

ESSAY 2

EXPLICATION

Write an explication of a poem by John Donne. Choose a poem included in *John Donne's Poetry* (Norton Critical Edition) that we have not discussed in class. You may select a short passage from a longer poem if you like.

Explication

Explication is a method designed to connect the poetic devices in a poem with the ideas and emotions it conveys to a reader. A good analyst can account for the contribution of every line, ideally of every significant word, especially for a short poem. An explication discusses *form* as well as *content*: not just the themes or argument, but also how the author presents, manipulates, and styles the material.

Read your chosen poem slowly, carefully, and repeatedly in order to make worthwhile observations on it. The more specific you are, the better your explication will be. So focus on small things (like an ambiguous word or phrase, a striking paradox, a peculiar analogy, or other small particulars) and offer some interesting and truthful insight into them. Everything you say in your explication must relate directly to the actual words of the text. Don't get sidetracked; stick with the words.

The length of your explication will depend on how much you have to say and on how efficiently you say it. Don't let your essay run longer than what you have to say. The longer or denser your poem (or section of a poem) is, the more there will be to say about it. On the other hand, the better a writer you are, the less of your reader's time you will require.

Structure

Quote the whole poem (or the whole passage from a longer poem) early in your essay and refer to it frequently throughout your explication. An explication does not require a formal introductory paragraph. The first paragraph should identify the poem's author and title, describe the dramatic situation in the poem, and introduce the major conflict or theme that develops in the poem. Subsequent paragraphs should explain in detail how the poem works; go through the poem line by line, focusing on details of form, rhetoric, syntax, diction, rhythm, and so forth. (See Explication Guidelines below.) The explication has no formal conclusion; simply stop writing when you reach the poem's end.

Style

Make your prose as clear and concise as possible. Don't waste your time (or mine) trying to sound impressive. Write, instead, in a conversational voice: the clear, plainspoken, engaging voice of a person talking about a subject they find interesting. Make every word count.

Drafts

I encourage you to write a bad first draft of your essay as soon as possible. This first draft's awfulness will help you see how to make the next draft better. You do not have to submit a rough draft to me, but if you want me to read and respond to your work in progress, I will gladly do so. You can send your work in progress to me as an email attachment or give me a hard copy of it in class. You may submit your work in progress for my feedback anytime before the Draft Deadline: Friday, October 21.

Quotations

Your essay should employ in-text citations and parenthetical references with line numbers and have a Works Cited page with full bibliographic information on all the texts you quote from. Use proper MLA style for formatting your document.

See drmarkwomack.com/mla-style/: "Document Format," "Citation, Format" "How to Quote Verse," and "Documenting Sources."

Proofreading

Before you submit your essay for a grade, proofread it carefully and thoroughly, correcting any errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and MLA formatting. Slapdash spelling, sloppy punctuation, semiliterate grammar, or slipshod MLA formatting seriously undermines your credibility as a writer.

Therefore, essays with excessive errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, or MLA formatting will receive no higher than a D.

Evaluation

In evaluating your essay, I will focus on the insightfulness and precision of your explication and the clarity of your prose. (See the "Grading Criteria for Major Essays" on the Syllabus.)

Submit your essay through the TurnItIn link on the class Blackboard page labeled "Essay 2: Explication."

DUE DATES:

- **DRAFT DEADLINE: October 21**
- **FINAL DRAFT DUE: November 4***

* I will accept any excuse you give for handing your essay in late, no matter how improbable; however, late papers get no written comments from me, and I won't accept any papers submitted later than one week past the due date.

EXPLICATION GUIDELINES

Here is a list of suggestions to help you explicate your poem. Use these suggestions as a guide, not as an ironclad set of rules. They are not comprehensive, nor is every recommendation invariably useful.

1. Read the poem for **meaning**. Pay attention to the sentence, not the line, as the principal unit of organization. Find the subject and verb. Forget, for the moment, about the poetry.
2. Write a modern English prose **paraphrase** of the poem. This will help you understand what the poem says and make you more aware of all its verbal details. (Don't include your paraphrase in your essay.)
3. What is the **antecedent scenario** for the poem? What happened right before the poem begins? What has provoked the speaker into utterance? How has a previous equilibrium been unsettled? What is the speaker upset about?
4. Outline the **structure** of the poem, identifying its major sections. Is there a clear system of organization? Does the form of the poem suggest a structure? Is it, for instance, organized into stanzas? Does it use a refrain? How does the structure help express the speaker's meaning? Are there shifts in direction? Antitheses? Repetitions?
5. Is **irony** a factor? Is there, in other words, a discrepancy between the speaker's words and meanings?
6. What is the speaker's attitude towards the subject of the poem? towards the hearers? towards himself? In other words, what is the **tone**?
7. Examine the **diction** of the poem. After reading for denotation (straightforward meaning), think about connotation. Look up key words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* to determine their currency in the Renaissance and to discover implied significance. Notice connections among roots of words, as well as alternative or archaic meanings.
8. Think about **wordplay**, remembering that puns aren't always funny. Consider multiple or ambiguous senses of words.
9. Notice **imagery**. Do the images repeat or suggest patterns? How do the images promote or clarify the subject?
10. What about **figurative language**: similes, metaphors, symbols? Analyze metaphors with an eye on the *tenor* (the thing being described), the *vehicle* (the thing used to describe it), and the connotations of the comparison.

11. Do you find other **figures of speech** like understatement, hyperbole, personification, paradox, anaphora, chiasmus?
12. Are there any classical, biblical, or historical **allusions**? What do they contribute?
13. Study the **syntax**, the arrangement of words into sentences. Is word order normal or inverted? Do sentences seem simple or complex?
14. Examine **meter** as you have syntax. Is it regular or not? Look for run-on lines or important instances of caesura.
15. Pay attention to **musical devices** such as alliteration, rhyme, assonance, consonance, euphony, cacophony, onomatopoeia. How do they contribute to the sonnet's effect on a reader?
16. For every device, the *essential* question is "How does it work?"