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21L.001 Foundations of Western Culture: Homer to Dante
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Elements of Close Reading

Diction: also known as “word choice,” diction involves the decision to use one word or phrase – what’s actually on the page – as opposed to any of the nearly infinite other ways of saying roughly the same thing. “Vengeance” (for example) is not the same word as “retribution,” “payback,” “punishment,” or even “revenge,” and close attention to diction asks what effects an author achieves by picking that word as opposed to those others.

Tone: diction (among other things) helps to create tone, our ability to describe a passage or speech as “bitter,” “heroic,” “wily,” or any of the other wonderful adjectives with which English is blessed. Sometimes tone is obvious (and correspondingly less interesting to focus on), other times much less so, and often it hovers or shifts between different or even opposed adjectives; always look at the cumulative effect of diction and issues below before arriving at a conclusion.

Syntax: broadly defined as “sentence structure,” namely how complex or simple, neatly parallel or wildly expansive, the sentences, clauses, and phrases of a given passage are. Complex sentences can enmesh and entrap the reader, which could be a deliberate strategy (e.g., the wiles of Odysseus) or the mark of an incompetent speaker; similarly, simple sentence structures might indicate noble clarity of character or dim-witted single-mindedness.

Sound (including alliteration and assonance): simply that, what the language sounds like; always read passages you’re working on out loud. Alliteration involves multiple words in the same sentence or phrase beginning with the same sound; assonance consists of internal rhyme or off-rhyme, as in “the consonants’ assonance affected their sense” (an extreme example). Think too about the potential effect of vowel- or consonant-heavy patches of language, and that of monosyllabic or polysyllabic ones.

Rhythm and cadence: especially crucial in poetry, but not to be overlooked in prose; again, read out loud and take note of where the words flow especially smoothly, and where they don’t. Stuttering or awkward clusters of words (thickly bunched consonant groups of the str- thw- and -nch variety) or phrases (lots of brief phrases or incomplete, interrupted sentences) might indicate (for example) intensity of ill-controlled emotion.

Metaphor, Simile, and Image: if a character is said to be “like” or do something “as” something else, pay close attention to what that is, especially in Homer, who invented the so-called “heroic simile,” a long, detailed comparison of a character’s actions or thoughts to those of a raging lion, boundless ocean, tranquil sunset, or whatever. And always, always look for images or image-clusters (animals, weather phenomena, whatever) that particularly catch your eye or recur at various points.

Repetition: Especially in Homer, look for repeated words, phrases, and even entire passages. Sometimes these will be purely formulaic (e.g., “daughter of Zeus whose shield is thunder”), but don’t be afraid to argue for their significance if you feel it exists; think too about the effect of one character repeating verbatim what another said earlier.