English 251 - CLOSE READING ASSIGNMENT

Due: April 8

Your assignment is to use close reading techniques to interpret a passage or short chapter from one novel from our course reading. Locate a contradiction, complexity, or ambiguity in the text —a textual strangeness— and take a position on its meaning. By focusing exclusively on specific details of a single passage, you can reveal how the language "works" at the local level, and how an author's specific language choices contribute to the way a text makes meaning.

Your essay should be **3 full double-spaced pages** and follow MLA formatting guidelines.

Open the essay with an argumentative thesis. Your thesis should be original, non-impressionistic, and interesting; you need to take an arguable stance, one that is not plainly factual and that requires a defense against other points of view.

> *An obvious, impressionistic thesis:* The first scene in *Lolita* used a lot of really negative words but it's a well-written scene because of how uncomfortable it made me.

> *A clear, arguable thesis*: The narrator of *Lolita* is deeply anxious about the limits and trustworthiness of memory; this is exemplified in the language of [a key passage or chapter].

Look back to your reading notes from when you first read the text—this is always a good place to begin locating an idea that can fuel an essay.

All interpretations require evidence; all evidence requires analysis. Be absolutely clear on the distinction between evidence (concrete facts, examples, and details; the data) and analysis (explanation of how that data is meaningful and contributes to your overall interpretation). Your evidence must be drawn from the novel you have chosen; you may not refer to other novels or outside reviews or criticism.

While you'll want to provide some context, this paper should mainly consist of close reading— analysis of specific words, phrases, images, lines, and metrics – **not plot summary**. While analysis should always tie back to the thesis, a paper should proceed according to logically developmental "steps," presenting, analyzing, and connecting each. Avoid "five paragraph" writing, which merely offers a sequence of evidence to prove the same point by reiteration. Simply describing your passage or structuring your paper in the order of your observations is not enough to succeed in a close reading.

If you would like help with your thesis or feedback on a draft, feel free to visit my office hours and to visit the Writer's Workshop! I also recommend reading "How to Do a Close Reading" at <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/CloseReading.html >
and "Close Reading Assignments" at < http://www.reed.edu/writing/paper_help/close-reading.html >