

Part 1B: GUIDELINES FOR COMMENTARY WRITING

This document assumes basic knowledge of the commentary exercise, as outlined in the **Fr1 guidelines**. In the same way as at 1A, the commentary offers an opportunity for you to identify the literary and linguistic features you see as important in a given passage. At 1B, you will not necessarily have the same level of familiarity with the text under discussion as you did at 1A, where there were fewer set texts. This should not affect your commentary, because the goal of the exercise remains a focused analysis of a specific extract. You will need to examine how the individual passage operates, and discuss the effects it creates.

Your commentary may include such elements as (see http://www.mml.cam.ac.uk/french/courses/ugrad/Fr1_commentary.pdf for further information):

syntax and sentence structure;

use of verbs (tenses, active or passive voice, and the use of the subjunctive mood);

patterns such as repetition and antithesis;

frequency and position of adverbs and adjectives;

sound patterning, such as assonance and alliteration;

versification (e.g. rhyme and metre);

manipulation of genre conventions (e.g. sonnet, letter, speech);

use of dialogue.

To a greater extent than at 1A, 1B commentaries may:

- **espouse a mode of analysis that can draw out ambiguities or inconsistencies within the passage, perhaps with particular attention to the use of irony or paradox;**

TEXT: 'Et sa vie, qui fut assez courte, laissa des exemples de vertu inimitables.' Mme de Lafayette, *La Princesse de Clèves*.

COMMENTARY: Throughout the novel, the princess has had to negotiate a rhetoric of exemplarity: injunctions as to how she ought to behave, and illustrations of what happens when other people behave in particular ways. At the book's close, it seems that she has succeeded admirably in understanding what is required. But just as this sentence reduces the rest of her life to a brief and non-specific subordinate clause, so it passes glibly over a key problem: how is it possible to be simultaneously exemplary

and inimitable? The oxymoronic phrasing involves the reader in a paradox that undermines the simplistic syntax and obscures the moral message.

TEXT: ‘Pendant toute la traversée ils raisonnèrent beaucoup sur la philosophie du pauvre Pangloss. “Nous allons dans un autre univers, disait Candide; c'est dans celui-là, sans doute, que tout est bien. Car il faut avouer qu'on pourrait gémir un peu de ce qui se passe dans le nôtre en physique et en morale.”’ Voltaire, *Candide*.

COMMENTARY: In the course of this passage, Candide’s equilibrium will be disturbed in more ways than one. ‘Reasoning’ here amounts satirically to ‘stating confidently’; and Candide’s confident assertion about the new world represents an ironic foreshadowing of the horrors to come. The litotes of ‘gémir’ and the distancing conditional of ‘pourrait’ demonstrate that the real world has not yet irrupted into the ideal propagated by ‘pauvre Pangloss’. But it is clear that, in a parodic treatment of the trope of education as journey, this ‘traversée’ will blur the processes of enlightenment and disillusionment.

- **accurately employ a more technical critical vocabulary, such as the language of tropes and figures;**

TEXT: ‘Je n’ay pas plus fait mon livre que mon livre m’a fait, livre consubstantiel à son auteur.’ Montaigne, ‘Du démentir’, *Essais* II, 18.

COMMENTARY: Montaigne’s striking metaphor of consubstantiality, in which his own identity becomes inextricably bound up with the act of writing, is given additional force by the chiasmic syntax: the author is both subject and object.

TEXT: ‘Le soleil accable la ville de sa lumière droite et terrible; le sable est éblouissante et la mer miroite.’ Baudelaire, ‘La Belle Dorothée’, *Le Spleen de Paris*, XXV.

COMMENTARY: The opening of Baudelaire’s prose poem uses rhyme, assonance and alliteration to evoke the sensory experience of dangerously pleasurable lethargy. The heat of the sun overwhelms both the city and the senses, through an accumulation of oscillating ‘s’ and ‘l’ sounds (le soleil, sa lumière), picked up in the rhyming of ‘accable’ and ‘sable’, which in turn is echoed (through the alliteration of ‘bl’) in ‘éblouissante’, emphasising the oppressive dazzling of the sun’s rays on the sand. Despite the flow of sounds from one word into another a sense of stasis is conveyed in the *rime riche* of ‘droite’ and ‘miroite’, suggesting a paralysing reflective heat and a motionless sea.

- **engage carefully with the narrative voice and focalization;**

TEXT: ‘À partir de l’âge de treize ans, sous l’influence de la progestérone et de l’œstradiol sécrétés par les ovaires, des coussinets graisseux se déposent chez la jeune

filles à la hauteur des seins et des fesses [...] leur contemplation produit alors chez l'homme un violent désir.' Houellebecq, *Les particules élémentaires*.

COMMENTARY: This is one of numerous examples in the novel where Houellebecq provokes the reader with a narrative voice that is difficult to locate. Its scientific language – emphasising the role of specific hormones, organs and body parts – suggests the perspective of Michel, a scientist, whose photograph of a pre-pubescent Annabelle appears to have triggered these observations. Yet there is nothing explicit to indicate Michel as their source. The presentation of a 13-year old female as the object of violent sexual desire is deeply troubling and raises the possibility of a disturbing authorial position in which paedophilic fantasies are validated through supposedly detached biological references. The subsequent confirmation, near the end of the novel, that the narrator is a post-human subject relating the history of Michel's life, explains the distancing use of 'chez l'homme'. Yet this ultimately amplifies the menacing objectification of women, as though after the demise of human history desire could only be recounted in these terms.

- **give brief references to the historical context of the work and contemporary philosophies and ideologies, or to the wider oeuvre of the author concerned, in order to illuminate the extract at hand;**

TEXT: Elmire to Tartuffe. 'Je vous écoute dire, et votre rhétorique / En termes assez forts à mon âme s'explique.' Molière, *Tartuffe*, 1001-2.

COMMENTARY: Molière's rhetorical ploy is to make explicit Tartuffe's own rhetorical skill: he is characterized from the start as a successful orator. As Molière was to find out to his cost when the play was censored in its first year of production, this tactic is responsible for much of the dangerous ambiguity of the comedy: the spectator observes the narrowness of the line between persuasion and manipulation.

TEXT: '- Une brûlure? demanda-t-elle en la touchant lentement, tout le long de l'abdomen.

Sarah ne répondait pas. « Blessure de guerre », devrait-elle dire, probablement sur un ton mélodramatique. Anne ignorait tout de la ville au cours de la période passée de feu et de meurtres.' Djébar, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*.

COMMENTARY: Anne's identity as the daughter of a French magistrate who left Algeria long before the war of independence provides a position of ignorance from which the Western reader can begin to approach the memory of the war. While Sarah remains silent, since words only seem to offer the possibility of an unsatisfactory and melodramatic cliché, Anne's slow touch of the scar caused by torture during the war offers an alternative point of contact that performs Djébar's stated desire to speak « tout contre » those who have no voice.

- **demonstrate knowledge of key literary or formal conventions or intertexts, and the ways in which the passages for commentary work with or against these.**

TEXT:

ESTRAGON (renonçant à nouveau). 'Rien à faire.

VLADIMIR (s'approchant à petits pas raides, les jambes écartées). Je commence à le croire. (Il s'immobilise.) J'ai longtemps résisté à cette pensée, en me disant, Vladimir, sois raisonnable, tu n'as pas encore tout essayé. Et je reprenais le combat. (Il se recueille, songeant au combat. A Estragon.) Alors, te revoilà, toi.'

Beckett, *En attendant Godot*.

COMMENTARY: The stage directions here are barely conventional directions at all: they play with a lexical field of repetition, stasis, effort and painful movement. In the manner of Racinian drama, the 'plot' of the play, comprising minimal action, will be expanded through references to incomprehensible pasts and anxieties about the future. Removing the mythological framework on which Racine draws, however, Beckett is left with an entirely mysterious fatality or predestination ('rien à faire'), which he sets, in this passage, against Vladimir's incipient resistance and self-questioning.

For further reading and glossaries, please see the suggested resources at Part 1A

(http://www.mml.cam.ac.uk/french/courses/ugrad/Fr1_commentary.pdf).