Close Reading for Literary Devices

This lesson plan works well for short poems. The aim here is twofold: to dissect the text at hand for key themes and literary devices and to teach a basic procedure for future close reading assignments and essays. Begin by selecting and assigning a short piece such as Phillis Wheatley’s “On being brought from Africa to America” or Hanif Abdurraqib’s “And what good will your vanity be when the rapture comes.” Before class, students should complete a basic reflection summarizing their initial impressions of the poem. They should print both their reflections and the poem for this activity. The goal will be to show how close reading can fundamentally reshape our understanding of a given text as well as the history it relays.

1. Break the class into groups of 3-4 students. Ask them to group up with students they have yet to work with.
2. Begin the exercise with introductions. It’s important that students feel comfortable working together. Students should then share their reflections with their small groups. Initial impressions should be recorded on the back of the poem or on a separate sheet paper.
3. Ask each group to share their general thoughts on the poem with the larger class. Record these group impressions on the board so you have a baseline to reference at the end of class. They should also record them on their group paper. If you so desire, have them submit their group papers at the end of class for your review.
4. Introduce and define an important literary device using a visual aid (tip: imagery, rhyme, repetition, diction, lexical and syntactic ambiguity work well for these poems). Make sure to provide examples, as students will need to then identify the device in the text at hand. Make sure they know what they are doing before they return to their groups by encouraging them to ask questions.
5. Have each group identify that device as it appears in the poem and then discuss its significance for understanding the work as a whole (i.e., what that device communicates). Have them record all of their findings and thoughts on their sheet of paper.
6. Call on groups to share their findings with the larger class. Make sure to discuss the significance of each and every feature for understanding the overriding meaning of the poem. Record those findings on the board beneath their initial impressions.
7. Repeat 4 and 5 for as many literary devices as you’d like to introduce. For Wheatley’s sonnet, I usually focus on diction, meter, rhyme scheme, homophone, and syntactic and lexical ambiguity. For Abdurraqib’s poem, I usually focus on diction, imagery, repetition, rhythm and homophones. Cater your lesson plan to whatever you’d like your students to focus on in the text. Moreover, keep future readings in mind. If, for example, homophones play an important role in the novel you’ll be reading later in the semester, it’s a good idea to introduce them early, as this will prime them.
8. By the end of the exercise, each group should have a sheet of paper with their initial impressions and all of their group findings. Use the closing fifteen minutes or so of class to synthesize their findings in larger class discussion. Record these new impressions on the board.
9. Compare their initial reflections on the poem with their newfound understandings. If done right, this exercise will highlight the way that closely attending to poetry’s formal devices can reinforce, alter or, in some cases, subvert our initial impressions.