

The Close Commentary Format

A close commentary **describes, explains, and interprets**, but a good commentary does not expend more space than is necessary on straightforward description. When writing a close commentary as a homework assignment or on an exam, where either space or time is limited, you would do well to remember that

1. Any plot summary is best kept very brief;
2. Offering a broad range of insights (e.g. historical context, relationships between the characters or historical individuals, intertextuality, formal features, diction) is the surest way to a good commentary;
3. Original interpretations can do especially well, but they are also more likely to fall flat, so at least take out insurance by making a wide array of “safe” observations as well.

For your midterm commentary, you can make the commentary several pages in length; just keep in mind that you will only have about 30 minutes’ time to write the exam commentary (a little more if you spend less time on the other exam assignments). Your commentary should comprise two parts:

1. Identify and characterize the work as a whole, and discuss how the excerpt relates to it;
2. Analyze the excerpt in detail.

The second part is the most valuable, but you’ll want to expend a modest amount of space getting the general introduction right as well. If the work is poetry, briefly discuss its form; in case of prose, provide more historical context and discuss the text’s aims and authorship.

In your analysis of the excerpt, zoom in on any details and explain what meaning you think they add to the work. For instance,

- **Diction:** what does the author’s choice of words reveal about their position? (e.g. *ofermōd* in the example overleaf.) Can you discern an emphasis on a particular **word field**, such as contemplation, perception, suffering, action, or violence? If so, what does it contribute to the poem’s meaning? (e.g. the characterization of the enemy as pagans and “wolves of slaughter” on the example overleaf.)
- **Form:** whether prose or verse, is there anything that stands out in terms of alliteration or metre? If verse, are there alliterative patterns extending beyond the single line, or some other repetition of sounds? If so, how does this connect with the subject matter? Can you identify a congruence between sound and meaning? (Cf. the alliteration identified in the example overleaf.) Does the author make use of **paronomasia** (word play; the use of similar-sounding words)? If so, what effect does this have?
- **Rhetoric:** can you identify any literary or rhetorical devices? Prosopopoeia, onomatopoeia, litotes, metaphor, simile, irony, frame narratives? What is their effect?
- **Authority, agency, and relationships:** who does what in the excerpt? What distribution of power does it reflect? Does the author’s representation of relationships signal an attitude on their part, such as modesty or piety? If so, should this be understood as a rhetorical device?
- What **intertextuality** can you discern? For medieval texts, you’ll often want to look for biblical echoes. What is the purpose of such connections?
- What references to **historical developments** can you discern? Does the author take a subjective stance?

When interpreting, always translate your findings into meaning: it is never enough simply to observe that something is the case. Instead, explain what you think it does for the meaning of the text and/or what it says about the author’s aims.

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 (“scir ... scildas”) 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 action preceding the battle as though giving an objective account, it also introduces the theme of **pride** (*ofermōd*, l. 89): it is this moral flaw that leads ealdorman Byrhtnoth (the speaker in this excerpt) 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, wolves, and/or eagles 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 Byrhtnoth for his decision to allow the Vikings onto land, this character’s referring the outcome of the battle to God (ll. 94b–95) suggests the poet’s sympathy. Indeed, the knowledge that Byrhtnoth 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. Byrhtnoth’s authority is suggested by the observation that “beornas gehlyston” (“warriors listened [to his words]”, l. 92b).