

Explication Assignment Packet

In this unit, we will read several poems and the explications of them by professionals in the field. In addition, we will read a record of the creation of a poem that investigates how the words chosen by that poet created the poem's meaning and as the author of the article also used these to support a reading or interpretation of that poem.

While professionals in the field sometimes rely upon outside research (knowledge about the author and his or her body of work), most of the insight provided through explication is gained from careful and close attention to the language used in the poem. When reading the explications by professionals, pay attention to the ways that they notice the use of language in a poem and how they explain the relationship between the language and the poem's theme/topic. |

At the end of this unit, you will be asked to provide an explication for a poem that you have never seen before. Try to model your explication on those we have done so far in the course.



I. Steps to Writing an Explication

First of all, read the poem over and over. Read it out loud. Then read it out loud again. Practice different ways of placing emphasis to get the most meaning.

All of the following can be part of a written explication, depending on the poem.

Look up anything you don't understand: an unfamiliar word, a place, a person, a myth, an idea. Look up words you DO understand, to help you articulate connotations.

1. State, very literally and in one or two sentences, what the poem is about. What is the most obvious statement you can make about the situation that the poem concerns itself with? Do not scare yourself with "deep meaning." Start literally. Paraphrase the poem.
2. What is the emotion of the poem? How does the speaker feel about what he/she is talking about? What can you infer about this speaker, what kind of person is he/she? Remember that because most poems are about human beings they are often expressions of complicated, mixed, and conflicting emotions; always try thinking in terms of both/and rather than either/or. To whom is the speaker talking: to him/herself? to someone else? How does the audience of the poem affect it?
3. Look at the poem. Describe the form of the poem, the design it makes on the page. For instance, is it divided into stanzas? Does it have long or short lines, or irregular? How does the form contribute to the content? Is it an inherited form (sonnet, sestina, etc.) or an invented one?

4. Listen to the sounds of the poem. Does it rhyme? Does it use alliteration (repetition of beginning consonant sounds)? Does it have an interesting rhythm? What do the words sound like? Are they smooth, or harsh, or lilting, or dull? Do they move quickly or slowly?
 5. How did the poet organize the poem, and why? Is it a question and an answer? Is it a story? Is it a list? Is it a conversation? Is it a description? Where (emotionally speaking) does the poem begin and where does it end? Be willing to be surprised. Things often happen in poems to turn them around. A poem may seem to suggest one thing at first, then persuade you of its opposite, or at least of a significant change or qualification. Discuss the "journey" the poem takes from beginning to end.
 6. Be very alert to word choice. Discuss the kinds of language the poet uses. Are they simple and everyday words? words from a particular occupation or walk of life? are they slang words? abstract? philosophical? from religion, or sports, or banking? from the world of nature or love or domestic life, or politics or painting or childhood or computers or psychology or law? From what "world" of experience does a group of words derive? Be alert to unusual words or usual words used in an unusual way. Try to say why this word is effective, what kind of very particular meaning it communicates, what it suggests. Try substituting a synonym of the word and explain to yourself why the poet's choice serves his/her purpose better. Look up the word in the OED and find out how old it is, what kind of journey it has taken to get to this poem.
 7. Be alert to repetitions of any kind: a repeated word, a repeated sound, a repeated idea, punctuation, part-of-speech, syntactical arrangement. Since repetition always serves to emphasize, what is being emphasized and why?
 8. Figurative language: What metaphors, similes, images does the poem use? When and why does the speaker use them? Keep in mind that a poet uses figurative language when more literal ways of speaking seem inadequate or inappropriate. Discuss what further dimensions of human experience can be delved into when the literal gives way to the figurative. (note well: both metaphors and similes are essentially comparisons: say what is being compared to what and why.)
 9. **Theme:** take a stab at the poem's theme. A poem's "theme" will be that part of it that communicates more widely, that tries to say a "truth." What you claim is the theme of the poem will serve as your thesis for your explication essay.
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II. Ways to Organize and Outline Your Explication

Begin with an introduction that relates the name of the poet and the title of the poem to your reader. **Then, provide a paraphrase of the poem** telling the reader what the poem is about, what takes place (if any actions do) in the poem,

and characterize the speaker in the poem if necessary. **Offer an interpretation** as to the poem's **theme/topic** in this introduction. To do this, try asking questions about what the poem hopes to persuade the reader to feel. For example, when exploring Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum est*, we will ask ourselves whether the poem attacks the idea of there ever being a time to justify war, or if the speaker thinks it is always "bad." Find an interpretation that you think you can support given the language of the poem.

In the body paragraphs, explore those elements of the poem that support your interpretation as to the meaning of the poem providing examples in quotation and explaining how these examples reveal elements in the language that prove your interpretation fits with the text.

Here are two options for organizing and outline your explication essay:

Explication: Visual Outline (Option #1)

Introduction	<p>State the author's name and the title of the poem. Tell the reader what the poem is about. Depending on what is appropriate to the poem, give the "plot" of the poem, characterize the speaker, introduce the characters or the setting, or relate the scene. In addition, tell you think is the theme/topic of the poem (as it differs from the poem's situation).</p>
figurative language elements	<p>I. Element 1</p> <p>A. Identify the element in the poem.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explain how the element functions 2. Analyze how the element helps to create the theme. <p>Choose elements of figurative language that contribute in a significant way to the meaning of the poem and explain to your reader how the example or examples of this element build and justify your interpretation of the poem. Remember that elements of figurative language include the connotation of words, the imagery, the chronological structure or the turn in the final lines of the poem, the metaphors, similes, the personification, use of symbols, or use of juxtaposition and paradox).</p>

figurative language elements	<p>Choose some other elements, do it again.</p> <p>II. Element 2</p> <p>A. Identify the element in the poem</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explain how the element functions 2. Analyze how the element helps to create the theme.
Figurative language elements	<p>III. Element 3</p> <p>A. Identify the element in the poem</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explain how the element functions 2. Analyze how the element helps to create the theme.
brief conclusion	<p>Close briefly by restating the interpretation, pointing out the significance of this interpretation or otherwise commenting upon the craft of the poem.</p>

Visual Outline: Option #2 (Stanza-by-stanza)

Introduction	<p>State the author's name and the title of the poem. Tell the reader what the poem is about. Depending on what is appropriate to the poem, give the "plot" of the poem, characterize the speaker, introduce the characters or the setting, or relate the scene. In addition, tell you think is the theme/topic of the poem (as it differs from the poem's situation).</p>
Stanza 1	<p>Choose elements of figurative language within each stanza that contribute in a significant way to the meaning of the poem and explain to your reader how the example or examples of this element build and justify your interpretation of the poem. Remember that elements of figurative language include the connotation of words, the imagery, the chronological structure or the turn in the final lines of the poem, the metaphors, similes, the personification, use of symbols, or use of juxtaposition and paradox).</p> <p>I. Stanza 1</p> <p>A. Paraphrase the action in the stanza</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Give examples

	2. Discuss/Analyze poetic elements in relation to the theme.
Stanza 2...	<p>Choose elements of figurative language within each stanza that contribute in a significant way to the meaning of the poem and explain to your reader how the example or examples of this element build and justify your interpretation of the poem. Remember that elements of figurative language include the connotation of words, the imagery, the chronological structure or the turn in the final lines of the poem, the metaphors, similes, the personification, use of symbols, or use of juxtaposition and paradox).</p> <p>II. Stanza 2</p> <p>A. Paraphrase the action in the stanza</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Give examples 2. Discuss/Analyze poetic elements in relation to the theme.
Stanza 3...	Keep going....the number of paragraphs will be determined by the number of stanzas the poem contains.
brief conclusion	Close briefly by restating the interpretation, pointing out the significance of this interpretation or otherwise commenting upon the craft of the poem.

*You will find an example of an explication on the last two pages of this handout.

***Student Sample
Explication Essay**

William Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark" examines the killing of a pregnant doe by a hit-and-run driver, a subject that would no doubt be treated sentimentally by a lesser poet. One of nature's exquisite creatures has been slaughtered and callously left on the road, unburied, unmourned, potentially to cause future accidents. Stafford, thankfully, avoids the trap of this topic by presenting the poem's events objectively with an almost reporter-like, semi-detached eye. His attitude toward this common tragedy is sadness but also resignation.

The repetition of the title in the opening phrase states the narrator's literal experience but suggests much more. It conveys the conditions of the accident. The road death is fresh, so the driver who had hit the deer was presumably also driving in the dark, and because nothing was done about the accident, for the sake of the deer or the safety of others, the driver's inaction suggests moral darkness. The darkness also suggests the narrator's confusion about what to do with the deer. "Traveling through the dark" also suggests the uncertainty of the of the speaker's quick decision. Is he doing the right thing? This poem is more than just a narrative of a man pushing a dead deer into a canyon for the benefit of others; thematically, this it is about making instant decisions in difficult situations. This is where the poem becomes the reader's.

The poem's opening line creates for the reader a false first impression: the surprising appearance of a deer, usually an occasion for happiness. However, the first word of the next line, "dead," immediately reverses this impression, more so by its delay. Following the pause at the end of line one and at the beginning of line two, "dead" receives extra emphasis. Placed where it is in the poem, the word can hardly be pronounced without producing a dull, flat, thud; in this context it is more than surprising, it is appalling, like the experience of a driver negotiating a mountain bend and seeing a dead deer for the first time. Stafford's traveler quickly assesses the scene and understands its moral implications. It is his duty to roll the deer "into the canyon . . . to swerve might make more dead." The word "swerve" here means neglect of duty, but it also suggests the kinetic image of a swerving automobile, the event that killed the deer.

The second stanza examines the dead deer more closely under the harsh glare of tail-lights: an eerie, infernal scene that links the traveler's vehicle with that of the hit-and-run driver. The deer is called a "heap," no longer a being, a cold and stiff thing that can be dragged off. Then we learn that it is a pregnant doe, a detail that moves our emotions from sympathy to the brink of pathos. However, Stafford's language is precise and controlled; he doesn't want to be inflammatory. Understating the situation, he simply says, "she was large in the belly."

The third stanza offers an unhappy paradox. The traveler feels the doe's underside and finds that it is still warm; it contains a fawn waiting to be born. In death the traveler discovers life, but not normal life that emerges from the womb into the world, for the fawn is "never to be born." This unhappy realization causes the traveler to hesitate. His mind, as pregnant as the dead doe, is filled with muddled emotions: pity, anger, frustration, and confusion about how to act. He may even wonder if the fawn can be saved, but knows all along what he must do. The reader

understands from the first stanza. The traveler's hesitation, therefore, may be seen as simply a moment of silence, a secular prayer before performing his inescapable task.

The fourth stanza draws a closer parallel between the traveler's car and the dead deer. The car with its parking lights jutting forward mimics a beast staring into the darkness, and like the heart of a mammal its engine "purred." The traveler stands in its "warm exhaust turning red," no doubt from the glare of the tail-lights but also from heated emotions pumping blood to his face. The red glow, moreover, cannot help but suggest the deer's blood. The traveler senses the wilderness witnessing (and perhaps censuring) the drama of "our group": the dead deer, the fawn, never to be born, the car only mechanically alive, and himself.

In the final couplet the traveler thinks hard for "us all," not just for the group, but for every being in creation, for all who suffer and face death - a natural prayer brought on by the moment. The pause was his "only swerving" he says, nothing more could be done. Finally he pushes the deer into the river, a shock even though the poem has prepared us for it. The reader has known from the beginning that this is what the traveler will do to save more lives, but this knowledge cannot eliminate a feeling of helplessness, nor a sense of waste.

Stafford's poem might have worked the reader into a frenzy of hate for the hit-and-run driver, but "Traveling Through the Dark" is not about hatred. It is about the sadness that accompanies each traveler on the longer journey of life and toward the inevitability of death, so that when we encounter a misfortune on the road, we hesitate before we move on. Stafford's somber scene is a small tragedy, but in his simplicity, in his directness without swerving, he creates a metaphor for life.