WHAT IS “CLOSE READING”?  

Close reading is a specific method of literary analysis, which uses the interpretation of a small piece of a text as a way to think about the whole. This kind of analysis invites readers to pay close attention to the effects of the specific words on the page. We ask ourselves why each word was chosen, how it contributes to the broader themes and ideas of the text, and how it interacts with the other words/images of the text.

For example, the first sentence of The God of Small Things describes “May in Ayemenem” as a “brooding month.” Arundhati Roy could have described the atmosphere as “menacing” or “ominous”: these words technically have the same meaning, but we come away with different impressions. It’s our task to figure out just what effect these choices have. Since even synonyms are subtly different from one another, when we change a single word, we alter the sense of the text. Close reading asks us to pay attention to these nuances.

There is no “right” way to analyze a text, but there are more and less convincing ways of interpreting different passages. The steps below will help you to persuasively close read a passage in a literary text:

1. **Summary**  
   Read the passage once without making any annotations. Start by asking yourself: what’s going on here? What is the speaker/character/narrator saying? Who is speaking? In what context? If you are unable to write a 1-2 sentence summary of the passage, read through again until you have a clearer idea. Don’t panic if you’re unsure, many texts are deliberately ambiguous or confusing; it is not always possible to say for definite what is happening.

2. **Mood & Tone**  
   The second time you read through, think about the overall mood created by the writing. Is it comic, tragic, sinister, serious? What is the tone of the writing: formal, playful, ironic? Does the writer use understatement or exaggeration?

3. **Literary Devices**  
   Circle/underline the specific words, images and literary devices which contribute to the mood and tone you have identified. These might include any of the following:
   - Unusual vocabulary/word choice (archaic words, neologisms, foreign imports, slang/colloquialisms). Use an online dictionary such as [www.askoxford.com](http://www.askoxford.com) if you need to look up words you don’t recognize.
   - Symbols: does the writer use images which seem to represent something else?
   - Metaphors and/or similes
   - Striking comparisons or contrasts
   - Personification
   - Alliteration and/or onomatopoeia

4. **Structure**  
   Consider the overall “shape” of the passage you are analyzing. In The God of Small Things, does Roy use regular punctuation and sentence structures? Is there dialogue in the piece? What is its effect?

5. **Bigger Picture**  
   Having considered these details, you can start to develop your overall interpretation of the passage. Consider the ways that your passage fits into the text as a whole. What do you think is the text’s main message? How does it contribute to the broader themes of the work? How do the particular literary devices you have identified help to emphasize, intensify or undercut the other questions and issues that the text raises?