

Thomas Apolis: Or, Intellectual Encounters Of A Wandering Mind

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The Atlantic's 'Idea of the Day' Horns in to "Stop Close Reading"

Posted on [July 4, 2010](#) by [thomasapolis](#)

On the same day that W.S. Merwin was announced as the next United States Poet Laureate, *The Atlantic* website unveiled a concept that threatened all values held by the Library of Congress honor. Pulling at the American public from the opposite end of the same rope, *The Atlantic Wire* declared its "Idea of the Day": that we should "[Stop Close Reading](#)" in the American educational system.

Staff writer [Heather Horn](#) begins by stating that "something called 'close reading'" has been encouraged in secondary schools across the country, but only "with varying degrees of success." The practice, she explains, "is about taking a chapter, a page, a paragraph, or even a single sentence, and picking it apart to extract meaning or see what the author is doing. It's a vehicle for teaching students about cadence and imagery, hopefully leading youthful minds to appreciate the complexity of authors' thoughts."

Curiously, Horn's examples of texts do not include poetry (she later references only the value of "quality prose"), and this leads us to the question: should we read poems for the quantity, rather than the quality, of their lines as well? Or is poetry unimportant, to be removed from the curriculum of English literature too? Maybe she intended to include poetry and drama, since she isolated "cadence" as one of the two purposes of close reading. But, then again, perhaps it merely sounded relevant – a word she heard in English class herself once during a forgotten lesson about something or other – and she wanted to look up the term but didn't have enough time.



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Regardless of the stated benefits of close reading, or the texts to which we apply the technique, Horn's position is firm and abrupt. "We should end it. Students almost universally hate close reading, and they rarely wind up understanding it anyway. Forced to pick out meaning in passages they don't fully grasp to begin with, they begin to get the idea that English class is about simply making things up...and constructing increasingly circuitous arguments by way of support."

Her statement bears the weight of no evidence, and the prospect of students "making things up" is actually a criticism of the influence of post-structuralism. So it is quite clear that the bulk of Horn's argument rests on the assumption that students "hate" close reading, and that this hatred has incited a precipitous and lifelong decline in reading. (Yet, one must ask, if the students truly disliked this technique, and found it utterly useless, what would make them apply the practice to recreational reading? Something is amiss....)

Horn's evidence for this "trend of reading fewer books, but reading them more slowly" is a *Newsweek* article "[Slow Reading: An Antidote for a Fast World?](#)" by Malcolm Jones. Strangely, the article – which references no such trend at all – actually takes a position against the *opposite* problem in American education. The article states that "we are all reading too much too fast these days. Yes, we're drowning in information, but, clearly, reading faster and faster is not the way out of the deep end." An English professor is quoted, noting that he sees "schools where reading is turned into a race... [with] kids on the stopwatch to see how many words they can read in a minute. That tells students a story about what reading is. It tells students to be fast is to be good." Jones concludes that the best way "to fight back" against an increasingly inattentive and superficial world "is by slowing down. For me that starts with reading, since that's what I do the most every day....[T]he worst that can happen, as far as I can tell, is that I might rack up a few more overdue fines at the library. I think I'll risk it."

Horn's heroic aversion to close reading is glaringly displayed through this reference, since she entirely misses the author's argument. She apparently takes her meaning from the first two paragraphs, in which Jones refers to close reading as "all the rage" during the mid-twentieth century. While *one* way to interpret such an association would be that it is a dismissal of close reading, a careful reading of the *rest* of the article would have revealed that the author is searching for evidence of a movement to rebuild such skills in attention.

Is Horn then offering herself as an example of the detrimental effects close reading has on mediocre students, who focus too much on a few words and cannot "see the literary forest for the trees"? (I love how she doesn't trust the readers of *The Atlantic* to understand her metaphor, without telling us that this is a *literary* forest – not a real one. The trees are the words and phrases we pay too much attention to, you see?)

Horn's article can easily be used as an example of the effects she details. ("Forced to pick out meaning in passages they don't fully grasp to begin with, they begin ...simply making things up...and constructing increasingly circuitous arguments by way of support.") Certainly, since she misses the point of the reference she selected as support for her argument, I am not convinced by her insight that "[s]peeding things up might make it easier to grasp—and appreciate—the overall arc of a book, while allowing the opportunity

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for real connection with the characters and plot.” This may be true if we want students to read novels that are plot-driven and contain little depth; that is, books that are explicitly not literary in their reach. If a novel has slight content other than the plot, and aspires to fast reading (or, rather, production and consumption), then I agree that there may be little reason to encourage close attention. (Take a glimpse at one of the several James Patterson novels he publishes – well, some are written jointly – each year, and see how long it takes you to read one of his 2-3 pages chapters.)

But should we assign John Grisham or Danielle Steel in secondary schools? Should difficult literature, or anything students may “hate,” be avoided altogether so that they aren’t left with a bad taste in their mouths? If we encourage future generations of students to supplement their reading of text messages and internet blogs (yes, i know – the irony!) with more lessons in how to read rapidly, we are indicating that content is usually not important, and that any understanding worth attaining can be gleaned from a basic outline.

If this is Horn’s vision, then by all means, she should encourage her children to read more, less valuable, less difficult material. But isn’t the value in reading to be had in the close attention to wording, the expansion of the imagination, and the enhancement of one’s ability to gather meaning where it isn’t explicitly stated? Read a Grisham novel and then watch the corresponding film. I doubt that you will find a reduced depth of imagination in the latter. Indeed, you will understand Grisham’s story without much loss if you opt to watch the film, although, for practical purposes, certain scenes will be cut, some details of plot reduced.

But can this be said of literary fiction? A superficial reading that informs a student of the general plot and characters will not be enough to understand the value of a work by Milton (oops, sorry, no poetry!), Jane Austen, or James Joyce. Can you conceive an adequate film version of *Ulysses*? How do you avoid attention to detail when you are confronted with literature that requires it? I would like to hear Horn explain, without close reading, the third episode of Joyce’s epic, “Proteus.” Would she get past the first line?: “Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes.”

After revealing all of her insight to us, Horn attempts to build excitement for her proposed educational plan: “Furthermore, aiming for fifteen books a year, rather than five, might expose the students to more good literature (immersion in quality prose being one of the best ways of learning writing) and increase their chances of finding a book they like.” Hmmm. I’m not sure if Horn was exposed to enough “good literature” while she was “learning writing.”

I think that the value of reading more rather than reading carefully can be nicely summarized by Woody Allen’s famous assessment of the craze incited by the Evelyn Wood speed-reading method: “I took a speed reading course and read ‘War and Peace’ in twenty minutes. It involves Russia.”

Horn should stick to writing what she knows. While I am in no position to assess her prior work for *The Atlantic*, those articles look much more carefully considered and palatable: “Beyond Bread: The Many Uses of Sourdough”; “Recipe: Buttery Rhubarb Coffee Cake”; and “The Amazing 1-Minute Chocolate Cake” (I may skip her advice on this

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 **kelley** says:
September 10, 2010 at 4:49 am

I am thrilled to read something similar to what my instructor wants me to write for the Sonnet 99 close reading assignment.

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 **Greg Clinton** says:
February 3, 2011 at 4:32 am

I can't believe more people don't comment on your posts. I wish my own blog was half as complete, composed and well-written. I've written posts about this general

subject, which you might want to read, or, given your scope, you might not!

Either way, all the best – I'll be linking to your site in the near future. Below are links to a couple of posts. I hope they pass your spam filter.

<http://wanderingacademic.com/from-the-editor/remaking-the-world-with-txt/>

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