

## ESSAY 1:

### EXPLICATE A SHORT PASSAGE OF MILTON'S VERSE.

Select a short passage (between 2–12 lines) from any of Milton's English poems excluding *Paradise Lost*. You would be wise to select a passage we have not already analyzed carefully in class.

Explication is a method designed to connect the poetic devices in a poem with the ideas and emotions they convey 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.

Work through your chosen passage carefully — word by word — 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 Milton's time. 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 your time (and 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. Don't let your essay run longer than what you have to say. Make every word count. One sentence that has something to say is better than a paragraph that doesn't.

Quote the passage you select at the beginning of your essay. Your essay should be between 500–800 words. Use MLA Format for quotations and citations. (See [drmarkwomack.com/mla-style/](http://drmarkwomack.com/mla-style/), especially “How to Quote Verse” and “Documenting Sources.”)

Submit your essay through the TurnItIn link on the class Blackboard Learn page labeled “Essay 1—Explication.” You don't need to submit a hard copy version of your essay.

## DUE DATE:

- I will write comments on all papers submitted on or before Friday, **October 10**.
- I will write little or nothing on papers submitted on or before Monday, **October 20**, 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, **October 20**.

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## 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 seventeenth-century English and to discover implied significance. Notice connections among roots of 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?"**