

The Literary Commentary

A commentary is an exercise in the close reading of a text, involving detailed analysis and appreciation of its significance and form, and a linguistic and stylistic exploration of HOW it achieves its effects on a reader or listener. A good commentary will always **explain**, rather than merely summarise, paraphrase, or list effects (hence the French term *explication de texte*).

Material can be built up in two ways: by going through the set passage itself, attentively identifying any words, sounds or moments that seem to you particularly striking or effective; and then by going through the checklist of questions on the rest of this handout. The following points will not all be relevant to all texts, but would need to be explored and included if they are applicable.

a) Overall impressions

1. What TYPE OF PASSAGE is it in general terms (narrative, oratorical, dramatic, descriptive, or other)?
2. What is the *fil conducteur* of the text, its MAIN IDEA or purpose? Does it have any special qualities that are immediately striking?
3. What is the STRUCTURE of the passage? Is it organised in a certain way, can its various parts be clearly delineated? Is there a pattern of subordination of one feature or group of features to another? How long are the sentences? Are individual sentences carefully organised? Do they tend to be independent of one another?

b) Detailed questions to ask of every passage

4. Does the text progress through such STYLISTIC FEATURES as enumeration, interrogation, apostrophe, exclamation, or other? Do you notice any peculiarities of word order? Of punctuation? Are there repetitions of words? If so, for what effect? What are the results obtained by such DEVICES as simile, metaphor, periphrasis, understatement, hyperbole, and symbolism?
5. How may the VOCABULARY be characterised? Is it abstract? Concrete? Are there allusions, proper names, archaisms, words used in special or etymological senses, incorrections, technical terms, words of local colour?
6. What are the EXPRESSIVE WORDS of the passage, as opposed to the words common to every text? Are nouns, verbs or other parts of speech used in any special way? Does the presence of certain stylistic traits seem to reveal something about the author's turn of mind or special interests? For example does the choice of nouns reveal the author's attitude toward the external world? Is the author's individuality revealed by his/her choice of adjectives, adverbs or verbs?

7. Does the author favour a particular kind of IMAGERY?
8. Is the RHYTHM of the passage of interest? What expressive purpose does it serve? Is there intentional rhythmic monotony? Do the sentences produce an effect of rhythmic harmony and balance, or the contrary? How?
9. Examine the VERB TENSES chosen by the author. Do they express in some way his/her attitude toward the actions s/he is recording?
10. If IDEAS are of paramount importance in the text, what are they and what do they mean? How are they presented? Is it necessary to summarise them for clearer understanding? Are the thoughts linked together in a particular way? Does the author attempt to influence the reader by logic and facts, or by charm and persuasiveness?
11. Does the passage have a pervading TONE (playful, melancholic, languid, ironic, tragic, or other)? Does the author convey his/her own attitude towards the subject? Where and how?

c) Particular questions to ask of a passage in verse or a poem

12. Is the passage cast in a fixed form (sonnet or other)? If so, does the poet work easily within the confines of the predetermined framework, or does s/he seem to chafe at the form's restrictions?
13. If it is not a *forme fixe*, what form has the poet chosen? Free verse (*vers libres*)? What kind or kinds of lines (*vers*) does the author use - *octosyllabes*, *decasyllabes*, *alexandrins* - or less common ones? Do different kinds of lines alternate or recur in any recognisable pattern?
14. Are the lines arranged into stanzas (*strophes*)? How many *strophes* are there, and how many lines to each one? Is there any change in their arrangement or pattern?
15. If the passage is not rhymeless (*vers blancs*) what kind (or kinds) of rhyme scheme is used - *rimes plates*, *rimes embrassées*, *rimes croisées* - or more unusual, original, or complicated patterns? Is there alternation of *rimes masculines* and *rimes féminines*? Are the rhymes *suffisantes*, *riches*, or *pauvres*?
16. Can the poem or passage be logically divided into a certain number of parts? What type of transition exists between them (smooth, abrupt)? Does the passage, in its general organisation, move in a linear, ascending-descending, or circular manner?
17. Is the meaning of each word of the passage clear, as well as any allusions, whether mythological, literary or other? Are there examples of punning or word-play (*Jeux de mots*)? Are any words used in their etymological sense? For what purpose? Is the vocabulary predominantly abstract or concrete? Is it possible to group together a number of concrete or abstract words in certain categories?

18. Can some words have more than one meaning? Is their ambiguity deliberate or unintentional? Are some words used merely as padding to fill out the line (*cheville*), or because the poet needed a certain rhyme?

19. Do certain types of words stand out (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc.)? Are some types of words conspicuous by their absence? Do the adjectives and adverbs used seem particularly effective?

20. Is the SYNTAX regular, or are there inversions or other forms of dislocation? For what reason do they occur?

21. Does the poet seem particularly concerned with relationships between sound and meaning? In what specific instances? Do certain vowels or consonants predominate? With what effect? Are examples of the following to be found: alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, dissonance, internal rhyme? What is their function? Are there unusual or *recherché* effects of euphony or cacophony (as, for example, hiatus)? What relationships exist between the sounds and other elements of the poem?

22. What is the basic rhythm of the piece (flowing, sluggish, slow, fast, heavily irregular)? How is it modified during the course of the passage by the use of *césure*, *coupes*, *enjambement*? With what aim? - heightened expression or accentuation or underlining the meaning of certain words? What effect do they have upon maintaining, hastening, or retarding the movement of the piece? How is the tempo increased or slowed down in other ways (repetitions, mute e's, choice of certain sonorities, isolated lines, etc.)? What general relationship exists between the rhythm and other elements of the passage?

d) Particular questions to ask of a dramatic text

All of the above features may be applicable to a passage from a literary drama, but pay particular attention to features relevant to PERFORMANCE – auditory effects and effects that indicate tone or expression or suggest action. In addition, in the case of dramatic texts, you can look for ways in which the set passage enhances the dramatic quality of the play, reveals aspects of character, or reflects the tone of either tragedy or comedy; and you should feel free in a commentary to explore how different performance styles or modes of delivery (including for example how both the speaker and the on-stage listeners are positioned on stage) might influence the effect that the passage has on a spectator. Be alert to the fact that in drama, even more than in other forms of text, several levels of communication are taking place at once: a character is speaking to one or more other characters, but the author is also giving information to the audience. Also, particularly in a classical play, characters who are present without speaking may be contributing a lot to the impact of the moment.

Do not be too afraid in commentary writing of stating what may appear to be obvious - you need not make heavy weather of these aspects, but what affects a theatre

spectator usually *has* to be quite obvious and you must not overlook the most direct impact of any text in a quest for subtleties which might be valid but could scarcely be picked up in a real performance.

Writing the commentary

The commentary should consist of a general introduction, a detailed study of the text and a conclusion. It may be laid out as follows:

1. General introduction

This should consist of one **brief** paragraph, situating the passage in context. When dealing with an extract from a play, a novel, or a long poem, state where the extract is situated in the text, e.g. act, scene, chapter, canto, giving only **relevant** information about the situation at this point, i.e. whatever is **vital** in order to bring out the full significance of the passage, but no more.

DO NOT explain the whole plot, basic relationships between characters, etc; and **DO NOT** paraphrase.

State briefly the general subject(s) and theme(s).

2. Detailed study of the text (the main part of the commentary)

Organise your material in a way which makes it easy for a reader to follow. It is probably most effective simply to go through the text paragraph by paragraph (speech by speech for a dramatic text), line by line, word by word and sound by sound - i.e. begin from an overview then gradually zoom in on ever closer scrutiny of the details. The alternative approach, a *commentaire composé* with separate sections on style, tone, character, dramatic effects, versification, etc., is possible but tends to make it more obvious if you do not have much to say under one of those headings, and will also tend to obscure the fact that in a literary text it is the interaction of all these things at once that actually makes the reader or spectator feel interested, amused and/or moved.

3. Conclusion

What can now be said about the passage that was not obvious at the outset?

What is the general importance of the passage for the work or the author? What is its predominant tone or atmosphere? Is it typical or peculiar, with respect both to the author and to the period or genre to which it belongs?