

Writing a Critical Commentary

Some Guidance

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Basic questions guiding a commentary are: What exactly is narrated? In which order is information presented to us? Why are we told matter in the way it is told? Which elements are foregrounded and why are these choices made? How exactly are they foregrounded and why? Whose poetic voice do we listen to at which point? Who is the focalizer in the narrative sections, i.e. through whose eyes do we see the plot?

1. Try to avoid writing a commentary line by line (if it is poetry) or passage by passage (if it is prose).
2. Begin by identifying the passage/poem and place it in the wider context of the literary work/literary period/material and historical context. Keep this section short.
3. Briefly summarizing the content, draw the attention to main literary motifs/themes/ideas that are represented/foregrounded in the passage before you begin discussing matters of language and style. An elegant moving on to this next discussion section could be the analysis of a possible form-contents relationship (e.g. you identify a battle-passage and refer to its marked use of alliteration of fricatives (e.g. sh, st, sp) and plosives (e.g. p, t, k)). Doing so you have moved to the phonic level of the text). N.B.: Make sure you do not overinterpret phonic or metrical features, as sound aesthetics can vary between recipients.
4. Comment on the language and style of the passage. Dedicate about one third to this section. You can do this in various ways:
 - (a) By starting with a well-chosen quotation that reflects a prominent linguistic/stylistic/metrical feature and allows for wider implications on style and/or contents;
 - (b) By presenting a word-field dominating the passage (e.g. perception: see, behold, eye, hear, brightness, shining etc.) that corresponds to a feature of the text (e.g. genre = dream vision);
 - (c) By working from the phonic over the lexicological and morphological to the syntactic levels;
 - (d) By working in the reverse order of that given in (c);
 - (e) By working in any order of levels given in (c).
5. Summarize your observations attempting more general statements on tone and style and how they may relate to the contents, ideology, authorial intention, guided reading or audience manipulation of the passage/work.
6. Widen your perspective on the passage by linking the ideas analyzed with each other and with other important passages in the work (or genre) or to the general framework of the work discussed.
7. Conclude with personal statements and a marked comment on how the text shows its unique qualities in the passage set for commentary.

Example Commentary

- Ðā se eorl ongan for his ofer mōde
 90 ālyfan landes tō fela lāþere ðēode.
 Ongan ceallian þā ofer cald wæter
 Byrhtelmes bearn (beornas gehlyston):
 ‘Nū ēow is gerȳmed, gāð ricene tō ūs,
 guman tō gūþe; God āna wāt
 95 hwā þære wælstōwe wealdan mōte.’
 Wōdon þā wælwulfas (for wætere ne murnon),
 wīcinga werod, west ofer Pantan,
 ofer scīr wæter scyldas wēgon,
 lidmen tō lande linde bāron.

Your commentary should look somewhat like this:

This passage is in Old English alliterative long lines, with four stressed syllables per line, two to three of which alliterate (e.g. “alyfan landes ... lāþere”, l. 90). It could be argued that the **sibilance** of line 98 (“scīr ... scyldas”) evokes the sound of mailcoats ringing as the Norsemen advance. In addition, the extended **alliteration** on /w/ across lines 96–98 brings to mind the exclamation *wā* (“woe”), thus offering a subjective reading of the action on a phonic level.

The scene is from the poem *The Battle of Maldon*, a fictionalized account of the historical Battle of Maldon, which was fought in East Anglia in AD 991 between a Viking raiding party and the Anglo-Saxon forces (or *fyrð*) rallied to ward off the raiders.

Although the passage describes the plain action preceding the battle, it also introduces the theme of **pride** (*ofermōd*, l. 89): it is this moral flaw that leads ealdorman Byrhtnoð (the speaker in this extract) to permit the Vikings to land. The poet’s sympathies are nevertheless plainly with the Anglo-Saxons, as the Vikings are referred to as *wælwulfas* (“wolves of slaughter”, l. 96), a term exclusively used with negative connotations. The word furthermore evokes (by association) the motif of the **beasts of battle**, in which ravens and wolves circle the scene of an upcoming battle in expectation of carrion. The hostility of the scene is further brought out by referring to the river Pante as *ceald wæter* (“cold water”, l. 91). Although the tidal waters around England are always cold, even in August when this battle is thought to have taken place, the reference here serves to extend the unpleasantness of the exchange to the landscape by a device resembling **pathetic fallacy**.

Although the poet blames Byrhtnoð for his decision to allow the Vikings onto land, his referring the outcome of the battle to God (ll. 94b–95) suggests his piety. Indeed, the knowledge that he dies in battle at a later point in the poem makes him something of a martyr, especially since the Vikings were heathens and are commonly so identified both in the poem and in contemporary chronicles. Byrhtnoð’s authority is suggested by the observation that “beornas gehlyston” (“warriors listened [to his words]”, l. 92b).