

## THE EXPLICATION OF A POEM

An explication of a poem is a full-fledged analysis of the poem with the aim of arriving at the total meaning of the poem. The 'total meaning' is made up of many elements: the obvious sense of the words, the structure, the sounds, figures of speech, rhetorical devices, and the like. These elements are isolated for the purpose of analysis, but the critic must also relate them to each other and show how they work together to make the complex that is the poem. After critics have finished dissecting, they put the whole thing back together.

There is no single method of explication and no single best order for discussing the various elements. The following method and order are reasonable and will serve as a guide. Usually one ought to start with a statement which gives basic information: title and author of poem, its kind (lyric or narrative), possibly the date of composition, and briefly what the poem is about.

1. **Prose Statement.** What is the "prose sense" of the poem, the central idea expressed in a prose statement? If the poem is a narrative, this means a prose summary of the action. Make this prose statement concise; ordinarily it should be no more than two or three sentences.
2. **Theme.** What is the theme, that is, the universal idea behind the particular statement? (Example: "Portrait," by e.e. cummings. The subject of the poem is the death of Buffalo Bill; a theme is that death claims all men, however glamorous.) The theme in good poetry is often suggested or implied; it is never merely asserted and versified. This theme is never directly stated, although it underlies the particulars which illustrate it. Not all poems have a theme; most have more than one, but an interpretation need focus on only one.
3. **Tone.** The tone is the writer's attitude toward this subject, his audience. Is the tone appropriate? How is it indicated by the diction? the meter? the rhyme? the rhythm? the stanza form? the choice of incident and imagery? the conventions? the overall pattern? What is the dramatic framework? Is the tone complex, or is there a combination of tones? Does the tone shift in the poem?
4. **Diction.** How appropriate is the diction for the subject? the theme? the tone? Is it formal, learned, homely, colloquial, a mixture? What about imagery? Is the whole poem one image? What is it? Do its various parts present separate images? What are they and how are they related? To what effect are images evoked? Is the diction concrete? abstract? Can the figurative images be translated into literal terms? What specific ideas do they embody? Are the images as a whole vivid? suggestive? What are the sources of the imagery; the poet's learning experience, the works of other poets, Nature, etc.? Does the poet rely largely on imagery or on general statement?
5. **Technical Judgments:**
  - a. **Form.** What is the form of the poem: ballad? dramatic monologue? ode? Is the form suitable for the subject and theme and tone? What is the stanza pattern? Is it appropriate? Inappropriate? neutral? Does the poem have unity and coherence?
  - b. **Structure.** Into what divisions of action or idea or mood is the poem divided? If it is a narrative poem, is it developed by scenes? What is the climax? Is the movement slow? rapid? Does it shift during the poem?
  - c. **Rhythm or meter.** Is it suitable to subject and theme? What is its relative importance to the poem as a whole? What metrical variations contribute to the effect?

- d. Rhyme. What is the rhyme scheme? What is the importance and effect of the rhyme? (This includes absence of rhyme, as in blank verse and free verse.)
  - e. Sound patterns. What other sound patterns contribute to the effect? What about alliteration? assonance? onomatopoeia? Are these devices used too obviously?
  - f. Figures of speech. What figures of speech are used and to what effect? Common figures of speech in poetry are simile, metaphor, personification, apostrophe, hyperbole.
  - g. Rhetorical devices. What rhetorical devices are used and to what effect? Some common rhetorical devices in poetry are repetition (sometimes in a refrain), balance, antithesis, paradox, irony.
  - h. Symbolism. Are there any symbols in the poem? What are they and how are they used? Are they familiar symbols, or more or less private to the poet? Are they used obviously or subtly? Does any obscurity result from the use of symbols? Is this offset by benefits, such as increased concentration, rich associations, a heightened emotional effect?
6. Intention or purpose. What do you determine to be the intention of the poet, judged from the above analysis? What is the purpose of the poem? This intention is perhaps usually conscious and explicit. It may, however, be unconscious and implicit. Use discretion in trying to determine the intention; some critics maintain that a reader may not presume to know a poet's intentions; that those who try are guilty of the "intentional fallacy."
  7. Flaws. What flaws are there in the poem, judging it from the poet's own intention and the standards it sets up for itself, which interfere with its complete effectiveness? What is the relative importance of these flaws?
  8. Biographical and historical information. Are any historical facts and biographical facts needed to explain the poem? Would these modify one's judgment of it? What about background? sources? personal experience? prevailing literary tastes and conventions? Is the poem completely free of these, standing on its own feet without reference to its "environment"?
  9. Extraneous factors. Are there any extraneous factors that, possibly, interfere with your judgment of the poem? That is, do you have any specific prejudices, specific enthusiasms? Are you inclined to be cynical? sentimental? hyper-critical? Are you annoyed by the restrictions of form? by the "undisciplined" quality of free verse?
  10. Final judgment. What is your final, reasoned, critical judgment of the poem as a whole?
- Note: An explication has value only if it is specific and detailed. Always support your judgments and generalizations by references to specific passages, lines, phrases, words in the poem, either quoted or designated by line numbers. Avoid, however, using so many quotes that your paper becomes a series of quotations strung together by transition sentences. At all times keep the reader's attention focused on your evaluation of the poem. The meaning of a poem can often be illuminated by appropriate reference to other poems by the same author or other authors.
- For an extended discussion, with numerous illustrations, of the explicating of poems, see Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry* (New York, 1950).

Adapted from materials developed by  
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