

WRITING A GOBBET ESSAY

What is a gobbet?

It is a **passage of literature** provided as a **context for analysis and discussion**, it is a **short extract** from a text (novel or play) that **sheds particular light** on some features or aspects of the text.

What makes a good gobbet essay?

CONTEXT (Where? When? Who? What about?)

- What part of the **plot or storyline** of the novel or play does the gobbet refer to?
- What comes **immediately before / after** it ?

MEANING

- What are the **main ideas** contained in the gobbet with regard to **theme/s, character/s, setting**?
- Are there any **key words, phrases, images, symbols** which suggest these ideas?

SIGNIFICANCE

- What does the gobbet **add to our understanding** of the whole novel/play?
- How do the **previously mentioned ideas (theme/s, character/s, or setting)** develop and contribute to the resolution of the plot? {NOTE that the ideas related to theme/s, character/s and setting often overlapeg. character trait or detail of setting shows a theme.}

A good gobbet essay will:

1. Open by identifying the context and making relevant comments on the setting;
2. Bring out the main issue/s of the given extract in terms of key themes, characters and other stylistic features;
3. Explore the significance of the gobbet through analysis rather than narration/paraphrase;
4. Demonstrate familiarity with (knowledge of) the text (novel or play);
5. Move from the specific (gobbet) to the general (text);
6. Make use of quotations, from BOTH the gobbet and the text, which are coherently incorporated within the writing;
7. Be logically structured and expressed (in terms of coherence and cohesion) with a clear topic sentence and development in each paragraph;
8. Contain neither error nor irrelevancy;
9. Use the Present Simple tense as its main vehicle of expression.

Things to avoid:

- Narration rather than ANALYSIS: **Do not simply paraphrase or retell** the gobbet.

ALWAYS try to COMMENT on it by bringing out what it contributes to the whole text in terms of themes, characters and other stylistic features.

- A general approach rather than MOVING from SPECIFIC to the GENERAL.
Do not lose track of the gobbet. ALWAYS use it as a **springboard** to the wider issues involved in the text.
- Mixing TENSES (Present and Past).

Further guidelines:

1. Read the gobbet carefully and identify from which part of the novel/play it is taken.
2. Underline any important concepts or quotations from it.
3. Identify the main thematic issues and the most important information about the characters.
4. Start your essay by locating the gobbet within the novel's plot. You might refer to what comes before it and what comes after it.
5. In a gobbet from Atwood you might also refer to whether it is taken from a Night section and comment on the significance of those sections in the novel.
6. Refer to any important stylistic aspects of this gobbet and how these relate to the rest of the novel/play. For example, if it's a soliloquy comment on the significance of soliloquies in Othello.
7. Identify those aspects in the examination rubric that are most pertinent to the gobbet and focus on them. It could be characterisation, style etc.
8. Devote paragraphs to separate issues. For example, if the gobbet highlights one particular theme and describes one particular character then you have a paragraph on each one.
9. In writing about the issues highlighted by the gobbet you may relate them to other parts of the novel but only in passing. Your essay needs to be grounded in the gobbet.
10. Quote from the gobbet if need be, especially if you want evidence to prove a particular point you're making about a theme or character.
11. In writing your essay aim to engage in critical commentary, i.e. focus on the significance on the issues rather than narrating the plot. That means you have to avoid paraphrasing the story and instead focus on commenting on the significance of the issues you're focusing on.
12. Just like any other essay you'll be writing in your exam it is important to support what you're saying by means of evidence and to signpost each paragraph by means of a topic sentence. Each paragraph needs to be made up of at least three supporting ideas related to one main issue, e.g. the theme of oppression via language.
13. Make sure that your paragraphs are sufficiently chunky (i.e. slightly less than half a page) and of approximately equal length.

Example

Gobbet from *The Heart of the Matter* (pp 108 – 9)

Write an essay on the importance of the following passage to the novel *The Heart Of The Matter*. You may wish to write about two or more of the following topics, which are being offered to you as guidelines:

- the relation of the passage to the plot or action of the novel
- the relation to the central themes of the novel
- what the passage reveals about any of the characters in the novel

‘What is terrible?’

‘A child like that.’

‘Yes. Both parents were lost. But it is all right. She will die.’

Scobie watched the bearers go slowly up the hill, their bare feet very gently flapping the ground. He thought: It would need all Father Brûle’s ingenuity to explain that. Not that the child would die – that needed no explanation. Even the pagans realised that the love of God might mean an early death, though the reason they ascribed was different, but that child should have been allowed to survive the forty days and nights in the open boat – that was the mystery, to reconcile that with the love of God.

And yet he could believe in no God who was not human enough to love what he had created. ‘How on earth did she survive till now?’ he wondered aloud.

The officer said gloomily, ‘Of course they looked after her on the boat. They gave up their own share of the water often. It was foolish, of course, but one cannot always be logical. And it gave them something to think about.’ It was like the hint of an explanation – too faint to be grasped. He said, ‘Here is another who makes one angry.’

The face was ugly with exhaustion: the skin looked as though it were about to crack over the cheek-bones: only the absence of lines showed that it was a young face. The French officer said, ‘She was just married – before she sailed. Her husband was lost. Her passport says she is nineteen. She may live. You see, she still has some strength.’ Her arms as thin as a child’s lay outside the blanket, and her fingers clasped a book firmly. Scobie could see the wedding-ring loose on her dried-up finger.

‘What is it?’

‘*Timbres*,’ the French officer said. He added bitterly, ‘When this damned war started, she must have been still at school.’

Scobie always remembered how she was carried into his life on a stretcher grasping a stamp-album with her eyes fast shut.

Model Answer (Gobbet pp 108-9)

INTRODUCTION

A] This passage is taken from Scobie's visit to Pende, where Scobie is investigating the arrival of a number of survivors of a torpedoed ship, who are being brought across the river. The survivors include a small, orphaned girl who is on the point of dying, and a nineteen-year-old widow clutching a stamp-album, who is later revealed to be Helen Rolt. Scobie is here talking to the French officer who has come in the launch with the survivors.

B] This is a central moment in the novel and a turning point for Scobie. Apart from introducing the small child who parallels Scobie's dead daughter in many ways, the passage also features Scobie's first encounter with Helen Rolt, an encounter which has crucial repercussions on the development of the plot.

C] The passage allows the reader to see Scobie's intense sense of pity and responsibility. It explores issues such as man's suffering and God's love and mercy.

BODY *In each of your body paragraphs, start with a close analysis of the passage, showing how your main point is brought out in this particular text. Then, gradually move away from the passage by focussing on other directly relevant parts of the novel.*

(Point 1) Scobie's sense of pity for the helpless, the child-like and the ugly is clearly brought out in this passage. He pities the child, who has lost both parents and has gone through forty days of suffering before being saved, only to be now on the point of death.

Pity is also at the heart of his relationship with Helen Rolt. In this passage, Helen is presented as being in a pitiful state and her "face was ugly with exhaustion." Ironically, it is this ugliness, together with her appearance like a skeleton and her skin "about to crack" that attracts Scobie to her. It is significant that Helen is "carried" into Scobie's life rather than presented walking into it. Moreover, her "young face" is still evident, her arms are "as thin as a child's" and she is carrying a stamp-album like a little girl.

(Extension 1) Both the dying little girl and Helen's child-like appearance are probably an unconscious reminder to Scobie of his own daughter who died aged nine in England. Perhaps it can be argued that his pity for these two persons arises from his sense of guilt for not having been present at his daughter's death-bed. However, it is actually Scobie's tendency to feel pity for others that is at the root of his troubles. This sense of pity is also visible in his marriage to Louise. He feels the need to protect his wife and ensure her happiness, and he does this not out of love but out of a great sense of pity and responsibility. Ironically, it is also this pity that leads Scobie into situations that contribute to his downfall, including his decision to overlook a letter sent by the Portuguese captain to his daughter, allowing himself to fall into Yusef's power by borrowing money from him, and his affair with Helen.

(Point 2) Another issue which is fundamental in this passage is Scobie's religious approach in the way he interprets events around him. Scobie's concern for the orphaned child and for Helen Rolt leads him to question the "mystery" of God, a theme which dominates the novel. Faced with inexplicable suffering, the Catholic Scobie struggles to reconcile reality with "the love of God." He sees it as a "mystery."

Interestingly, the French officer is bitter about the suffering caused by “this damned war,” which suggests that man is to blame for it. By contrast, Scobie seems to put the blame on God, as suggested by his thoughts that the child has been “allowed” to survive forty days and nights. However, Scobie, we read, “could believe in no God who was not human enough to love what he had created.”

(Extension 2) This attitude towards God’s mercy is a characteristic of Scobie, which he also shows in his conversation with Father Clay about young Pemberton’s suicide. While Father Clay quotes “the Church’s teaching,” presumably that Pemberton would be damned for his suicide, Scobie insists that he will not believe “that God doesn’t pity the young.” Scobie believes God’s mercy is wide-ranging.

The religious theme, however, is not limited to Scobie. This issue of “God’s mercy,” and the way religion sometimes fails to account for human suffering is evoked again at the end of the novel. Talking about Scobie’s suicide, Louise echoes Father Clay in referring to what “the Church says,” but Father Rank argues that the Church “doesn’t know what goes on in a single human heart.”

Incidentally, the religious theme is here reinforced by the detail that the survivors suffered for forty days and nights – a Biblical allusion to Christ’s fasting in the desert before starting his public life.

CONCLUSION *does not need to be too long and does not have to state anything new. Focus once again on why this passage is significant in the context of the novel as a whole.*

The given passage is significant in the whole novel in that it touches on various central aspects, including Scobie’s tendency to pity the weak and also his frequent religious doubts and thoughts. The novel as a whole explores the life of a character who, ironically, is led to his downfall by an almost excessive willingness to feel responsible and pity for others and his own reasoning about God and religion.

Suggested Plan

Gobbet pp 108-9: *The officer said gloomily ... with her eyes fast shut.*

INTRODUCTION *Contextualise passage, showing its importance in plot. Introduce main points of focus in essay.*

A] Passage taken from Scobie’s visit to Pende - investigating arrival of survivors of torpedoed ship, being brought across river - survivors include small, orphaned girl on the point of dying, and 19-year-old widow clutching stamp-album, later revealed to be Helen Rolt. Scobie is here talking to the French officer who has come in the launch with the survivors.

B] A central moment in the novel and a turning point for Scobie: introduces small child who parallels own dead daughter in many ways; also features Scobie’s first encounter with Helen Rolt, which has crucial repercussions on his life.

C] Passage allows reader to see Scobie’s intense sense of pity and responsibility and also explores issues such as man’s suffering and God’s love and mercy.

BODY *In each of your body paragraphs, start with a close analysis of the passage, showing how your main point is brought out in this particular text. Then, gradually move away from passage to other directly relevant parts of novel.*

(1) Scobie’s sense of pity for the helpless, child-like and ugly – six-year-old child, Helen Rolt.

- It can be argued that Scobie's pity arises from his sense of guilt regarding daughter's death. However, it is actually his tendency to feel pity and responsibility for others that motivates his actions: - pity for Louise; suicide an act of pity.
- (2) Scobie's religious approach when interpreting events: how to reconcile reality of suffering with God's love. French officer bitter about man's kindness. By contrast, Scobie has doubts about God's mercy (*hint of an explanation ...*)
- Issue of God's mercy and way religion sometimes fails to account for human suffering: - also Pemberton's suicide – and Scobie's own sin of 'love'. Suicide: Church *doesn't know what goes on in a single human heart*.

CONCLUSION *Focus once again on why passage is significant in the context of the novel as a whole.*

The given passage is significant in the whole novel in that it touches on various central aspects, including Scobie's tendency to pity and feel responsible for the weak and also his frequent religious doubts and thoughts. The novel as a whole explores the life of a character who, ironically, is led to his downfall by an almost excessive willingness to feel responsible and pity for others and his own reasoning about God and religion.