

## WORLD LIT 018: NECROPOLIS!

### CLOSE READING OF A PASSAGE FROM PUSHKIN OR GOGOL

FALL 2016

**LENGTH:** 2-3 pages, typed and double spaced

**DUE:** Rough draft: Friday, October 10 at the beginning of class

Final draft: Wednesday, October 26 at the beginning of class

**ASSIGNMENT:** Do a close reading of one of the short passages below, or choose a different one of similar length from “Queen of Spades,” *The Bronze Horseman*, or a Gogol story. (If you decide to select your own passage, please be sure to run it by me first. Pick a passage that we haven’t analyzed closely in class and that you feel contains keys to the overall meaning and construction of the story.)

**\*\*NB: Be sure to include in your paper a copy of the passage you’re analyzing, either photocopied or typed out!!**

Your goal is to write in a precise manner about a small portion of text—try to squeeze every drop of information you can from the passage! The purpose of a close reading is to show how the overall effect of the work is achieved: a **focused analysis of the details of a small part of the text can shed much light on the whole**, which is, after all, an accumulation of such details. Though you will want to provide some structural information (such as where the passage occurs in the narration or how the scene/character described relates to the overall plot), you should not summarize the plot or take on larger issues of analysis – keep your analysis focused on the passage at hand.

**INTRODUCTION:** Make sure your paper has a strong introduction in which you identify which passage and story you are going to examine and why doing so is significant: what insights or understanding can this give us about the story? In constructing your thesis statement, consider how the passage is representative of the work: does it...

- develop a theme?
- provide insight into a character?
- betray the narrator’s attitude?
- foreshadow later events?

**BODY AND CONCLUSION:** Support your thesis with stylistic elements **from the passage**. Be careful not to make claims or introduce interpretations that you cannot back up with specific evidence and quotations from the text. Pay close attention to the elements of style in the passage, such as:

- Point of view: who is “speaking” in the excerpt and/or telling the story? Is the narration 1<sup>st</sup>-person or 3<sup>rd</sup>? A female or a male? A character or the narrator?
- Allusion: references to authors or literary works, historical events or figures
- Tropes such as metaphors and similes
- Syntax: word order, punctuation. Is it neutral? Convolutioned? Effusive??!!
- Sensory evocations: visual (imagery), olfactory, tactile, auditory

Check a glossary of literary terms (if you don’t have access to one, Shmoop actually has a pretty great one, with definitions and lots of examples: <http://www.shmoop.com/literature-glossary/>).

You will not have room to address all of these issues, so please be careful to pick for your paper those elements that you feel are most important. Wrap up with a strong conclusion that sums up what you have proven through your close reading.

**This paper will be revised.** Your initial submission should not be too “drafty,” however, as your first draft will count for 40% of the final grade on this assignment.

The weather raged more wildly,  
 Nevá swelled and roared, 180  
 Gurgling and welling up like a cauldron,  
 And of a sudden, bristling like a beast,  
 Rushed on the city. Before her  
 All fled, all about  
 Was suddenly deserted—the waters suddenly 185  
 Flowed into cellars underground,  
 Up to the grillwork gushed up the canals,  
 And afloat was Petropolis, like Triton  
 Steeped to the waist in water.

Beleaguerment! Assault! The angry waves, 190  
 Like thieves, climb through the windows. Boats  
 Swooping, smash panes with [their] stern[s].  
 Pedlar's trays under sodden cover,  
 Fragments of huts, beams, roofs,  
 The merchandise of thrifty trading, 195  
 The chattels of pale beggary,  
 Bridges carried away by the storm,  
 Coffins from the flooded cemetery  
 Float down the streets!

The people  
 Gaze on the wrath of God and bide [their] doom. 200  
 Woe! All is perishing: shelter and food!  
 Where turn for them?

PUSHKIN, THE  
 BRONZE HORSEMAN

(P. 411)

Time went slowly. Everything was quiet. A clock struck twelve in the drawing room, and following it, all the clocks in all the rooms announced the hour, then everything grew quiet again. Hermann stood leaning against the cold stove. He was calm: his heart beat evenly, like that of a man embarked on a dangerous but unavoidable mission. The clocks struck one, then two in the morning; at last he heard the distant rumble of a carriage. An involuntary agitation seized him. The carriage drove up to the house and stopped. He heard the thump of the carriage's steps being lowered. The house began stirring. Servants were running, voices resounded, and lights came on. Three old chambermaids ran into the bedroom, and the Countess, barely alive, came in and sank into a Voltairean armchair. Hermann watched through a crack in the door: Lizaveta Ivanovna passed by him. He could hear her hasty steps up her staircase. Something akin to a pang of conscience stirred in his heart, but was soon stilled. He stood petrified.

PUSHKIN, "THE  
 QUEEN OF SPADES"  
 (223)

He hastened into the cathedral, made his way through a row of old beggar women with bandaged faces and two openings for the eyes, at whom he had laughed so much before, and went into the church. There were not many people praying in the church: they all stood just by the entrance. Kovalev felt so upset that he had no strength to pray, and his eyes kept searching in all corners for the gentleman. He finally saw him standing to one side. The nose had his face completely hidden in his big standing collar and was praying with an expression of the greatest piety.

"How shall I approach him?" thought Kovalev. "By all tokens, by his uniform, by his hat, one can see he's a state councillor. Devil knows how to go about it!"

He began to cough beside him; but the nose would not abandon his pious attitude for a minute and kept bowing down.

"My dear sir," said Kovalev, inwardly forcing himself to take heart, "my dear sir . . ."

"What can I do for you?" the nose said, turning.

GOGOL, "THE NOSE"

(307)

**I. CLOSE READING STEP-BY-STEP:** based on the first passage of Pushkin's "Queen of Spades"

1. **READ:** At first, treat the passage as a complete, stand-alone text. Read it through a few times, concentrating on all its details. Assume that everything is significant. Look up any words you don't know.
2. **DETAILS:** Next, write down or underline all the details that jumped out at you. (NB: Not every passage will feature details that fall into the specific categories listed here; these—time, place, etc.—just happened to fit the most significant details from this particular passage.)

<u>Time:</u>	<u>Place:</u>	<u>Characters/characterization:</u>
Winter night 5:00 am	officer's home dinner table, after cards group of cavalry officers	introduction of Tomskii, Hermann, and (implicitly) Countess

<u>Motifs/Themes:</u>	<u>Oppositions:</u>
Cards (gambling, risk, temptation, chance, fate, luck)	new / old generations; in/out empty/full plates; German/Russian winners/losers; cool head/risk

3. **ELEMENTS OF STYLE:** Identify and analyze any stylistic elements present in the passage. Refer to the packet of literary terms, and focus only on items that are important to the particular passage (for instance, it would be difficult to try to analyze Pushkin's use of metaphor in this passage). In the opening passage of "Queen of Spades," the following stylistic elements jump out at the reader:
  - Vocabulary: lots of untranslated French words and card terminology
  - Characterization: Hermann (outsider, observer, not a risk-taker, doesn't gamble; called a German; Russian name [Germann] derived from word "German")
  - Conflict: may foreshadow Hermann/Countess conflict – both are identified as never playing cards, though for different reasons.
  - Dialogue: the passage switches between omniscient narrator (in the first paragraph) and characters' dialogue
  - Any other elements of style—metaphor, imagery, point of view, etc.
4. **IDENTIFY THE "POINT" OF THE PASSAGE:** Now, consider the role this passage plays in the overall structure of the text: What purpose does it serve? How does it provide insight into the text it is a part of? Does it foreshadow later events? Refer back to earlier ones? Does it provide us with a "key" to the rest of the work? Answering these questions will help you to formulate a good thesis statement.

There's no single correct answer to this question – a scene may serve multiple functions in the overall text. Some readers would probably conclude that the opening gambling scene in "Queen of Spades" serves to introduce and develop the character of Hermann; others might conclude that it serves to set a scene, or to introduce thematic elements, etc.

5. **THESIS:** Finally, try to organize these observations into a focused argument, or thesis. You will need to focus on relevant observations/details that support your thesis, and leave others out.

Based on the details listed above, you could try to argue:

- that the passage establishes Hermann as an outsider
- that it sets up the eventual conflict between Hermann and the Countess
- that it implicitly sets up the work's central themes

Don't think there's one "right" answer – there are many possible interpretations of every passage!

## II. CLOSE READING: BASIC STRUCTURE

**TITLE:** descriptive, not just "A Close Reading of Pushkin's "Queen of Spades"

### FIRST PARAGRAPH:

1. Refer to the passage you'll be discussing, and briefly situate it in the work as a whole. Be sure to identify the work and author somewhere in the opening paragraph (for instance, "The opening passage of Pushkin's "Queen of Spades" introduces many of the themes central to the story as a whole.")
2. Thesis statement: what do you intend to prove? Be specific! It's not enough to say, "This passage shows characterization." Instead, say something like, "In this passage, Hermann is characterized as an outsider."
3. Supporting details: How do you intend to prove your thesis? Which details do you intend to focus on? ("Pushkin establishes his hero Hermann as an outsider through card imagery, his characters' dialogue, and the use of names.")

### THE "BODY":

1. Each paragraph in the body of your essay should focus on **one particular idea**, theme or stylistic element. For instance, in this particular reading, you could have one paragraph focusing on card/gambling imagery, one paragraph on the characters' dialogue or word choice, and one on the characters' names. (In other words, don't organize your paper "chronologically," but thematically.)
2. Be sure to **use textual details** and quotes to back up your ideas (for instance, "Hermann declines to join in the others' game, explaining that he is 'not in a position to sacrifice the necessary in the hope of gaining the superfluous.'")
3. The order of the supporting details you present doesn't necessarily need to follow the order of the passage being discussed. Instead, structure your evidence based on how it relates to your central argument.
4. Most importantly, **stay within the given passage** – try not to stray too far into the rest of the text! Try to treat the passage under consideration as a text unto itself.

### FINAL PARAGRAPH:

1. Summarize without restating
2. Try to relate the passage and your interpretation of it to the rest of the work: **how does your reading of this part illuminate the whole?**