

# Comparative Literature: Close Reading of the Myth of Sirens (Seminars 1)

**[SIRENS]  
CLOSE READING**

## **I. Study the instructions for Close reading: (retrieved from <https://guides.lib.uoguelph.ca/c.php?g=130967&p=4938496>)**

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### **Step 1: Read the passage**

Take notes as you read. Mark anything that seems relevant or interesting to you – even if you are unsure why a particular section of the text stands out.

Ask yourself: How is language and/or argument being used? Take notes about your observations of the passage, even if these observations seem simplistic or self-evident. Also pay attention to how language use changes over the course of your passage. For example, if the same word appears at the beginning and end, does it mean different things in both places? Does the author's tone or attitude change?

After you have read the entire text, you can return to these sections to look for repeated patterns, themes, or words. Often, a close reading will focus on one example of a theme or pattern to study the significance of this theme or pattern more in depth.

### **Step 2: Analyze the passage**

Begin by writing answers to some of the following questions, focusing on the kinds of rhetorical and literary devices you see in the passage.

#### **Diction:**

- What words are being used here?
- Are any words repeated in this passage?
- What adjectives are used? What nouns do they describe? How do they alter your understanding of these nouns?
- Are any two (or more) words used in this passage connected in some way?

If any words are unfamiliar, look them up. If you are analyzing an older text, keep in mind that words may mean different things at different points in history—so be sure to look up any words that may be familiar but used in an unfamiliar way. [The Oxford English Dictionary](#) (OED) will provide you with definitions as well as histories of word use.

Whether you are looking at an historical or contemporary text, remember that words can be used in different ways. Ask yourself: Are any words being used in unusual ways? Are any words referring to something more than what is simply stated? Are any two (or more) words in the passage connected in some way?

#### **Narrative Voice**

- Who is speaking in this passage?
- What narrative perspective is being used in this passage?
- What does the narrative voice tell you?
- What characters does it give you access to?

#### **Tone:**

- Is the speaker being straightforward, factual, open?
- Is the speaker being direct or ambiguous with their message?
- Does the voice carry any emotion? Or is it detached from its subject?
- Do you hear irony (what is said is different from what is meant)? If so, where?

#### **Rhetorical and Literary devices:**

- Do you notice any figurative language, such as metaphors and similes?
- Do you observe any imagery?
- Is the sound of the language and sentences important (e.g., rhyme, repetition, choppy or long sentences)?
- What is the effect of these devices and techniques? (e.g., do they add emphasis or connect key ideas?)

### **Step 3: Construct an argument about the passage.**

Now that you have some idea of HOW language is being used in your passage, you need to connect this to the larger themes of the text. In other words, you now need to address WHY language is being used in the way (or ways) you have observed.

This step is essential to a successful close reading. It is not enough to simply make observations about language use – you must take these observations and use them to construct an argument about the passage.

Transform your descriptive thesis into an argument by asking yourself WHY language is used in this way:

- What kinds of words are used (intellectual, elaborate, plain, or vulgar)? Why are words being used in this way?
- Why are sentences long or short? Why might the author be using complicated or simple sentences? What might this type of sentence structure suggest about what the passage is trying to convey?
- Who is the narrator? What is the narrative voice providing these particular descriptions? Why are we given access to the consciousness of these particular characters? Why not others?
- What images do you see in the passage? What might they represent? Is there a common theme?
- Why might the tone of the passage be emotional (or detached)?
- To what purpose might the text employ irony?
- What effect/impact is the author trying to create?

#### **Close Reading - Key takeaways (retrieved from:**

**<https://www.studysmarter.co.uk/explanations/english/rhetoric/close-reading/>)**

- Close reading is the focused reading of a short passage of text, with attention to distinct elements.
- Close reading is important because it helps readers understand a text, strengthened literary analysis skills, and builds vocabulary.
- To conduct a close reading, readers should first read and annotate the text with a focus on the main ideas and elements.
- After reading the text for the first time, readers should reflect on patterns like repetition and structure and reread and annotate again with a focus on technical details.
- While close reading, readers should note the use of literary devices and techniques, organizational patterns, unfamiliar words, and important details.

## **II. Read and Listen to the mythological story.**

Based on the video: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVVL\\_zPsMNI&t=39s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVVL_zPsMNI&t=39s)

You awake to a loud thump as the waves crash against the hull of the ship. The hulls echo with instructions from your captain: “There's a storm coming, boys”.

You jump to your feet and race to the top deck. Some of the crew are scurrying frantically to secure the hull, but there are so many of them missing.

As you begin to question where they have gone, you hear shouts of man overboard and turn to see your peers leaning over the edge of the ship, fixated on the ocean. They begin to jump one by one to almost certain death.

As you approach, you start to hear a song. The song is familiar, but at the same time, you've never heard anything like this. The song has a soothing effect, and you are captivated by the melody.

You begin to forget your surroundings. You no longer hear the screams of your crew or the waves that bombard the ship. You are no longer in a storm. You glance into the distance and see the outline of a woman lying on a bed of rocks. It appears that she's gesturing for you to join her, but as you look down, you see the lifeless bodies of your crew being carried away by the waves.

Unable to stop yourself, you begin to climb overboard, knowing that it would mean certain death. If only you could warn the rest of the crew of the song. If only you could stop them sharing your fate.

But at this point, you are nothing more than a passenger in your own body. As you plunge into the cold, dark abyss, you finally realize that the siren's song is the last you will ever hear.

In Greek mythology, the sirens were beautiful creatures, but they were also extremely dangerous, luring many sailors to their doom with their enchanting voices.

The sirens are mentioned by numerous authors, and they are said to be the daughters of Phorcys, one of the primordial sea gods, and their mother, one of the nine muses, which could be why they are graced with such elegant voices.

The amount of sirens is something that varies depending on the author or the story, and most tend to disagree. In some stories, there are two or three, and in others, there are many more.

According to some of the older stories, the sirens accompanied Persephone, the daughter of Zeus and Demeter. Shortly after Persephone's abduction by Hades, the sirens were given their wings.

In some accounts, the sirens requested these wings in order to aid them in their search for their mistress, and in others, the wings were a form of punishment from Demeter because the sirens were unable to prevent the abduction of Persephone.

Their song was an enchanting but sad melody, eternally calling for the return of Persephone.

It's because of this myth that the sirens were depicted as birds with the heads of women, almost harpy-like.

The earliest depictions of the sirens described them as nymph-like creatures, and they could be seen living amongst the muses.

There are stories where the sirens would compete against the muses to see who had the best voice. When the sirens lost, as punishment, they would have their feathers plucked from them.

One of the most famous stories regarding the sirens can be found in Homer's *Odyssey*. In this story, the sirens are said to live on an island near Silla. The hero Odysseus is warned how dangerous the sirens are, and he comes up with a plan to cross the island safely. In order to stop his men being seduced by the sirens, he had them block their ears using wax. Because of his curiosity, Odysseus did not block his own ears, as he wanted to hear the song of the sirens. Instead, he tied himself to the mast of his ship, and as they sailed past the island, his men were unaffected by the siren singing. Odysseus, however struggled to resist, but his men stood firm and ignored his demands to untie him. Odysseus would become one of the only men to have heard the song of the sirens and live to tell the tale.

In some versions of the story, there was a prophecy that stated, if anyone heard the song of the sirens and lived, the sirens would die. There is an alternative ending to this tale, where the sirens would take revenge on Odysseus by taking his son.

Another popular myth involves Jason and the Argonauts, who had to sail past the island of the sirens. Rather than block their ears, the Argonauts had the famed musician Orpheus accompany them. When the sirens began to sing, in an attempt to

seduce the Argonauts, Orpheus began to play his harp, and the music overpowered the voice of the sirens.

One of the Argonauts did fall victim to the son of the siren, and he jumped out of the ship, swimming towards them, but he was lucky enough to have been saved by the goddess Aphrodite.

The sirens are definitely interesting creatures in Greek mythology. Their exact origins may be a little bit hazy, as there are several figures that could be considered their mother and father. Over the years, their appearance has definitely changed, going from nymph to almost harpy-like in Greek mythology.

If we take a look outside Greek mythology, the sirens are now depicted as almost mermaid-like creatures who live in the sea. They serve as a warning that looks can be deceiving; they are both beautiful and deadly.

## PART 1

**1) Translate the following words, find sentences with them in the mythological story and explain their usage:**

1. <b>hull</b>	2. <b>deck</b>
3. <b>thump</b>	4. <b>scurry / scurrying</b>
5. <b>frantic(ally)</b>	6. <b>secure</b>
7. <b>fixated</b>	8. <b>captivated</b>
9. <b>soothing</b>	10. <b>succumb</b>
11. <b>abyss</b>	12. <b>lifeless</b>
13. <b>seduce / seduction</b>	14. <b>nymph</b>
15. <b>harpy</b>	16. <b>prophecy</b>
17. <b>pluck</b>	18. <b>primordial</b>
19. <b>wax</b>	20. <b>lure /luring</b>

**2) Present short information on the following characters, paying attention to the pronunciation of their names**

1. Phorcys (Phorkys)	2. Demeter
3. Persephone	4. Zeus
5. Hades	6. Aphrodite
7. The Muses	8. Odysseus
9. Jason	10. The Argonauts
11. Orpheus	12. Scylla (Silla)
13. Harpies	14. Nymphs

**3) Answer in full sentences; cite the line or phrase when asked**

### **A. Literal / factual (use the passage)**

1. What initial event wakes the narrator?
2. What orders does the captain give?
3. What do the narrator's peers do when they lean over the ship edge? Be specific.
4. Describe the physical effect the sirens' song has on the narrator.
5. What does the narrator see when they look into the distance?

6. What was the sirens' relationship to Persephone in older stories?
7. How do the sirens' physical depictions change over time (list three stages)?
8. How did Odysseus protect his crew? What did he do to himself?
9. What was the story of the Argonauts?

**B. Close detail/text evidence**

11. Find the exact phrasing that indicates the narrator loses control of their body.
12. Which phrase in the passage signals that the song is simultaneously "familiar" and "strange"?
13. Identify one instance of a word that creates urgency or panic in the opening scene. Explain your choice.
14. Which sentence signals that the narrator recognizes the danger too late? Quote it.
15. What detail connects the sirens to the Muses?
16. Point to the line that mentions a prophecy about survivors of the siren song. What is that prophecy?

**C. Inference & interpretation**

17. Why might the author have chosen a second-person perspective for this incident? Give two interpretive reasons.
18. What effect is produced by switching to the third-person narration?
19. The passage suggests two possible motives for the sirens receiving wings (aid vs punishment). How does this ambiguity affect how we read the sirens?
20. What does the recurring idea of "song" suggest about the relationship between art (music, poetry) and danger in this mythic context?
21. Compare Odysseus's approach and Jason's/Orpheus's approach to the sirens. What does each strategy value (curiosity, control, skill, collective safety)?
22. How does the line—"the siren's song is the last you will ever hear"—work as both a literal and symbolic statement?
23. How might the transformation of sirens into mermaid-like figures outside Greek myth reflect modern attitudes toward femininity and danger?

**D. Wider context / cultural knowledge (mythology)**

23. Why is it significant that Phorcys is called a "primordial" sea god? What does primordial status imply about genealogy and power?
24. How does Persephone's abduction (and Demeter's reaction) help explain the sirens' destiny?
25. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus orders his men to plug their ears with wax. Why is this detail important for interpretations of leadership and obedience?
26. Explain how Orpheus's presence with the Argonauts is an argument about the power of art versus the power of seduction.

**4) Define the symbolic meaning of the myth**



**5) Fill in the table**

	Character/ Detail	Characteristics in the text
1	Sirens: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- portrayal</li> <li>- lineage</li> <li>- behaviour</li> <li>- destiny/death</li> </ul>	
2	Sailors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- behaviour</li> <li>- relations/encounter with the sirens</li> <li>- destiny</li> </ul>	
3	Sirens' dwelling place	
4	Siren song and its influence on the sailors	

**Narrative Voice**

**1. Who is speaking?**

- *Task:* Identify the narrator (I / you / mixed address), and explain whether the voice is a survivor, participant, or retrospective storyteller.
- *Look for:* pronouns, temporal markers, immediacy of sensation.
- *Starter:* "The passage uses a \_\_\_\_\_ person narrator (give evidence: '\_\_\_\_') which suggests..."

**2. Narrative perspective and focalization**

- *Task:* Is the perspective internal (limited to one mind) or external? How many minds do we access?
- *Look for:* internal sensations ("you begin to forget"), direct thoughts, lack/presence of other characters' interiority.
- *Starter:* "The focalization is mostly \_\_\_\_\_ because the narrator reveals \_\_\_\_\_."

**3. Narrative voice—reliability and purpose**

- *Task:* Discuss whether the narrator is reliable (can they describe events accurately while entranced?) and what the voice's rhetorical purpose is (to warn, to mourn, to involve reader).
- *Look for:* contradictions, claims about perception, emotional distance.
- *Starter:* "Although the narrator claims to perceive X, the language of trance suggests . . ."

#### 4. Access to characters

- *Task:* Which characters' inner lives do we access? Which are only externally described? Why might the author limit access?
- *Look for:* verbs of perception, reported speech, direct quotations.
- *Starter:* "We only see the inner life of \_\_\_\_ because the text uses \_\_\_\_."

### Tone

#### 5. Describe tone(s) across the passage

- *Task:* Map tone shifts (calm → panic → fascination → fatalism). Quote small phrases that signal the shift.
- *Look for:* adjectives/adverbs (frantic, soothing), sentence length/pace.
- *Starter:* "The tone shifts from \_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ as shown by the words \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_."

#### 6. Directness vs ambiguity

- *Task:* Is the speaker explicit about causes? Where is ambiguity used intentionally? How does ambiguity affect reader response?
- *Look for:* speculative modal verbs (may, could), alternative accounts (two motives for wings).
- *Starter:* "The passage is deliberately ambiguous when it says \_\_\_\_, which suggests \_\_\_\_."

#### 7. Emotion vs detachment

- *Task:* Is the narration emotionally engaged or cool and clinical? Cite specific phrases showing emotion or detachment.
- *Look for:* emotive vocabulary vs neutral reportage.
- *Starter:* "Emotional intensity is signaled by \_\_\_\_; detachment appears in \_\_\_\_."

#### 8. Irony

- *Task:* Locate any ironic statements (what is said vs what is meant). For example: "You are no longer in a storm." Is that ironic? Why?
- *Look for:* contrasts between description and expected outcome, understatement, or dramatic irony.
- *Starter:* "This sentence is ironic because although it claims X, the context shows Y."

### Rhetorical & Literary Devices

#### 9. Figurative language inventory

- *Task:* Identify metaphors, similes, personification. Choose one and explain its effect.
- *Look for:* "bed of rocks", "passenger in your own body" (metaphor), "song is familiar but...".
- *Starter:* "The metaphor '\_\_\_\_' suggests \_\_\_\_ because ..."



## 10. Imagery analysis

- *Task:* List three sensory images (sound, sight, touch). How do they work together to create mood?
- *Look for:* “loud thump,” “cold, dark abyss,” “soothing effect.”
- *Starter:* “Sound imagery () creates ... while visual imagery () ...”

## 11. Sound & syntax

- *Task:* Analyze sentence length and sound patterns. Where are short choppy sentences used? Where are long flowing ones? How does sound mirror theme?
- *Look for:* punctuation, commas, repetitions.
- *Starter:* “Short sentences like \_\_\_\_ speed the pace and evoke \_\_\_\_; longer sentences like \_\_\_\_ mimic \_\_\_\_.”

## 12. Repetition / motifs

- *Task:* Identify repeated words or motifs (song, waves, death). What is their cumulative effect?
- *Look for:* recurring lexical items and their contexts.
- *Starter:* “The repetition of \_\_\_\_ underscores the theme of \_\_\_\_ by ...”

## 13. Effect of rhetorical devices

- *Task:* Choose two devices and argue what they do (add urgency, produce empathy, distance reader). Use textual evidence.
- *Starter:* “By using \_\_\_\_, the author achieves \_\_\_\_ because ...”

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## 4) Step 3 — Construct an argument about the passage (how to turn observations into a thesis)

**Goal:** move from *what* the language does to *why* it’s done.

### Steps & guiding questions

1. **Collect 3–5 language observations** (words, syntax, images).
    - e.g., *repetition of ‘song’; first-person second-person and third-person address; short sentences in storm scene; metaphor ‘passenger in your own body’.*
  2. **Ask WHY for each observation**
    - *Why repeat ‘song’?*
  3. *Why second-person (“you”)?*
  4. **Draft a descriptive thesis** → Convert to an argumentative thesis (gives a claim about purpose/meaning).
    - *Descriptive:* “The narrator uses images of sound and loss.”
    - *Argumentative:* “By centring auditory imagery and addressing the reader as ‘you,’ the passage enacts the sirens’ power and implicates the reader in the fatal allure of art, arguing that aesthetic fascination can become a form of self-destruction.”
  5. **Support with 2–3 close quotations and language analysis**
    - Show how each quote supports the claim (word by word: diction, connotation, rhythm).
  6. **Conclude by connecting to a larger theme**
    - e.g., art vs. ethics; leadership and curiosity; gendered danger in myth.
- Example thesis statements (choose one to model)**

- **Thesis A (art & danger):** “The passage demonstrates that mythic music both mesmerizes and erases agency: through auditory imagery and trance-like syntax, the sirens’ song becomes a metaphor for how aesthetic allure can override moral choice.”
- **Thesis B (reader implicature):** “By using second-person narration and vivid sensory detail, the text implicates readers as potential victims, turning a mythic episode into a cautionary mirror about human susceptibility.”
- **Thesis C (mythic genealogy):** “Referencing primordial figures like Phorcys and the Muses, the passage reframes the sirens not merely as monsters but as liminal artists punished or empowered by divine history — thereby complicating sympathy and blame.”