



Explication of a Poem Essay

An explication of a poem is an analysis, typically short but detailed, that connects the poem's structure with the plot/conflict. The goal is to discuss what the poem says, the techniques the poet uses, and the implicit message(s) of the poem according to your interpretation. Your explication should display an orderly progression that goes chronologically line by line and stanza by stanza. It should provide commentary revealing both the physical, external structure (stanza structure, rhyme scheme, meter, alliteration, etc.) and the less obvious internal make-up of the poem (implication, ambiguities, allusions, use of images, etc.) showing how each adds to the effect of the other.

Tips and Tricks

- Read the poem silently and out loud multiple times. It helps to do this throughout the writing process.
- Consider annotating the poem carefully and heavily. Color coding can definitely help in this step.
- Be sure to create a thesis-driven essay. You must direct a clear and organized discussion.
- Some questions to ask yourself: How does the poem work? What structure does the poem have and how does that connect to the story line? How does the structure connect to the conflict?
- In an explication, avoid excessive discussion of any autobiographical/historical issues. You are not looking at history or biography as much as you are trying to see *how the poem works*.
- Be careful not to use a mechanical, lockstep manner when discussing the poem chronologically. Avoid writing like this: "In the first line Milton says. . ., in the second line he means. . ., in the third line he uses. . .," and so on.
- It's important to know the different elements and terminology when you look at poetry. (see our Poetry Terminology and Analysis handout for some additional terminology)
- Look up the meanings of words and how the meaning has changed. You can use the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a helpful tool.

Terms to Use

Form	Does the poem represent a particular form (sonnet, sestina, etc.)? Does the poem present any unique variations from the traditional structure of that form?
Rhetoric	How does the speaker make particular statements? Does the rhetoric seem odd in any way? Why? Consider the predicates and what they reveal about the speaker.
Syntax	Consider the subjects, verbs, and objects of each statement and what these elements reveal about the speaker. Do any statements have convoluted or vague syntax?
Vocabulary/Diction	Why does the poet choose one word over another in each line? Do any of the words have multiple or archaic meanings that add meanings to the line?
Rhetorical Patterns	Look for statements that follow the same format.
Rhyme	Consider the significance of the end words joined by sound; in a poem with no rhymes, consider the importance of the end words.
Patterns of Sound	Alliteration and assonance create sound effects and often cluster significant words.
Visual Patterns	How does the poem look on the page? Is there a break after a word every time it appears?
Rhythm & Meter	Consider how rhythm and meter influence our perception of the speaker and language.