

ANGLAIS
ÉPREUVE À OPTION : ÉCRIT
COMMENTAIRE COMPOSÉ DE LITTÉRATURE
ÉTRANGÈRE

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Coefficient : 3 ; **Durée** : 4 heures

Le sujet proposé cette année pouvait certes paraître long, les deux extraits choisis comprenant un nombre non négligeable de lignes chacun, mais cela n'a pas semblé gêner la plupart des candidats présents : le nombre de copies blanches était légèrement inférieur à celui des années précédentes, et une seule copie proposait un plan détaillé à la place d'une rédaction complète. En fait la première étape (la compréhension globale) posait peu de problèmes, et les deux passages étaient sans doute plus faciles et rapides à « déchiffrer » que les poèmes proposés les années précédentes.

Cinquante-six candidats ont composé lors de cette épreuve, et ont obtenu des notes allant de 0,5 (pour des copies quasiment blanches) à 18. La moyenne des notes s'établissait à 8,59. 34 copies (60,71%) ont obtenu une note inférieure à 10, et 22 copies (39,28%) une note égale ou supérieure à 10.

Nous commencerons par évoquer rapidement les raisons pour lesquelles certains candidats n'ont pas obtenu la moyenne. Parfois c'était à cause d'un contresens sur la nature de la voix narrative et sur les intentions affichées du narrateur. Ainsi, et malgré le « chapeau » introductif, qui distinguait nettement entre le narrateur de Fielding et le héros, plusieurs candidats ont cru que les pronoms *we* et *I*, dans le texte de Fielding, avaient pour référent le personnage éponyme, Tom Jones.. Ils en voulaient pour preuve l'amour de Tom Jones pour Sophia, explicite (selon eux) dans la citation incluse dans le paragraphe d'introduction, “with whom we are ourselves greatly in love”. Ces candidats étaient alors mal armés pour étudier la dimension ludique, parodique, et ironique du texte. Pour eux le narrateur de Fielding était donc homodiégétique (ou autodiégétique, selon les copies), et s'opposait au narrateur extradiégétique et hétérodiégétique d'Austen. Ces copies passaient en général sous silence la dimension métafictionnelle et intertextuelle des deux textes (“what we can do in the Sublime”) pour tenter de comparer l'art de la description mis en œuvre dans les deux textes. Souvent ces candidats en arrivaient à conclure que les deux textes étaient radicalement différents, l'un présentant un éloge enthousiaste et lyrique de l'héroïne, l'autre créant une « anti héroïne » dont le narrateur se moquait avec un mépris cruel.

D'autres candidats encore, qui semblaient parfaitement imperméables à l'ironie, condamnaient fermement le « manque de féminité » de Catherine Morland (“she is a too wild girl to fit the model of a really feminine girl” [sic]) ou encore la coupable indulgence de sa mère, qui l'encourage à faire des caprices en l'autorisant à abandonner ses cours de musique.

Un autre défaut (beaucoup moins fréquent) consistait à asséner des affirmations maladroitement et confuses sur le thème de l'inadéquation entre les mots et les choses (“it demands exertion to transcend the semiotic value of language”, “language is different from what the narrator tends to mean”) tout en convoquant des « autorités » à la mode en guise de

preuve (“it is an exemplification of the concept of difference by Derrida [sic]”). Le fait de consacrer toute la troisième partie d'un devoir à des affirmations générales qui pourraient s'appliquer à n'importe quel morceau choisi (“language is not mimetic and departs from reality”, “the reader has to take an active part in the creation of meaning”) ne contribue en rien à construire une analyse précise de deux extraits spécifiques. Que « l'activité » du lecteur soit importante, tout critique littéraire en est probablement conscient, mais cette simple constatation ne permet pas de faire l'économie de l'analyse détaillée des modalités spécifiques de la relation narrateur/ lecteur dans les deux extraits concernés.

Enfin, s'il arrive (très rarement) qu'une copie présentant une argumentation fine et convaincante soit desservie par un anglais très pauvre et incorrect, il est beaucoup plus fréquent de trouver une adéquation entre le niveau de langue et la subtilité de la pensée. Notons néanmoins une faiblesse récurrente, même chez des candidats ayant un bon niveau de langue : les élèves maîtrisent très mal la forme interrogative, qu'elle soit directe ou indirecte, et très souvent on trouve dans les questions des fautes grossières de syntaxe et de conjugaison qui sont absentes des autres phrases. C'est sans doute un reflet de l'apprentissage des langues en France, où traditionnellement le professeur questionne et l'élève répond. Il est à noter aussi que l'usage de formules toutes faites empêche parfois l'élève de penser ou tout au moins d'approfondir : telle copie qui affirme “this word is pregnant with meaning” se garde bien de définir ensuite ce “sens,” comme si le mot “pregnant” était suffisamment déterminant.

Pendant le jury ne doute pas que les professeurs de khâgne mettent inlassablement leurs élèves en garde contre ces « errements », et il est plus utile aux futurs candidats de savoir comment l'argumentation a été construite dans les copies bien notées. Voici donc certaines des problématiques abordées :

— Quelques copies se proposent de montrer que la présentation de l'héroïne est en fait l'occasion pour les deux auteurs concernés de conduire une réflexion sur les codes et les conventions littéraires, et même de rédiger un véritable manifeste, la position stratégique et liminaire des deux extraits leur permettant de fonctionner un peu à la façon d'une préface.

— D'autres posent le problème du paradoxe de la présence d'un « héros » ou d'une « héroïne » dans un genre qui prétend par ailleurs respecter un certain réalisme, c'est à dire décrire des personnages qui puissent paraître « humains » et « normaux ». Les deux textes jouent en effet sur les différents sens des termes *heroine* ou *heroic*.

— Les candidats ont aussi cherché à analyser comment un texte pouvait à la fois créer un degré non négligeable d'illusion romanesque, tout en menant en parallèle une réflexion sur la nature et le statut de l'héroïne d'une part, sur l'art de la description verbale d'autre part, comparée à l'art de la représentation plastique.

En revanche les khâgneux ne semblent pas sensibilisés aux problèmes liés au genre, car on compte sur les doigts de la main les candidats qui se sont posés des questions sur la nature fabriquée, conventionnelle, construite, de la « féminité » et du féminin. Le fait qu'un des écrivains soit un homme et l'autre une femme introduit-il une différence dans la façon de créer et de présenter une héroïne ?

Voici à présent quelques exemples de plans, pas nécessairement structurés en trois parties, tirés de copies jugées « bonnes » ou « moyennes ». Dans la mesure où les différentes parties respectaient la règle du jeu qui consiste à constamment étudier les deux textes en parallèle, ces plans étaient tous acceptables :

- Two surprising descriptions that go against the reader's expectations
- The persona of each narrator, and his/her conversation with the reader
- Deconstructing literary codes: in I the "Sublime", in II the Gothic romance.

- Similarities and differences of the extracts as seen through the relationship of reader and narrator.
- The art of portrayal
- Order and disorder in the two excerpts (Nature as orderly, controlled and bucolic, i.e. artificially constructed, versus Austen's more realistically disordered Nature)

- Identity and masks of the narrator; role of the reader.
- How the two portraits are built.
- The status of the two heroines, as compared with literary traditions and codes.
- Are heroism and irony compatible?

- The first introduction of a heroine: one rather late, the other in the very first page (text as threshold, incipit, expository function etc.)
- The omnipresence of humour and parody in both texts
- Two texts blending tradition and modernity, presenting a reflection on Art, and the proposal of new "rules" for the genre of the novel.

Comme dans le rapport précédent, nous nous proposons à présent de détailler, en anglais, quelques-uns des points évoqués dans les plans ci-dessus, en insistant encore une fois sur le fait que ce sont quelques points choisis parmi bien d'autres, pour donner des pistes aux futurs candidats. Il ne s'agit certainement pas de rédiger un « corrigé-type ».

About the reader's expectations, and the reader's dialogue with the narrator:

The stance of Austen's narrator consists in pretending to share conventional expectations about what and who the heroine should be. The use of vague passive forms ("at least so it was conjectured") contributes to that pretence, by keeping the narrator's own "conjectures" in shadow. The narrator pretends to define the "heroic" and the gothic ("locking up daughters") as an ordinary, commonplace "norm", which logically implies the (ironical) use of adjectives such as "extraordinary", "strange", "unaccountable" to designate what, outside a novel, in "real" life, is perfectly ordinary and "normal". The reader is implicitly involved in this system of assumptions and expectations; for instance he (or she) is included in the phrase "as anybody might expect", in II, 8. In I the address to the reader is an explicit invocation.

Both texts playfully blur the limits between fiction and reality, between the fictive "reality" created by the novelistic illusion and the artificiality of literary creation. In II, in the same sentence (the first one) Catherine is first referred to as a (fictively) "real" person whom any one (i. e. the reader) might have "seen", and as a fictional character in a book, a "heroine". The use of the word "character" in II, 33 exploits the same ambiguity, by punning on the double meaning of the word (i.e. a personality, a temper, on the one hand, and a fictional, imagined being on the other). In I the same blurring effect is created, for instance when Sophia is referred to as a person who might read the book and be offended (I, 38), and as a person with whom the narrator is in love. Sophia's resemblance to "one whose image can never depart from [the narrator's] breast", that is, presumably, a non-fictitious, living woman, whom the (contemporary) reader is presented as likely to "remember" (I, 17), also contributes to the same effect.

Under this heading one could also place an analysis of the "presence" of the narrators in both texts. In I the narrator is present, and even obtrusive: there is a frequent use of both the

singular and the plural first person pronouns, and great protestations of (false) modesty. The narrator is falsely, playfully apologetic about his own incompetence. In II the narrator's presence is more subtly felt. The narrator does not refer to him/herself, but intrudes nevertheless, forcing his/her (ironical) bafflement on the reader through direct, strongly punctuated comments (“What a strange, unaccountable character!”), and also through a kind of suggested dialogue with the reader. For example the very oral style of the sentence beginning with “Not that Catherine was always stupid, — by no means” sounds like a casual answer to an implicit possible query by the reader.

About gender

The paragraph quoted in the introduction shows that Fielding's narrator, being in love with Sophia, is necessarily a man, who addresses himself primarily to a majority of male readers (“with whom many of our readers will probably be in love too before we part”). The descriptions are suffused with a discreet eroticism, calculated to titillate the (male) reader: “the blooming maid” is “in loose attire” (I, 5), the promised true “symmetry in her limbs” is a veiled allusion to her legs, a part of the female body which was kept hidden at the time, and the unmatched whiteness of her bosom contributes to creating the image of a desirable object, endowed with exactly the “modesty” (32), the pliancy and “sweetness” that a man could wish for in an ideal wife. But not *too* soft, sweet or passive: the “lustre” in her black eyes, “which all her softness could not extinguish” (28) promises a passionate nature under the demure appearance. Thus the “charming young creature” (49) cannot fail to charm men, among whom of course the hero, but also, more importantly, the male readers.

The ironical use of negatives in Austen's text constructs Catherine as the negation of what the heroine of a novel should be: weak, passive, delicate, given to swoons and nameless terrors, and eminently saveable (like Ann Radcliffe's helpless “Gothic” heroines). Austen ironically denounces the rigid stereotypes opposing girls to boys. Catherine is presented as too boyish to be a “good” girl, likely to grow up as a lady, a true heroine. Austen's narrator sarcastically enumerates the “heroic” enjoyments of infancy, creating a conflict between the epic, energetic, superior (and, ultimately, masculine) connotations of the adjective “heroic” and the tame, gentle, traditionally feminine occupations mentioned (II, 15-16). Austen's text asserts the right of little girls to use their creative powers and their energy, to hate “confinement and cleanliness” (the alliteration in <k> creates a comic identification between a negatively connoted word and a positively connoted one). It asserts their right to appropriate the boisterous naughtiness, the mischievous attitude tolerated (and even encouraged) in boys, but frowned upon in girls. Girls, very early, are constrained: forced into submission, demureness, and placidity. But the rebellious, “unaccountable” Catherine enjoys the exhilarating freedom of “rolling down the green slope”, while Fielding's heroine, “the lovely Sophia”, is modelled on “the lovely Flora”, who “gently trips it over the verdant mead” (I, 5), showing no propensity to rebel against the confinement of her energy, no reluctance to behave in anything but a proper, sedate fashion. Fielding certainly pokes fun, through excess and hyperbole, at the artificiality of conventional literary descriptions, but he finds no fault with the “feminine” as his own society has constructed it. Jane Austen, conversely, indirectly protests against the constraining limitations constantly imposed on women¹.

Fielding's heroine only functions as the necessary virtuous appendage to the eponymous hero, hence the belated appearance of this portrait in the overall structure of the novel. Fielding's priorities and hierarchies are clear: the young heroine will always play second fiddle to the hero, who appears in the very title of the novel. Whereas the very position of

¹ Just as she protests against the “invisibility” of women: later in the novel Catherine Morland complains that history is “very tiresome”, “popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page, the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all”.

Austen's extract, on the threshold of her novel as it were, clearly states the right of a woman to be a heroine in her own right (like Richardson's eponymous heroines).

In the 18th century the novel was still despised as a weak, inferior, "feminine" literary genre, and both Austen and Fielding, in different ways, wanted it to be treated seriously, as a truly artistic genre, very different from the romance. The novel was more than a fantasy about private matters: it was to encompass the complexity of reality, and to reflect social, public issues.

About the art of portrayal, and intertextuality.

This is the part that students dealt with most thoroughly, and most competently, analysing the structure of the two descriptions, Austen's striking use of negations throughout the extract, and Fielding's use of the tradition of the blazon. The students used their knowledge of mythology, and of classical literature to comment intelligently on Fielding's exercise in the style of "the Sublime". Burke had not yet defined the "Sublime" as excessive and awesome, and Fielding uses the term as a humorous synonym for the elevated, the elegant, a reference to the unrealistic, pastoral universe of sheperds and sheperdesses playing out their love stories in a gentle, bucolic nature. A literary invention reminiscent of Virgil, of euphuism, of the pastoral romance. Fielding uses poetic diction, excessive alliteration, accumulation, mythological references to create his pastiche of an artificial universe.

Austen, on her part, writes "against" the conventions of the Gothic novel in general, and of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* in particular, a novel in which the first chapter is devoted to the description of the heroine's education. Emily St Aubert receives a complete education, she learns very fast, has exceptional qualities and acquires outstanding accomplishments. Austen very skilfully uses negation and fake astonishment to oppose her plain, realistic, no-nonsense, down-to-earth characters to the "usual", "normal" heroes and heroines whom the reader might expect to find in a novel, that is to say human beings presented as either exceptionally gifted and virtuous or exceptionally villainous.

Which does not mean that text I is only a pastiche and text II a straightforward parody. In fact, Fielding's text is comic and parodic because exaggeratedly bombastic and hyperbolic. The Homeric epithets and the metaphors qualifying Boreas, the North wind, and Eurus, the East wind, emphasised by excessive alliteration, create ludicrous dog images which destroy the "elevated" effect that the narrator pretends to be aiming at. Sophia is first said to conform to the classical canons of regularity and symmetry, but in the fourth paragraph the cascade of cautious modals and prudent adverbs again turns the pastiche into a hilarious parody ("could", "might", "possibly", "might", lines 25-26). The parody is also perceptible in an anticlimactic fall from a hyperbolic trumpeting of the narrator's "utmost skill" to a description which in fact is vague, hesitant, creating a blank page on which the reader can project his own desires rather than a precise image which an artist might draw ("difficult to say", "though perhaps", "rather more"). Fielding is also trying to create a "real" "living" girl in a "real" place, not a petrified statue, hence the little "imperfections" which destroy symmetry and regularity (a dimple in *one* cheek, the comically indeterminate size of her chin) and which in fact are received by the reader as charming characteristics.

Austen's narrator pretends not to be omniscient ("unaccountable") and to be baffled by Catherine's "strange" ways, but her sympathy for her character is perceptible. It is perceptible through the constant device of irony, but also in certain details, for instance the adjectives "old" and "forlorn" that characterise the spinnet. Those adjectives create an effect of internal focalisation through the eyes of the little Catherine, who is thus indirectly portrayed as sensitive and imaginative. Catherine's inability to learn the "Beggar's Petition" is ostensibly a proof of her stupidity. But if Catherine can learn a fable as quickly as any other English girl,

her incapacity to learn the “Beggar's Petition” becomes an oblique attack on this boring, conventionally didactic “poem”, rather than a proof of her “stupidity”.

In neither text is the description static. Both extracts integrate the dimension of time, and combine narration and descriptive “pauses”. Of course this is especially true of II, which very dynamically covers many years in one page, and promises that Catherine will not always be plain, in fact will turn out to be quite pretty after all (“*for many years of her life as plain as any*”). But Fielding's text also plays with the possibilities of the novel, able to go backwards and forwards in time, and thus different from the unique, static representation offered by a painting or a statue. Sophia's hair is first described as “reach[ing] her middle”, then as short and curly (I, 23-25), superimposing a later (and more sophisticated) image of Sophia on her younger, more natural self. The fourth paragraph plays on the rivalry of plastic arts and literature; it also plays on the paradox of an artist claiming that his creation is real. The descriptions of Sophia's hair and eyebrows (lines 25 and 28) are reminiscent of Shakespeare's sonnet 127, which develops the idea that natural beauty can be suspected of being false (i.e. achieved through artifice and paint).

Ces remarques sont très loin d'être exhaustives, les deux extraits se prêtant à une multitude d'analyses et de lectures, mais leur seul but est de donner des pistes aux candidats malchanceux et aux futurs candidats, en espérant qu'elles auront contribué à démystifier cet exercice, réputé difficile, mais tout à fait “faisable” avec un peu d'entraînement. Les meilleures copies le montrent bien, et nous félicitons chaleureusement leurs auteurs, qui ont fait la preuve de leur culture, de la rigueur de leur démarche intellectuelle, mais aussi de leur sensibilité littéraire, leur capacité à détecter le non-dit des textes.