

How To Analyze a text and Prepare a Commentary

Read the text or passage **several times over** and answer the following questions:

1- Narrative Strategy

- ❖ Who tells the story? Whose **voice(s)** do we hear?
- ❖ Is the narrator **heterodiegetic** (he is not a character in the story he is telling) or **homodiegetic** (the narrator is part of the story)?
- ❖ Whose point(s) of view do we get? Just one, or several? Is it the narrator's point of view, or does the narrator give us a character's point of view (pay attention to the type(s) of discourse: **direct speech, indirect speech, free indirect speech**)? Are we dealing with **internal focalization, external** or **zero focalization**?
- ❖ Is the narrator **omniscient**, i.e. does he know everything about the character's inner feelings and thoughts and can he jump backward and forward in time for he knows the past and the future of the characters?
- ❖ What is the narrator's attitude towards the story and its characters? Is the narrator **objective**, or **biased**?
- ❖ Could you say that the narrator is open and honest? Does he tell you everything he knows? And does he do so clearly? Or does he withhold information or delude you? Can you say he is **misleading**? Is the narrator **reliable** or **unreliable**?

2- The Story

- ❖ Summarize the story, making sure you include answers to **Who, What, When? Where**? Pay attention to **all the characters involved**, whether they actually take part in the action of that passage or whether they are only present in the scene (as observers) or mentioned.
- ❖ How is time treated in this text? Is the story told in a simple, linear, way? Do you have **time-shifts** (**analepses** – i.e. flashbacks – or **prolepses** – i.e. jumps into the future)? Where are the time markers indicating so? What is the effect?
- ❖ Are there several readings to this story? Can you take it to a higher level of meaning on a **paradigmatic axis**? Does the story acquire universal significance?

3- Analyzing in Depth

- ❖ What type of text do you have: a **narrative**, a **description**, a **portrait**, a **dialogue**, an **interior monologue** or a **monologue** etc.?
- ❖ Can you make out an internal structure or pattern of the text? Is there a **progression**, which you can trace in the paragraphs? What is the **rhythm** of the text? Is there any **acceleration**? Does the **action** or narrative **pace** slow down? Or do they remain even?
- ❖ Pay attention to **repetition, echoes, parallels, contrasts, leitmotifs** etc... How does this influence your understanding of the text?
- ❖ Is there a **title** to the text? Do you find it **polysemic**? Is the title recalled by the text itself? What light does it bring onto the story, how does it influence your reading? Does it acquire further meaning **retrospectively**, after you have read the whole story?
- ❖ Try to define the **tone** of the text: is it **comical, pathetic, ironic**?
- ❖ Is the atmosphere rather **euphoric** (happy, gay) ? Or is it **dysphoric** (sad, gloomy)? Does the atmosphere remain the same throughout or can you trace any **change**? If so, at what moment and because of what textual elements.
- ❖ Can you trace **humor** in the text? If so what kind of humor, what do you laugh at and what are the elements in the text that concur to trigger your laughter or smile?
- ❖ Can you trace **suspense**, or **tension** in the text? What kind and how does it arise?

- ❖ Is the text **realistic**? Or does what happen seem impossible, unlikely? Is the text **fantastic**? **Uncanny**? **Marvellous**? Can you speak of **magic realism**? **Psychological realism**? What is the effect on your reading?
- ❖ Are there any **dramatic** elements? Is the text **theatrical**? How does this happen and to what effect? Analyze the character's **cues** and how they follow one another. Does the text give you the equivalent of **stage directions**? How do the **gestures** and **movements** of he characters express things implicitly? Do these signify meanings contradictory what their words, or with what they are supposed to represent? Can you speak of **props**, i.e. objects mentioned that signify something to the reader implicitly?
- ❖ Can you find **contradiction** in the text? Between conflicting points of view? Or between what you expected was going to happen and what eventually does? What **expectations** does the text build up? Are these expectations fulfilled?
- ❖ Do you understand more from the text than the narrator is willing or able to tell you? Do you know more than the characters do on the situation, and can you therefore speak of **dramatic irony**? How does it work, and to what effect?
- ❖ Can you recognize any specific trait that remind you of a type of fiction, a particular **genre**, or several at the same time (a mystery, a detective story, a horror story, a comedy, a tragedy, a fable, an allegory, a romance, a fairy tale, science fiction, a satire, autobiography etc.?) What are the **conventions** that are called upon to produce that impression on you?
- ❖ Are some elements in the text to be read symbolically? Can you find **comparisons**, **metaphors**, **metonymies** (substitutes cause for effect or *vice versa*) or **synecdoches** (substitutes part for whole or *vice versa*)?
- ❖ Pay attention to the characters' names: Do their names mean anything? Is the text playing with **onomastics**?
- ❖ Pay attention to the **setting**. Do you have names of places that are meaningful? Are these real places, or fictive ones? How do they matter here? How is the setting described? Does the story take place **indoors** or **outdoors**? What does it evoke? Are **nature** or the **weather** described? Is the setting animated? Can you speak of **pathetic fallacy**? Are there close links between the setting and the action? Or does the setting suggest anything about the characters' thoughts and feelings?
- ❖ Can you perceive **intertextuality**? Does this text refer to other texts by other authors (a passage in the bible, a Greek myth, a famous novel or play?). How does that bring more meaning to the text at hand?
- ❖ Is the text **autoreferential**? Does it call attention to the act of writing or reading, of inventing fiction? Is it therefore **metatextual**? Does it make you think about how it is artificially created? To what purpose?
- ❖ Does this text have **poetical** qualities? Where do you find them?
- ❖ Do you happen to know anything about the author, this type of writing, a film adaptation, a sequel, or another form of art that is of relevance here, or that this text reminds you of? (This is always useful in a conclusion, after you have summarized your argumentation).