

Essay #1: Poetry Explication

A poetry explication is a relatively short analysis that describes the possible meanings and relationships of the words, images, and other small units that make up a poem. It is a line-by-line unfolding or revealing of the meaning(s) of a poem as the poem develops that meaning from beginning to end. Writing an explication is an effective way for a reader to connect a poem's plot and conflicts with its structural and literary features.

Assignment:

Write a poetry explication of a poem you choose from the selection of poems found in our textbook. These poems should be no less than 14 lines and not more than 35. You pick. **Do not research or go to other sources** to learn about your poem. It is just between you and the poem. Trust your own brain, and don't let others think for you.

Requirements:

This Poetry Explication should be 1000-1250 words. You are expected to display “reflective thinking” in your explication, use the language of poetic analysis, and use quotes from the poem as you explicate it. It is due in MLA Manuscript Format and Documentation Style. *Essays that show clear signs of the writer accessing outside research on their poem will lose at least -10 points.*

MW Classes Due Dates for Drafts:

Draft 1 = 2/6 Draft 2 = 2/8 Draft 3 (Final) = 2/13

TR Classes Due Dates for Drafts:

Draft 1 = 2/2 Draft 2 = 2/7 Draft 3 (Final) = 2/9

Late drafts for draft 1 or 2 lose -5 points. Late final drafts lose -10 points.

Grading Rubric: <http://www.lirvin.net/1302/rubricExplicationEssay.pdf>

Preparing to Write the Explication

1. Read the poem silently, then read it aloud. Repeat as necessary. Read it “closely, interactively, and critically,” particularly following strategies discussed in chpt. 2. Look up words. Annotate.
2. Analyze the poem in two ways: First, begin your analysis by identifying and describing the speaking voice or voices (persona), the conflicts or ideas, and the language used in the poem. Then, examine the poem closely according to its poetic elements.

Analyze the large issues

Determine the basic design of the poem by considering the who, what, when, where, and why of the dramatic situation.

- What is being dramatized? What conflicts or themes does the poem present, address, or question?
- Who is the speaker? Define and describe the speaker and his/her voice. What does the speaker say? Who is the audience? Are other characters involved?
- What happens in the poem? Consider the plot or basic design of the action. How

- are the dramatized conflicts or themes introduced, sustained, resolved, etc.?
- When does the action occur? What is the date and/or time of day?
- Where is the speaker? Describe the physical location of the dramatic moment.
- Why does the speaker feel compelled to speak at this moment? What is his/her motivation?

Analyze your poem in terms of the elements of poetry

To analyze the poem, we must focus on the poem's parts or elements, namely how the poem dramatizes conflicts or ideas in language. By concentrating on the parts, we develop our understanding of the poem's structure, and we gather support and evidence for our interpretations. As you analyze the poem line by line, examine it closely in terms of each element of poetry, looking for certain patterns and connections to develop which provide insight into the overall meaning or interpretation of the poem.

The Elements of Poetry include:

- Words/Diction
 - Images/Imagery
 - Figures of Speech/Figurative Language
 - Tone
 - Form
 - Symbolism/Allusion
- ***See our handout on the Elements of Poetry.

Writing the Explication

An explication is a line-by-line explanation of a poem from beginning to end. "Explain" is the key word. It differs from a thesis-support paper because it doesn't follow a logical structure (thesis + 3 supporting reasons); instead, it has a chronological structure that unfolds or reveals the meaning(s) of a poem as it develops from beginning to end. The explication begins with the large issues and basic design of the poem and works through each line to the more specific details and patterns.

The First Paragraph

The explication does not require a formal introductory paragraph; the writer should simply present their interpretation of the poem's overall meaning and start explicating immediately. The first line(s) of the explication should

- describe the dramatic situation of the speaker and declare the central subject of the poem
- identify the most significant conflict(s) or tension(s) surrounding this subject, and
- present your interpretation of the overall message or theme of the poem.

One university professor suggests a foolproof way to begin any explication with the following sentence: "This poem dramatizes the conflict between ..." Such a beginning ensures that you will introduce the major conflict or theme in the poem and organize your explication accordingly.

Here is an example. A student's explication of Wordsworth's "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" might begin in the following way (notice the writer quickly begins explicating the poem):

This poem dramatizes the conflict between appearance and reality, communicating the idea that even in the unnatural city Nature's presence can be seen. From Westminster Bridge, the

speaker looks at London at sunrise, and he explains that all people should be struck by such a beautiful scene. Line 1 begins with the speaker expressing his wonder: “Earth has not anything to show more fair.” Although he stands on a bridge in the city, a place the speaker sees as apart from nature, he finds himself seeing a scene as beautiful as any natural wonder like a waterfall or mountain. In the next lines, the speaker further highlights the wonder of the scene saying someone would have to have a dull soul not to be moved by “A sight so touching in its majesty”(ln. 3). What is ironic here is that the city typically, especially early 19th century London, is associated with pollution and human affects of the industrial revolution

In lines 4 through 9, we see details of the City scene the speaker is wondering at. In line 4, he uses the metaphor of clothes to describe the city’s beautiful appearance: “This City now doth, like a garment, wear/ The beauty of the morning” (lines 4-5). He seems to describe the way the special light of early dawn illuminates the city as if this light were a beautiful piece of clothes covering the city scene. Lines 5 and 6 catalogue what he is seeing: “silent, bare, /Ships, towers, domes, theatres.” ...

The Next Paragraphs

The next paragraphs should continue to explicate the poem’s central meaning line by line, expanding the discussion of the meaning and conflict central to the poem in terms of the elements of poetry: words/diction, imagery, speaker and tone, figures of speech, form, symbolism and allusion. That is, the writer should explain the overall meaning of the poem by focusing on how the poet has used these elements of poetry to construct this meaning.

Each “section” of the poem (stanza or grouping of text) should be explicated in a separate paragraph in the essay. What constitutes a “section” is determined by you based upon meaning.

One analogy to describe how an Explication is organized is a thread. By expressing the overall meaning or theme, you are saying that the poem has this particular thread running through it. When you start your Explication, you grab the beginning of that thread, and then you follow the thread as you interpret the poem line by line, stanza by stanza, part by part, from beginning to end.

The Conclusion

The explication’s concluding paragraph does not simply restate the main points of the introduction. The end of the explication should discuss any or all of the below:

- the overall value of the poem in literature,
- or the value of experiencing the poem,
- or the reader’s personal connection to the poem.

Using the Language of Poetic Analysis

The elements of poetry identify the ways poets use language to make meaning. As you are explicating or unfolding this meaning, *you need to use the language of these elements of poetry* in your discussion. Always discuss an element as it refers to meaning; avoid stating or identifying some element just to identify an element.

Tips to keep in mind

1. Refer to the speaking voice in the poem as the "speaker", "the poet", or "the persona." For example, do not write, "In this poem, Wordsworth says that London is beautiful in the morning." However, you can write, "In this poem, Wordsworth presents a speaker who..." We cannot absolutely identify Wordsworth with the speaker of the poem, so it is more accurate to talk about "the speaker" or "the poet" in an explication.
2. Use the **present tense** when writing the explication. The poem, as a work of literature, continues to exist!
3. To avoid unnecessary repetition of "says" or "states" in your compositions, the following list suggests some verbs you can use when writing the explication:

Dramatizes, emphasizes, presents, suggests, illustrates
asserts, characterizes, argues, underlines, stresses, asks, offers

4. Don't forget to follow MLA guidelines on quoting and citing lines of poetry in your text.
 - a) Introduce your borrowed parts of the poem with an effective signal phrase.

Heaney directly compares poetry writing to the digging his ancestors did: "Between my finger and my / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it" (lines 29-31).
 - b) Use a forward slash (/) between lines where they end in the poem when you are quoting 1-3 lines.
 - c) Give the line numbers in the parenthetical reference at the end of your sentence. For your first borrowing, use the word lines before the numbers: (lines 29-31). Thereafter, use just the numbers: (12-13). No need to use page numbers.
 - d) Set off 4 or more lines of poetry using a block indent format:

The author David Bottoms is wise to the fact that men often use sports to communicate their feelings. The persona of the poem, however, takes years to realize his father's message. Once he realizes the importance of sports to their relationship, he sends a message back to his father:

and I never learned what you were laying
down. Like a hand brushed across the bill of a
cap,
let this be the sign
I'm getting a grip on the sacrifice. (20-23)

5. Do not use ellipses [. . .] if you are starting a quote midline. Do not use ellipses if you end a quote midline.
6. If you remove words from the middle of a line, DO use ellipses to represent missing text:

As a boy, the speaker visited his grandfather in the fields: "Once I carried him milk. [. . .] / He straightened up / To drink it" (Heaney 19-21).
7. If you remove one or more full line, use a line of ellipses to indicate the omission.
The persona in Hayden's poem would wake to hear the fire his father started before dawn:
Sundays too my father got up early
.....
I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress. (1, 6-8)
8. Put line numbers after citing several single words:
Roethke uses a variety of words in "My Papa's Waltz" that indicate physical violence, words such as "death" (3), "battered" (9), "scraped" (12), "beat" (13), and "hard" (14).
9. For one word, put the line number at the end of your sentence:
When Heaney uses a simile to compare his pen to a "gun," he creates a startling image (2).