

Essay 2—Explication

Explicate a short passage from Shakespeare.

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 passage. 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.

For your explication, select either A) a short passage (about 5-15 lines) from one of the plays on our reading list or B) one of these suggested passages from plays not on our reading list: *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* 3.3.174-187, *Romeo & Juliet* 3.2.17-25, *Richard II* 3.1.40-50, or *The Winter's Tale* 4.4.135-46. If you select a passage of your own, pick one we have not already analyzed carefully in class.

Work through your chosen passage carefully, line by line, to “unpack” each line’s poetic and rhetorical effects. Use the online *Oxford English Dictionary* to explore the etymology of key words in the passage and their particular usages during Shakespeare’s time. (Get into the habit of looking up key words in the *OED* for any literary analysis. But while one or two instances of important etymology or usage might prove useful to your essay, avoid letting the essay become a listing of vocabulary words and their various meanings.) Analyze the literary and rhetorical figures—simile, metaphor, metonymy, personification, alliteration, assonance, consonance, enjambment, parallel structure, and so on—and through your explication reveal an important effect of the passage that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. Build your thesis statement on this discovery.

Make your prose as clear and concise as possible. Don’t waste my time and yours trying to sound impressive.

Your essay should be 2-3 pages (500-800 words). Quote the passage you select at the beginning of your essay. Put the exact word count for your paper (excluding the quoted passage at the beginning) on the last page.

Since your only source for this essay will be your chosen passage, you do not need a Works Cited page. You should, however, use MLA style for formatting your document. (See <<http://drmarkwomack.com/mla-style/>>: “Document Format,” “Anatomy of a Citation,” and “How to Quote Shakespeare.”)

Due Date:

- I will write comments on all papers submitted on or before the beginning of class Monday, **November 23**.
- I will write little or nothing on papers submitted on or before the beginning of class Monday, **November 30**, but I will grade these papers just the same as those turned in on the earlier date.
- I will assign a zero to any papers not turned in by Monday, **November 30**.

Explication

Here is a list of suggestions to help you explicate your passage. These suggestions are a guide, not a set of ironclad rules. They are not comprehensive, nor is every recommendation invariably useful.

1. Read the passage 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. Try to summarize the main idea or ideas. (Do this in writing: having to commit conclusions to paper forces you to decide what you think. *Don't* include your summary in your essay.)
3. Outline the progression of ideas, identifying major sections. Is there a clear system of organization? Are there antitheses? Repetitions? Shifts in direction?
4. What is the specific and general context? How does context (speaker, situation) modify the passage?
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? towards the hearers? towards him- or herself? In other words, what is the tone?
7. Examine the diction of the passage. 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 or words, as well as alternative or archaic (but still applicable) meanings.
8. Think about wordplay, remembering that puns need not be funny. Consider multiple or ambiguous senses of words.
9. Notice imagery. Is it particularly abundant? unusually sparse? Do the images suggest patterns or form clusters? 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. Are there classical, biblical, or historical allusions? What do they contribute?
12. Do you find understatement, hyperbole, personification, paradox?
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 passage's effect on a reader?
16. **For every device, the essential question is "How does it work?"**

The Two Gentlemen of Verona (3.1.174-87)

What light is light, if Silvia be not seen?
What joy is joy, if Silvia be not by —
Unless it be to think that she is by,
And feed upon the shadow of perfection.
Except I be by Silvia in the night
There is no music in the nightingale.
Unless I look on Silvia in the day,
There is no day for me to look upon.
She is my essence, and I leave to be
If I be not by her fair influence
Fostered, illumined, cherished, kept alive.
I fly not death, to fly his deadly doom.
Tarry I here, I but attend on death,
But fly I hence, I fly away from life.

Romeo & Juliet (3.2.17-25)

Come, night, come, Romeo; come, thou day in night,
For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night
Whiter than new snow upon a raven's back.
Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-browed night,
Give me my Romeo, and when I shall die
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.

Richard II (3.1.40-50)

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house
Against the envy of less happier lands;
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England

The Winter's Tale (4.4.135-46)

What you do
Still betters what is done. When you speak, sweet,
I'd have you do it ever; when you sing,
I'd have you buy and sell so, so give alms,
Pray so; and for the ord'ring your affairs,
To sing them too. When you do dance, I wish you
A wave o' th' sea, that you might ever do
Nothing but that, move still, still so,
And own no other function. Each your doing,
So singular in each particular,
Crowns what you are doing in the present deeds,
That all your acts are queens.