

## Commentary Assignment

A commentary is a *detailed* analysis of one short passage from a larger piece of writing, such as a play, a novel or a poem. You will be given a passage from a work studied in class and will have one period to complete a close reading on that passage. All work will be completed in class and will be handed in at the end of the period. Your commentary should be 2-3 pages hand-written.

Here are the components of a commentary:

Context (1/3 of the assignment):

- What just happened in the text?
- What is going to happen in the text?
- How do things change in the story either during this passage or because of this passage?
- What is the context significant? Why is the passage here and not somewhere else in the work?

Analysis (2/3's of the assignment):

Salient Details:

In a series of short paragraphs, 'unpack' the passage and discuss the *salient details*. Choose two or three things from the list below and discuss them in detail. This section of the close reading should be the 'meatiest' section. Spend the most time on this part.

- The author's **vision of the world**: What particular values are being illustrated? You should **always** discuss this idea in a close reading.
- **Conflict** in the story: Man versus man, man versus self, man versus society, et cetera.
- **Images** and **details**: Image patterns, symbols
- Elements of **language**: Literary devices (similes, metaphors, personification, et cetera), interesting or unusual word choices
- Elements of **humour**: Type of humour (irony, parody, satire, et cetera), source of humour
- Descriptions of **character**: Personification of ideas, motivation, role
- Some **moments of revelation**: New information, epiphanies
- Moments of **change**: Who or what has changed? Why? What are the motives?
- Echoes: Are there recurring themes, images, symbols? When have we seen these things earlier in the work or later in the work? Has the meaning changed at all?

Conclusion

In a concluding paragraph, offer an interpretation of some kind

- Think of this section as similar to an essay's conclusion. Now that you have analyzed the passage, what new things have you learned? State those things here.

## CLOSE READING EXAMPLE—*Hamlet*

HAMLET:

So oft it chances in particular men	23
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,	
As in their birth, wherein they are not guilty,	25
(Since nature cannot choose his origin)	
By the o'ergrowth of some complexion,	
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,	
Or by some habit that too much o'erleavens	
The form of plausible manners that (these men,	30
Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect,	
Being nature's livery, or fortune's star)	
Their virtues else, be they as pure as grace,	
As infinite as man may undergo,	
Shall in the general censure take corruption	35
From that particular fault. The dram of evil	
Doth all the noble substance of a doubt,	
To his own scandal.	38

### Mole of Nature: A Close Reading of a Passage from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (I, iv, 23-38)

#### Introductory Paragraph

In this paragraph, you hint about what your major areas of discussion about the passage will be, and you list the two or three specific salient details you will be analyzing.

→ This speech of Hamlet's from Act I, Scene iv is a treasure trove of analysis for the careful reader. It says so much about Hamlet's character, and also about the themes and ideas that permeate the play. Hamlet is, without being fully aware of the deeper implications of his speech, making some very good points about the nature of tragedy in general and tragic heroes in particular. After contextualizing the speech, the salient details discussed will be how the speech illustrates Shakespeare's vision of the world, how the meter of the speech works, and finally some details of language in the speech. After this, the parts of the speech that echo other parts of the play will be discussed, and finally some conclusions will be reached.

#### Context Paragraph

In this paragraph, you situate where the text appears in the work. What just happened and what happens immediately following are the two major things to cover in this section. You may use quotations from other parts of the work in this section, as is done here.

→ This speech occurs in Act I, Scene iv of the play. The *context* is that Hamlet, Marcellus, and Horatio are on the battlements of Elsinore, standing guard on a chilly winter's night, in the hope that the ghost of Hamlet's father will reappear. This scene was promised to the audience earlier in the play, as two scenes prior to this, Hamlet makes arrangements with Horatio and Marcellus to "watch [with them] tonight" (I, ii, 242) while they stand guard on the battlements of Elsinore, in the hope that "Perchance [the Ghost] will walk again" (I, ii, 243). The immediate circumstances of the speech are in reference to Horatio asking Hamlet about King Claudius's custom of "tak[ing] his rouse [and] / Keep[ing] wassail" (I, iv, 8-9); in other words, Claudius's custom of getting really drunk and making a fool of himself. Hamlet's comments in this speech are in reference to the idea that other nations will think poorly of the Danes because of their national reputation for drunkenness. Immediately after this speech, quite literally in the next line, the ghost of Hamlet's father makes his appearance, and beckons Hamlet "to a more removed ground" (I, iv, 61) to have a private conversation with him. It is during this meeting, which the audience sees in Act I, Scene v, that the ghost tells the story about how Claudius murdered him.

#### First Salient Details Paragraph

This particular salient details paragraph is about "vision of the world." All close readings should analyze your opinion of the author's vision of the world.

→ The *vision of the world* expressed in this paragraph is Shakespeare's view of the nature of tragedy. The "mole of nature" (line 24) that Hamlet mentions can be compared to the Greek *hamartia*, which is often loosely translated to "tragic flaw," but a better translation would give as "excess of character." Hamlet makes the point that one tiny flaw, or "the stamp of one defect" (line 31), as he puts it, can be enough to cause a man who is otherwise "pure as grace" (line 33) to fall in some way. Shakespeare explored this idea in all of his tragedies: Othello's "mole of nature" (line 24) is jealousy, King Lear's is blindness to people's true natures, and Hamlet's is indecision and inactivity caused by over-analysis of different situations. Hamlet's "mole of nature" (line 24) is illustrated for us in this very passage, as he is overanalyzing the drunkenness of King Claudius and extending the King's isolated flaw onto the entire Danish people.

**Second Salient Details Paragraph**

This particular salient details paragraph is about meter. Any time you are asked to do a close reading of a passage that is in verse, you should address any interesting things about the meter.

→ The *meter* of this passage is of interest as well, due to several feminine endings, some unmarked elisions, and a very interesting first-foot trochaic substitution in line 31. Hamlet as a rule is a character whose verse contains a large number of lines with feminine endings, as he is a character who is constantly asking questions. His most famous line in the play, “To be | or not | to be: | that is | the ques- | -tion” (III, i, 56), is of course a feminine ending. This particular speech has, over the course of its sixteen lines, six feminine endings:

That for | some vi- | -cious mole | of na- | -ture in | them, (line 24)

As in | their birth, | where-in | they are | not guil- | -ty, (line 25)

Oft brea- | -king down | the pales | and forts | of rea- | -son, (line 28)

Or by | some ha- | -bit that | too much | o'er -lea- | -vens (line 29)

Shall in | the gen- | -eral cen- | -sure take | oor-rup- | -tion (line 35)

From that | par-tic- | -ular fault | The dram | of e- | -vil (line 36)

In five of those six lines (i.e. – all of the feminine endings but line 24), the feminine ending is the second or third syllable of a word. A feminine ending where the last syllable of a word is unstressed usually results in the word trailing off a bit, and it is interesting that this happens on the words *guilty*, *corruption*, and *evil*. It is as though Hamlet is unconsciously recoiling from these words. This serves to strengthen his role as the hero of the play, when the audience hears him recite these words with such distaste that he can barely finish them. The fact that the word *them* is unstressed in line 24 may be illustrating to the audience that Hamlet is unconsciously realizing that *he* is, in fact, the character in this play who has a “vicious mole of nature,” as though he were going to say “in *me*,” but somehow he unconsciously stopped himself. Also, Hamlet’s speech has several unmarked elisions (e.g. – line 35’s “general” must be elided to “gen-ral,” and line 36’s “particular” must be elided to “par-tic-lar”). These indicate the speed at which Hamlet’s mind works: he thinks so quickly that his speech cannot keep up with his thoughts. Finally, the most interesting metrical feature of this speech is this first-foot trochaic substitution: “Carr-ying | I say, | the stamp | of one | de- | fect” (line 31). The word *carrying* is also elided, so that it is pronounced “care-ying,” which adds to the previous point about Hamlet’s quick speech, but the fact that it is a first-foot trochee gives extra emphasis to the word. Hamlet is worried about the idea of *carrying* anything, as he sees things like responsibility and duty as burdens, metaphorically piling onto his back. This idea will be further explored in the echoes section.

**Third Salient Details Paragraph**

This particular salient details paragraph is about “details of language.”

→ One very interesting *detail of language* in this speech is the repetition of the word *nature*. Hamlet uses the word *nature* three times in sixteen lines. It is profitable to examine how and why he uses this word, for it has some disturbing cosmological implications. The first time Hamlet says the word is when he makes mention of the “vicious mole of *nature*” (line 24) in “particular men” (line 23). Here, he is using the word *nature* in the sense of a person’s personality or character. The implication in using the word *nature* to describe this, however, is that our personality traits are *natural*, or, in other words, we have no control over them because they are innate, in us from birth. The second time Hamlet uses the word is when he says “(Since *nature* cannot choose his origin)” (line 26). This is in keeping with the previous point, that something *natural* is something uncaused, something unchangeable, something even *random*. An interesting detail here is that *nature* is personified (“nature cannot choose *his* origin” – line 26). This may suggest that nature should be thought of as a capital-N “Nature,” a deity or force of some kind, which suggests that there is a plan of some kind for why men are the way they are. This brings up issues like fate and destiny, which are also often themes in tragic stories. The final mention of the word *nature* occurs when Hamlet mentions “nature’s livery” (line 32) as being what “the stamp of one defect” (line 31) “wears,” for lack of a better word. *Livery* is the clothing of a servant, so the personality trait that is the “mole of nature” (line 24) or the “stamp of one defect” (line 31) is, effectively, the *servant* of *nature*. This adds to the idea that nature (or Nature) is a force of some kind with some sort of plan for man. It is a negative force at that, because, if it is true that nature (or Nature) gives man faults and flaws on purpose, then it (he? she?) must *want* the tragedy to occur. This is cosmologically troubling, as it implies some sort of negative supernatural force at work in the world.

**Echoes Paragraph**

This section is where you discuss how things in your passage relate to other parts of the work. This might take the form of repeated words, phrases, ideas, themes, characters, or situations.

→ One very interesting *echo* in this speech was briefly mentioned in the discussion of meter. Hamlet says that men with a “mole of nature” (line 24) or a “stamp of one defect” (line 31) are “[c]arrying” (line 31) it, like some sort of weight or burden. This image of carrying a burden is one to which Hamlet returns a few times in the play. It is apparent to the audience members who are carefully listening to Hamlet’s speeches that he resents the duties and responsibilities that are imposed on him, especially those imposed on him by the ghost of his father, involving the revenge of his father’s murder. He says a bit later in the play, immediately after he has been given the responsibility to avenge his father’s death, “O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!” (I, v, 188-189). Several scenes later in the play, during his famous “To be or not to be” speech, he *twice* mentions *bearing* (i.e. – carrying) loads or responsibilities: “For who would bear the whips and scorns of time” (III, i, 70) and “Who would fardels [footnoted in the Signet text as *burdens*] bear / To grunt and sweat under a weary life” (III, i, 76-77). Hamlet, as a scholar, does not want the responsibilities of revenge and violence that he is about to be given by the ghost just one scene later in I, v.

**Second Echoes Paragraph**

*This is optional!*

→ Another *echo* in this speech has to do with the idea that Hamlet is describing a situation that he will eventually play out himself. Hamlet is, in “virtues else [...] as pure as grace” (line 33), and we know this because Ophelia says of him that he is “a noble mind” (III, i, 153) who is “[t]he glass of fashion and the mold of form, / Th’observed of all observers” (III, i, 156-157); in other words, he is beloved of virtually everyone in Denmark (with the exception of Claudius, of course). Hamlet suspects, though, that once his story is played to its conclusion, he will “in the general censure take corruption / From that particular fault” (lines 35-36) in his nature. Just before his death, this concern manifests itself when he admonishes Horatio not to kill himself, but to stay alive and tell his story. He is worried about “what a wounded name, / Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind” (V, ii, 345-346) him. He is worried about the “general censure” (line 35) of those who are actually left alive in the Danish court, people who once regarded him as a great man who would, as Fortinbras puts it, “have proved most royal” (V, ii, 399) had he been king.

**Concluding Paragraph**

This paragraph is used to give the close reading a sense of finality and completeness, and to reiterate, in your opinion, the *most important idea* of the passage.

→ This speech of Hamlet’s is such an important speech in the play, because it essentially *contains* the important themes and events of the play. Hamlet’s description of men brought down by “vicious mole[s] of nature” (line 24) describes both his own fate and the fate of all tragic heroes in drama. The tragedy arises both from the fact that the tragic hero is a person “as pure as grace” (line 33) who is brought down and destroyed, and the fact that nature (or Nature) has it in for the person from the start. Such is the *nature* of tragedy.