

Poetry Explication

Definition of genre

An explication is a close reading of a single poem or passage of poetry. The purpose of this exercise—originally a staple of French literary training from secondary school onward—is to talk about the meaning(s) of the poem primarily in terms of how the poem works—that is, through diction, stanza and line structure, meter, rhythm and imagery. X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia explain, “Not intent on ripping a poem to pieces, the author of a useful explication instead tries to show how each part contributes to the whole.”¹ A good explication requires some basic familiarity with the language of poetry.

An explication can either be an assignment unto itself or part of a larger assignment that asks for broader analysis and argument. For example, a ten-page paper on imagery of the sea in Derek Walcott’s poetry might contain explications of four or five poems as evidence for the essay’s claims. An explication on its own is a set of “microstatements” about the inner workings of the poem, typically giving equal weight to each word, line and stanza. You’ll still be formulating a strong argument in an explication, but your primary task is to let the text guide you to that argument rather than to come into the poem with a preconceived agenda.

Questions to ask

About the poem as a whole

- Who is the speaker?
- What is the structure of the poem? Two of the most important features to note here are **stanza** and **meter form**.
- Does the poem fall into an identifiable subgenre—for example, is it a sonnet, ballad, haiku, or dramatic monologue?
- What, primarily, is the poem about, and how do you know that?

About specific parts of the poem (stanzas, couplets, lines or even individual words)

- **Diction (word choice):** Why has the poet chosen these particular words? What words might she have used instead, and why were they rejected in favor of others?
- **Imagery:** What images does the poem evoke? How are they evoked? How has the poet placed them? How do different images connect or contrast with one another?

¹ X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, *An Introduction to Poetry*. 10th Ed. New York: Longman, 2002. p.609.

- **Literary devices:** What kind of figurative language is the poem using—for example, simile, metonymy, hyperbole, apostrophe, or conceit? What about symbolism or literary allusions?
- **Other aural and visual details:** What about punctuation? When read aloud, do the *sounds* of the words contribute to the poem’s meaning?

Actions to take

- Read the poem straight through once, then read it a second time with a pencil in hand. Your explication should follow the structure of the poem itself, starting with the first line and ending with the last.
- Make several general points about the poem’s structure and main purpose before you start discussing individual lines. This will save you the trouble of repeating yourself as you go through the text, and help you ensure that your explication is working to relate individual parts of the poem to the poem as a whole.
- Consider three key tasks as you explicate: first, to take the poem apart into its smallest units and study them on their own terms; second, to talk about how those units relate to each other; third, to make some connections between these smaller units and the poem in its entirety. You may find it useful to work on each of these tasks in this order—as a first, second and third draft of your explication—or it may be easier to put all these different levels of analysis together from the start.
- Remember that poetry explication is a focused type of textual analysis, but *that doesn’t mean you don’t have to formulate a thesis*. What is the poem doing and how is it doing it? These are the questions at hand; let your close reading guide you to the answers.

Helpful resources

Print sources

- **X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. *An Introduction to Poetry*, 10th Edition. New York: Longman 2002.** Includes extensive discussion of the various elements of poetry (chapter titles include “Words,” “Song,” “Figures of Speech” and “Rhythm”) as well as two chapters about writing a literary analysis and a glossary of literary terms. Pick this up if you want to look at some sample student essays.
- ***The Norton Introduction to Poetry*, 8th Edition. J. Paul Hunter, Ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2002.** Another classic resource, which follows a similar format as the Longman; the most noticeable difference between the two might be the poems they include.

Helpful links

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/weweb/handouts/poetry-explication.html>

An excellent overview from UNC’s Writing Center of what an explication is and how to approach a poem with this task in mind; longer and more comprehensive than the Texas site. Includes an explanation of some key literary terms (though not an exhaustive resource for this; print guides will cover this information much more extensively).

<http://uwc.tamu.edu/handouts/writing/poetry.html>

Texas A & M's useful list of questions to get you started with any explication.

<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/ReadingPoetry.html>

Another useful introduction to how to read a poem analytically, from the University of Wisconsin.

<http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl>

(NB: The Oxford English Dictionary is available through the Duke University library website; if you are off site, you will need to log in through a proxy server.)

Word meanings change over time: OED is especially useful for early English poetry, but can also be a good resource for investigating the wide range of possible meanings from which contemporary poets may be drawing when choosing their diction.