically analyzed by other scholars and students innumerable times before. Therefore, this close reading reflects the fact that critical reading has the power to generate new interpretations of and perspectives on influential literary texts.

It is also important to note that Freedgood’s close reading represents a reading of *Great Expectations* that finds itself on an unconventional ground in literary criticism. She exposes Dickens’s peripheral representation and cognizance of horrors occurring in Australia during his time; however, she does not use this revelation as an excuse to condemn Dickens and his writing. And this lack of condemnation or reproach is where Freedgood fundamentally differs to T.S. Eliot and many subsequent literary critics into contemporary English culture. Atherton writes that many of Eliot’s critical essays “seem to revel in exposing gaps in [factual] knowledge, even flaunting them as evidence that the critic has the right to voice judgements even when they are unsupported” (Atherton 133). This presents Eliot specifically and the critic in general as an

antagonistic figure in relation with the text they analyze. Such negatively connotated words as “flaunt,” “revel,” and “exposing” juxtaposed with the idea of a critic suggest Eliot and his critical followers endorse an adversarial approach to literary interpretation. Given Freedgood’s subject matter, it would have been fairly easy for her to adopt this critical approach and denounce Dickens for his limited representation of an incredibly important concept. The fact that she does not do this, however, is unconventional in the current critical context, where it appears most critics approach criticism with suspicion and a desire to criticise. Freedgood’s method therefore serves as a valuable contrasting example to a common practice.

Freedgood presents us with an intriguing alternative to Eliot’s style of critical reading. Although Freedgood clearly recognizes the cultural weight of her claim, she also contends the manner of fetishistic representation within Dickens’s text “need not be consciously understood or historically explicated, because realism ... provides its readers with lots of objects and details that do not demand interpretation” (Freedgood 35). In other words, even realistic literature is limited. If readers were expected to interpret each individual object and detail included in *Great Expectations* – or any text for that matter – there would simply be too much to consider. In Freedgood’s view, therefore, the fact that “Negro head” fetishistically represents Aboriginal genocide does not discredit the representations Dickens does provide, of which poverty in Victorian England is a prime example. Rather than reflecting a fundamental flaw of Dickens’s writing, the fetisistic representation reflects a fundamental flaw, a fundamental limitation, of realistic fiction. Realism cannot possibly attempt to fully represent or flush out the scope of the world’s problems, tragedies, conflicts, etc., even if the book remains contained in a short time period.

Freedgood has functioned as a literary practitioner by T.S. Eliot's definition. Through her essay that expresses and successfully supports the association between Dickens's novel and a case of aboriginal genocide, she has also infused an old masterpiece with contemporary importance. Although *Great Expectations* has been analyzed time and time again, Freedgood's essay unveils a hitherto unrealized connection between the literary work and its global surroundings. Dickens's text contains shadows, whispers, of things happening on the other side of the world. If Aboriginal genocide has been hiding between the lines of *Great Expectations* all these years, what other connections lie just beneath the surface of the Victorian masterpiece? Literary works like these continue to be important because it can always be viewed in new contexts. Furthermore, Freedgood uses the connection she discovers as a method of supporting her theory on the nature of realistic fiction in general. The hidden association between Aboriginal genocide and *Great Expectations* is important in itself, and it is additionally important because it reflects the inherently limited nature of the literary medium. Freedgood makes readers care about her argument because it applies to more than simply Dickens's literature. Freedgood is an example of a successful practitioner of literary criticism because she provides readers with a new, original reason to care about a renowned novel.

Freedgood's critical analysis benefits modern readers in two manners. For one, Freedgood constructs her argument based on a systematic, methodological template. Students reading her essay could easily deconstruct her analysis in order to learn how a successful piece of literary interpretation works, which ultimately teaches them how to engage in critical reading and eventually generate criticism themselves. Additionally, her analysis reflects the role of inductive reasoning in literary criticism, and this highlights literary criticism's similarity to the scientific method in technique yet fundamentally different in result. While experiments result in empirical

knowledge, the results of close reading lack similar verifiability. “Realism, Fetishism, and Genocide” represents an additional manner by which criticism may differ from other disciplines, in addition to how the future of the discipline may evolve in the future. While Freedgood could easily have reveled in exposing the gaps of Dickens’s world of *Great Expectations*, she asserts the limitations lie with Dickens’s artistic medium of realistic fiction instead of with the man or the novel. The difference between Freedgood’s approach to *Great Expectations* and the more popular contemporary, suspicious approach used by contemporary literary critics, as well as the implications of both approaches, shall be explored in greater detail later in this essay.

Having examined and analyzed a successful piece of professional criticism, it will be beneficial to provide a critical reading of my own: a close reading of a chapter from Dickens’s *Sketches by Boz*. Including a personally executed critical analysis shall exemplify the process and features being discussed in this examination in a contemporary context.

Meditations on Monmouth Street

As Elaine Freedgood’s essay suggests, one of the most difficult tasks in writing a novel is attempting to depict a multi-dimensional, dynamic world through a lamentingly linear and limited art form. Realism is fundamentally limited. Every novelist attempts to present an accurate, engaging, and sensational depiction of the human experience, thereby creating the most intimate and emotionally evocative artistic product. Charles Dickens, one of the most renowned novelists of all time, represented his reality through a unique overabundance of detail. Because of this representative style, Dickens’s works offer a particularly rich landscape for those interested in close reading. For example, Dickens’s use of words associated with death, incorporation of seemingly insignificant details, and use of metonymy for items of clothing in “Meditations on Monmouth Street” present the narrator as a kind of archaeologist. Profound

similarities between the process involved in journalistic writing and the process of interpreting archaeological evidence exemplify the profound importance of recognizing and understanding the meaning hidden in seemingly random patterns and trivial details. Further, this connection calls another process into its analytical web: the process of close reading. While the connection between Boz and an archaeologist offers an intriguing new perspective on Boz as a narrator, it ultimately — and more importantly — exemplifies the value of close reading abilities.

Repetitious use of words associated with death creates the image of Monmouth Street as a site ripe for archaeological exploration. Dickens writes, “Monmouth-street has still remained the burial place of fashions,” “We love to walk among the groves of the illustrious dead,” “deceased coat,” “dead pair of trousers,” and “the mortal remains of a gaudy waistcoat” (Dickens 98). Death is a condition that may only come to objects or beings that have once been alive. Yet Boz describes the street as a place clothes such as the deceased coat and dead pair of trousers go when they pass from this life, i.e. when they are discarded by their owner. Further, Boz specifies the waistcoat has deteriorated to “mortal remains,” calling skulls and other kinds of bones to mind. Dickens’ connection between death and clothing animates the inanimate articles of clothing. The fashions and clothes can only be dead because they were once alive. Further, while the association of death with fashions and articles of clothing parallels the fashion of an age to the human generation wearing the fashion, it also parallels specific articles of clothing to the unique individuals who once wore them. In Dickens’ sketch, fashions signify the generation from which they come and individual articles represent the people on which they hung. In this way, Dickens presents Monmouth Street and its second-hand clothing shops as excavation sites, from which the culture of an age or character of a person may be interpreted.

The abundant use of metonymy with the objects found in Monmouth Street adds a layer of fictive magic to the story while ultimately furthering the connection between Monmouth Street and an archaeological site. Dickens writes, “Whole rows of coats have started from their pegs, and buttoned up, of their own accord, round the waists of imaginary wearers” (98) and, “A black suit and the jacket changed into a diminutive coat” (99). In these sentences, the articles of clothing notably perform the given actions. Coats jump from their pegs and button “of their own accord,” around individuals that Boz pictures in his mind. Next, Boz notes the boy’s clothing “change into a diminutive coat.” It is important to note that the clothing’s owners have no place or agency within these sentences. Rather, agency belongs to the inanimate objects. Although the idea of animated items of clothing may seem objectively silly, the decision to present the story in this manner reveals Boz’s connection to an archaeologist studying the ruins of an ancient culture. By figuratively shifting the agency to agentless objects, Dickens raises the perceived power and significance such objects hold in readers’ minds. Metonymy inverts the standard dynamic. The objects and discarded possessions tell Boz the entire story of individuals’ lives, rather than the individuals telling Boz the story behind their possessions. Archaeologists must engage in a similar practice; they must allow the objects they excavate to tell the story of the people to whom they once belonged.

Boz’s explanations for his conclusions shatter the illusion of magic suggested by the metonymy and reveals his similarity to an archaeologist. Boz notices various apparently trivial details from the clothes he sees and easily formulates an elaborate explanation behind the presence of such a detail. Regarding a particular blue suit displayed in a shop window, Boz deduces incredibly specific aspects of its owner’s life; “It had belonged to a town boy, we could see ... A small day-school he had been at, evidently” (99). In order to ingratiate the image of Boz

as a kind of detective or archaeologist, Dickens kindly explicates the logic behind Boz's conclusions. Of course, the suit belonged to a town boy, Boz insinuates; the short length of the legs and arms and the bagginess at the knees of the piece of clothing match the dress only of the younger generation running amok in London's streets. Additionally, the boy must have attended a small day-school because the knees of the suit indicate the child played a lot on the floor. A regular boys' school would never allow the boy to rub his knees white by excessive playing on the floor. While Boz's inductions seem obvious to readers after Dickens explains the logic behind them, the details and facts upon which Boz draws in order to make these conclusions are fairly minute and obscure. This process mimics that of an archaeologist, who uses trivial details of collected material excavated from a given site to recreate the lives and cultures of people who lived long ago. Here the suit is the excavated material, and the boy is the individual Boz conjures from the archaeological evidence. Only a truly gifted archaeologist could make such precise inductions and build a full image of a person from so limited an archaeological find.

Dickens' metaphorical and ideological connection between Boz's inductive abilities and archaeology offers a profound argument for the importance of close reading. Just as Boz and the skills he displays represents a skilled archaeologist studying the people of London, he also represents the reader close reading the very story Boz presents her in "Meditations on Monmouth Street." The story itself embodies a site rich with material for the observant close reader. On the surface, the sketch is just Boz's amusing, in-depth description of London's second-hand clothing shops. Yet, if the reader begins noticing patterns in Boz's arguably overabundant detail, they may make the kinds of observations displayed in the preceding passages of this paper. If the reader emulates Boz in her approach to reading the story, analyzing details Boz did or did not choose to include in his narration, they too may be able to imagine the individuals Boz describes

and even Boz himself. Boz directly addresses this parallel when he says, “There was the man’s whole life written as legibly on those clothes, as if we had his autobiography engrossed on parchment before us” (99). Although Boz specifically references an autobiography, an arguably more clear-cut form of historical and personal documentation than the novel, the statement’s truth applies to literary fiction as well. Close reading Boz’s narrative not only provides invaluable insight into the individuals and scenes he observes, but also into his own character. The details the author notes and describes ultimately reflect the values and priorities he held. For example, Boz’s lingering descriptions of the lower-class, city schoolboy and the unfortunate trajectory of his life indubitably reflect Dickens’ preoccupation with class tension and disparity in London during the Victorian era.

Ultimately, “Meditations on Monmouth Street” articulates, on a number of different levels, why individuals must possess the ability to engage in the practice of close reading. By highlighting fundamental similarities between the roles of Boz the journalist, an archaeologist, and a close reader, Dickens reveals the value inherent to the process these roles involve. Although the cultural importance of a journalist or novelist may be subject to some argument, the importance of an archaeologist largely escapes questioning. Archaeologists study the remains of people and cultures in order to discover, understand, and document the progress of humankind and civilization through the ages. Rephrased, archaeologists study excavated material to write the most important story of all time: the story of human history. When an archaeologist recovers a dragonesque brooch from Southern England, he will analyze its aesthetic and physical properties to draw conclusions about the values and perspectives of Roman Britain from whence it came, and those of its individual owner. Journalists like Boz and close readers engage in the very same process. Boz and the reader of his story uses the details of the clothes seen in shop windows on

Monmouth Street to draw conclusions about the culture of Victorian London. Additionally, the reader may use her observations to draw conclusions about the author, Charles Dickens. *Sketches by Boz* itself now serves as an archaeological artifact from which readers may come to imagine Victorian London. No one alive in 2018 can live in Dickens' time and experience the sorts of things Boz or Dickens experienced, but modern readers can use Dickens' text as a rich form of cultural documentation. It may not be as true to literal or historical fact, but, like the dragonesque brooch, the story's properties undoubtedly reveal intrinsic details regarding the values and perspectives of a man living in nineteenth century Britain.

J. Hillis Miller's essay, "The Fiction of Realism: Sketches by Boz, *Oliver Twist*, and Cruikshank's Illustrations," provides a crucial lens through which readers should consider Boz and his relationship to an archaeologist. Miller writes, "This giving of meaning is an act of interpretation creating a culture, generating those signs which Boz the speculative pedestrian must then interpret" (Miller 111). Boz's role, described here by Miller, clearly supports the comparison between Boz as a journalist and an archaeologist. Yet, Miller goes further, providing a profound alternative for the significance of this parallel. He writes, "The Sketches are not mimesis of an externally existing reality, but the interpretation of that reality. ... The metonymic associations ... are fancies rather than facts, impositions on the signs he sees of stock conventions, not mirroring but interpretation, which is to say, lie" (119). This quote highlights the crippling limitation of the inductive process involved in Boz's narratives, archaeological study, and close reading. Conclusions made by Boz or an archaeologist cannot be verified. They cannot go back in time and find the owners of the objects in question to corroborate their conclusions with reality. Boz creates associations from objects he sees. While his associations may be valid or true, it is very likely they are not. The boy with white knees could have attended

a regular boy's school or could have lived in the country. Or perhaps the suit belonged to a girl going through a tomboy streak. Boz's associations only seem obviously true because Boz presented them that way. For all readers know or reality is concerned, all of the conclusions could be lies.

While the fact that Boz's inductions may not be based in reality detracts from the validity of an archaeologist, it does not always do the same for a close reader. Boz offers his own perspective on this issue of his credibility in "Meditations on Monmouth Street"; "Yet we felt as much sorrow when we saw, or fancied we saw – it makes no difference which" (Dickens 100). Readers and literary critics too often fall into a trap asserting authorial intent. Limiting textual analysis and interpretation to the meaning the author intended fundamentally limits the power of a text to influence individuals and society more broadly. Dickens' own interpretation of his *Sketches* may not provide the most insightful analysis for the text; prioritizing the author's intention discourages and obscures other profound readings and interpretations. At the end of the day, it makes no difference whether Dickens intended readers to compare Boz's role studying Victorian London to that of an archaeologist studying ancient cultures. Perhaps this association never crossed his mind. Yet as this reading offers an intriguing new perspective through which readers may perceive their own role, how could the validity of the interpretation be denied? This is not to say, however, that all interpretations possess the same weight or measure of validity. Archaeologists and close readers must allow their interpretations to change based on new facts and insights gleaned from further and deeper investigation. An archaeologist certainly cannot deny DNA evidence revealing the ancestry of remains simply for the sake of his preferred, more imaginative conclusion. Similarly, close readers must also be able to allow their interpretations to evolve based on more intimate understanding with a text and its social and historical context.

Yet this raises the question, how can an individual determine the value of a given interpretation? How can readers learn to guide their practices to gather evidence supporting more constructive, worthwhile conclusions?

The question of interpretational validity reveals the fundamental differences between close reading and other activities requiring intense investigation and intellectual reasoning. Highlighting the parallels between the process of close reading and archaeology must not diminish the important distinctions between these occupations. While the skills required for both jobs possess many similarities, they are not fundamentally the same. Many jobs require their practitioners to draw conclusions from evidence. For example, doctors distinguish patterns from the small details and symptoms of a patient's physical condition to diagnose overarching medical concerns or problems. Additionally, detectives must find the clues that often go unnoticed in order to solve difficult crimes. Close reading and literary interpretation are inherently different from these other practices. Literature is not an exact science. In the case of a doctor, a patient usually suffers from a tangible, detectable affliction, and a crime usually has only one explanation the detective may uncover. Even archaeology has a home among the sciences - though that home may be a bit insecure. However, neither literature nor literary criticism exist in a realm with any kind of exactitude. An archeologist uncovering a new artifact provides new information about a past culture or individual, but what purpose does a literary critic serve?

Herein lies the root of my fundamental question. Analyzing Dickens's short story, exemplifies a fundamental skill gained from studying English literature in an academic institution, which also serves as an example of literary critique. The inductive process involved in close reading closely resembles processes by which archaeologists and individuals in other professions conduct their livelihood. The inductive process is important, as many surely agree.

The importance of thinking critically about situations as a method of recovering deeper knowledge and truths cannot be overstated. Yet learning and practicing critical reading does not exist as the only way to learn inductive reasoning, nor is close reading the most obvious or practical use of the process. Therefore, English scholars and practitioners must consider how close reading is unique compared to other inductive logic processes. Although this essay shall not provide much in the way of answering this question, future students should consider whether acquiring the ability to engage in methods of induction through the medium of English study and literature provide a unique benefit to modern individuals or society as a whole.

Suspicious Reading

Close reading – ironically given the qualifier “close” – is generally presumed to mean something along the lines of a person taking a step back from the text and considering what makes it tick from a more objective perspective. The close reader must identify the technical elements of a piece and consider them in various contexts including textual, historical, structural, etc. In the mode coined by I.A. Richards, the text should be studied through “‘an intellectual analysis of the Total Meaning’ into its contributory components of sense, feeling, tone, intention, and form” (Atherton 141). This limits the critical interpretation of a piece of literature to the textual and rhetorical elements of the work itself. However, some literary scholars criticize close reading, literary criticism, and literary theory because of the tendency to adopt negative attitudes toward literary texts during the critical process. This idea was cursorily presented earlier in this essay, in reference to Elaine Freedgood’s critical analysis of the term “Negro head” in the context of *Great Expectations*. Now it is appropriate to expound upon the limits and possibilities of close reading in light of varied contemporary perspectives on the subject.

Rita Felski offers a particularly enlightening critical view on the subject. Within her essay, “Suspicious Minds,” she describes a concept coined by Paul Ricoeur known as the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Ricoeur subscribes literary critics and theorists Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud to this approach and defines the idea as a “type of interpretation that is driven by a desire to demystify, an adamant refusal to take words at face value” (Felski 216). In other words, the hermeneutics of suspicion describes the tendency to distrust a text, assuming the “true” or “inaccessible” value or implications of the work lie beneath the surface. A suspicious reading of *Great Expectations*, for example, may have manipulated the fetishistic representation of Australian Aboriginal genocide into a way of exposing Dickens’s faults as an author. Suspicious readers would fault Dickens and *Great Expectations* for their limitations; the fetishistic representation would be characterized as a failure.

As Felski aptly notes in her essay, though, this approach to reading has become stale in the current academic context. Felski questions why scholars feel the need to unmask and demystify literary works. In contrast to my previous paragraph, Felski writes, “We can think of suspicion ... as a curiously non-emotional emotion, the stance of detachment that became synonymous with professional culture. The rise of the professions was to promote the sense of a tight fit between technical competence and affective neutrality” (Felski 220). Based on this view of a literary critic as a suspicious reader, close and critical reading allows the study of literature to fit within an empirical institution like the university. Close and critical reading in practice suck the emotion out of reading, or so the hermeneutics of suspicion suggests.

It is not difficult to understand why approaching literary study in an adversarial, non-emotional manner gained traction among literary scholars and critics. Felski writes, “Detachment served as a vital confirmation of the ability to ... devote oneself wholeheartedly to perfecting the

procedures and practices that define particular types of expert knowledge” (220). By transferring skepticism from focusing on the literary discipline itself, close reading removes two obstacles destabilizing the estimation of literary study. On the one hand, critical study allows the disciplinary anxiety surrounding the study of literature to transform into suspicion of the text. Rather than constantly question the value of the study, close readers can question the value or meaning of the text. The hermeneutics of suspicion disguises the novel as an opponent to be conquered, a monster to be unmasked, and the English scholar is the hero riding in on his white horse to save the day. Additionally, transferring suspicion from the discipline to the text masks literary study as a more traditional form of scholarship. With suspicion, the “non-emotional emotion,” defining the practice, English study builds a façade to fit the likes of biological or mathematical study. As the mathematician approaches his equations and the scientist approaches his hypothesis and experiment – that is, without emotional attachment to the object of study – so the suspicious close reader considers his text.

However, Felski goes on to offer an intriguing and appealing contrast to the detachment inherent to the hermeneutics of suspicion. The faults of the hermeneutics of suspicion echo those of historical and technical approaches to literary study. Literature attracts people because many fictional stories have the power to conjure emotions, not because they withhold their true meanings from immediate understanding. While it is possible to enjoy noticing elements of a text and interpreting their meaning in a way no one else has considered, it is unlikely English students and literary critics enjoy this because they feel they have beaten their opponent, the novel in question. Rather, perhaps some people relish the process of close reading because it provides the opportunity to become closer to a text; to understand the text in a more intimate way than they did previously.

Felski again refers to Ricoeur, who contrasts the hermeneutics of suspicion with the hermeneutics of trust. As the hermeneutics of suspicion aims to expose the limits or fallacies of a literary text, the hermeneutics of trust approaches a text with a different kind of mentality. Instead of antagonism and distrust, the reader offers admiration and respect. Instead of working *against* the text, the trusting close reader works *with* the text, attempting to expand upon rather than expose the lessons and meanings of the novel. This approach aligns with my idea of close reading. Even when I closely read a text I do not like, I often gain a deeper respect for the internal functioning of the story in spite of myself.

Dickens's works, as well as most great works within the literary canon, have been analyzed through a great many perspectives and from a great deal of angles. The novel *Great Expectations* alone has generated a tremendous wealth of literary criticism. Literary critics have examined the novel through lenses such as feminism, psychoanalysis, formalism, new historicism, and more. Considering the substantial body of writing that already exists on the subject begs the question: why does the world need another piece of literary criticism on Dickens generally or *Great Expectations*? The hermeneutics of suspicion appears to answer that question by aiming to expose previously hidden aspects or mysteries of written work.

Audrey Jaffe's analysis of Dickens's unique use of narrative in his writing offers an incredibly poignant parallel to the hermeneutics of suspicion. Within her book entitled *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience*, Jaffe analyzes the transactional style of narration characteristic of Boz in Dickens's *Sketches*. Identifying the narrative style as "semi-omniscient" immediately signifies a degree of separation between the narrator and the story he describes because the nature of being omniscient or all-knowing inherently removes a creature from the rank of average humanity and into another category entirely (the image of an all-

knowing god may come to mind). However, as Jaffe accurately identifies, Boz does not exactly fit the description of an omniscient being. She writes, “The narrator who is also a character cannot be omniscient, since he is a part of the scene he observes” (Jaffe 1). While Boz sees and understands many things about his surroundings, many of which most of those around him do not see or understand, he is not a god.

As expressed in the earlier close reading, Boz’s power is that of induction. He does not have any power to control the world around him and Jaffe vitally distinguishes Boz exists as a character within Dickens’s larger story. In the context of Dickens’s writing, Dickens is the omniscient being, not Boz. Dickens ultimately controls the story and the narrator’s surroundings, giving him the power in the situation. Jaffe’s analysis notes Boz does not function as a stereotypical character within Dickens’s story. Jaffe writes, “By positioning himself as observer, [Boz] asserts his distance and difference from those he describes” (Jaffe 1). In this way, Boz embodies an incredibly intriguing paradox. Because Boz exists as Dickens’s character, a product of Dickens’s imagination, he cannot be entirely omniscient. Yet Boz also does not occupy the same plane of existence as the rest of the characters within Dickens’s story. He remains separate and distinct from the other characters based on his role in the *Sketches*.

Further, this separation between Boz and the rest of the cast of characters derives, in large part, from the stories’ genre. The function and style characteristic to the literary sketch possesses an ambiguity similar to that surrounding Boz’s narrative style. Jaffe references Richard Stein, writing, “The sketch form itself ... suggests both a lack of attention and superiority to its subject matter” (Jaffe 1). Literary sketches lie somewhere between novel and journalistic writings; they are generally short, fragmented works that contain little plot. As the name “sketch” suggests, authors intended the short narratives to illustrate a particular aspect of the author’s (or an

outsider's) culture for the public to consume. Sketches focus on a specific character, place, or activity, and they are informal, analytic, and descriptive writings. By nature, sketches did not fit within the category of the novel or journalism. Sketches were more descriptive and focused on creating an intriguing aesthetic than standard news articles. Conversely, the stories were shorter and more factual, and cannot be characterized as a novel either. The sketch describes a particular phenomenon in great detail, shedding light on something that may be otherwise poorly understood. At the same time, its specificity does not invite opportunity for a great deal of narrative. Boz and the genre of the sketch are both defined by their internal contradictions.

Jaffe's analysis further evidences the previous comparison of Boz as a narrator to a close reader or a literary critic. As conveyed in the close reading of Dickens's sketch "Meditations on Monmouth Street," Boz's character performs a function strikingly similar to that of a literary critic or a close reader. Boz observes the people and places around him, collecting enigmatic details others do not notice and crafting reasonable explanations for their existence. Jaffe writes, "Boz establishes his narrative position by seeing what characters fail to see, which includes not only ... the city of London, but ... the inevitable failure of many characters' projects" (Jaffe 1). Boz's ability to see what others cannot infuses him with an attitude of superiority toward the objects of his observation, i.e. the other characters. Indeed, Jaffe notes Boz's noticeable lack of sympathy for people he sees. Analyzing the sketch "The Pawnbroker's Shop," Jaffe writes, "Yet while seeming to invite sympathy, the sketch often displaces it, making sympathy its object. ... Feeling is what the narrator regards rather than what he expresses" (Jaffe 7). And here is where Felski comes back into play. Through his lack of sympathy, his emotional and narrational removal, Boz functions within Dickens's *Sketches* like a suspicious close reader. Both Boz and

the suspicious close reader aim to notice that which the author and characters do not, gleaning meanings from the patterns and inconsistencies of their surroundings.

Boz's resemblance to a suspicious reader serves as a reminder for why the English discipline evolved the way it did. Literature's entrance into the university and Dickens's writing took place in very similar environments. The place and nature of English study in the academic world owes a great deal to the focus on intellectuality, professionalization, and specialization in nineteenth-century England. People in the Victorian era put a lot of stock in professionalism and empirical study, the ability to approach situations and solve problems methodically and without emotion. Dickens's sketch writing illustrates this fixation through his narrator Boz. Audrey Jaffe tellingly entitles the chapter on Dickens's *Sketches*, "Boz and the Business of Narration." This title represents the detached, "professionalized" attitude Boz takes to very emotional situations. Jaffe writes, "As Boz turns the seemingly inconsequential material of daily life into capital, then, the sketch narrator's business absorbs what business itself has left out of its domain" (Jaffe 2). That which has been left out of the domain of business is assumed to be nothing less than human emotion and connection. Boz brilliantly exemplifies the tendency of Dickens's era to take the emotion out of emotionally charged things in order to make them professional, academic, and empirical.

Ultimately, the central thread in the debate surrounding the relevancy and worth of English relating to the intangibility of its knowledge must be reconsidered. Atherton writes, "The story of English Literature's origins as a discipline in the universities ... is therefore one of a struggle to define and claim ownership of the knowledge that English represents: a knowledge whose nature is still contested, and still indistinct" (Atherton 182). While the indefinite nature of English and its study stimulates disciplinary tension, this tension does not ultimately devalue the

discipline. Studying English develops students' abilities to critically examine the world around them, an indubitably valuable skill. Critical questioning often masquerades as cynical skepticism, as Felski points out, but questioning and investigating does not need to be antagonistic. The ability to critically question societal structures and ideologies allows an individual to come closer to the world's truths than simply ingesting empirical knowledge and facts ever could. Rather than conceptualizing close and critical reading as a process of exposing the mysteries of a text, we should consider critical reading as an act of admiration where the reader comes closer to the text and their inner selves.

Conclusion

As the evaluation of and engagement with several pieces of literary criticism reveals, critical reading and literary study possesses both subjective and empirical characteristics. On the one hand, literary criticism follows a general procedure that is remarkably similar to inductive processes involved in scientific research. The methodological nature of the critical process, while seemingly antithetical to the humanistic elements of literature, allowed English to become accepted within the academic and professional communities. Although some people criticize literary study for lacking intellectual rigor, critical reading and writing literary criticism are replicable, rational processes. On the other hand, Rita Felski and Elaine Freedgood's essays reveal the power of the subjective elements in the study of literature. Felski and Freedgood promote an alternative approach to suspicious critical reading that relies on appreciation and respect for literary works. This method is better suited to promote the English major in modern society. Critical reading does not need to be antagonistic in order to be methodological, and suspicious reading of literary texts invites suspicion of literature's worth in general. Respecting an object of study does not delegitimize its academic value. If English scholars wish to preserve

literature's place in academia, they need to promote appreciation overall. Suspicious critical reading begets suspicion *of* reading and its scholarship.

Approaching literature with respect and admiration rather than suspicion departs from contemporary methods of criticism and allows the current generation of English students and scholars to create new, unique interpretations and analyses. Atherton summarizes F.R. Leavis's theory of literary criticism, which asserts English has its life and reality in the present, and that the reality of English changes to fit the reality of contemporary contexts. In other words, "each age needs to discover the 'significant relatedness' of literature in 'an organic whole, the center of significance being (inevitably) the present'" (Atherton 144). Leavis's statement here is particularly poignant in light of the current discussion. Literature and its interpretations evolve with the times, and it is up to every generation of readers and interpreters to decide the direction their generation needs. English may always be engaged in a perpetual struggle to define and claim ownership of some kind of indistinct, disputed form of knowledge. There may never be conclusive evidence or a universally accepted argument for its worth. However, maybe the uncertainty inherent to English study and close reading is not a problem to be solved, but a paradox to embrace. Despite its disciplinary uncertainty, English study and literature has had a great impact on universities and academics. Rather than evaluate the discipline with contempt for its shortcomings and uncertainties, modern society should take a lesson from Elaine Freedgood and Rita Felski and respectfully approach English study and critical reading.

Why should we care about English and close reading? Well, "despite a widely felt disenchantment with the idea of literature" (Warner 9), close reading and literature remain incredibly valuable as an academic discipline. A theme threaded through the argument over the importance and value of studying English is the inconclusiveness characterizing the entire

English discipline. Literature does not contain precise knowledge or well-defined abilities or skills. And, although many perceive literature's inconclusivity as a fatal flaw, the openness of English literature serves as an asset. As Jonathan Culler writes, "The work of close reading is not primarily to resolve difficulties but above all to describe them, to elucidate their source and implications" (Culler 22). In other words, close readers do not seek answers, but seek meanings and interpretations produced by a text. The fact that literature does not feature concrete, verifiable data or information may be seen as a detriment, or it may be seen as a great freedom. Close readers are not retrained to facts and figures; they have more freedom to interpret and investigate literary worlds.

English and close reading matter in contemporary society because these practices generate greater empathetic capacity. As Jane Gallop identifies, "Close reading can equip us to be open to learning—to resist our presumptions, prejudices, and suppositions—to keep on learning" (16). In other words, close reading teaches its practitioners how to approach the world with an open mind, and maintaining an open mind is how people will continue expanding themselves intellectually, ideologically, and socially, even outside the classroom. The ability to approach conflicts and problems with a mind that is open to new ideas promotes adaptability and empathy, two characteristics that enable people to navigate complex challenges and interpersonal relationships. Teaching and promoting the importance of close reading abilities will enable more individuals to gain the skills necessary for successfully navigating the challenges they face in an increasingly complex, heterogenous, dynamic world.

In conclusion, it is undeniable that the literary discipline possesses tangible weaknesses, and that these weaknesses have contributed to a shift toward more empirical disciplines like math and science in recent years. Interest and investment in English study has experienced a market

decline, which has been reported by the Association of the Departments of English and previously mentioned in this essay. However, contemporary society must not lose its appreciation for literature or for the people who devote their lives to studying it in close, critical manners. Studying English and close reading promotes empathy, which is absolutely essential to acquiring and applying a broader, more inclusive outlook to the world's dilemmas. Close reading more specifically encourages readers to look beyond preconceptions and prejudices and – by doing so – equips readers with the skills required to critically consider and respect new perspectives to which they are exposed. In other words, critical reading equips readers with skills required to continue learning beyond the classroom and in varied contexts. While close reading and English may not possess clear value in modern society, the ability to empathize and learn are widely perceived as valuable. Reading and close reading cannot be said to *cause* higher levels of empathy and learning capacity, yet the correlation between the variables is enough to argue that close reading and the English discipline do not deserve to be culturally disparaged or belittled. Close reading and English, contrary to growing belief, still belong in the university.

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