

Poetry Explications

What this handout is about

A poetry explication is a relatively short analysis that describes the possible meanings and relationships of the words, images, and other small units that make up a poem. Writing an explication is an effective way for a reader to connect a poem's plot and conflicts with its structural features. This handout reviews some of the important techniques of approaching and writing a poetry explication, and includes parts of two sample explications.

Preparing to write the explication

1. Read the poem silently, and then read it aloud (if not in a testing situation). Repeat as necessary.
2. Consider the poem as a dramatic situation in which a speaker addresses an audience or another character. In this way, begin your analysis by identifying and describing the speaking voice or voices, the conflicts or ideas, and the language used in the poem.

The large issues

Determine the basic design of the poem by considering the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why* of the dramatic situation.

- What is being dramatized? What conflicts or themes does the poem present, address, or question?
- Who is the speaker? Define and describe the speaker and his/her voice. What does the speaker say? Who is the audience? Are other characters involved?
- What happens in the poem? Consider the plot or basic design of the action. How are the dramatized conflicts or themes introduced, sustained, resolved, etc.?
- When does the action occur? What is the date and/or time of day?
- Where is the speaker? Describe the physical location of the dramatic moment.
- Why does the speaker feel compelled to speak at this moment? What is his/her motivation?

The details

To analyze the design of the poem, we must focus on the poem's parts, namely how the poem dramatizes conflicts or ideas in language. By concentrating on the parts, we develop our understanding of the poem's structure, and we gather support and evidence for our interpretations. Some of the details we should consider include the following:

- 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: Why does the poet choose one word over another in each line? Do any of the words have multiple or archaic meanings that add other meanings to the line? Use the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a resource.

The patterns

As you analyze the design line by line, look for certain patterns to develop which provide insight into the dramatic situation, the speaker’s state of mind, or the poet’s use of details. Some of the most common patterns include the following:

- 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?
- Rhythm and Meter: Consider how rhythm and meter influence our perception of the speaker and his/her language.

Basic terms for talking about meter

Meter (from the Greek *metron*, meaning measure) refers principally to the recurrence of regular beats in a poetic line. In this way, **meter** pertains to the structure of the poem as it is written.

The most common form of meter in English verse since the 14th century is *accentual-syllabic meter*, in which the basic unit is the **foot**. A foot is a combination of two or three stressed and/or unstressed syllables. The following are the four most common metrical feet in English poetry:

(1) **IAMBIC** (the noun is “iamb”): an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, a pattern which comes closest to approximating the natural rhythm of speech. Note line 23 from Shelley’s “Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples”:

U / U / U / U /
 And walked | with in | ward glory crowned

(2) **TROCHAIC** (the noun is “trochee”): a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable, as in the first line of Blake’s “Introduction” to *Songs of Innocence*:

/ U / U / U /
 Piping | down the | valleys | wild

(3) **ANAPESTIC** (the noun is “anapest”): two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable, as in the opening to Byron’s “The Destruction of Sennacherib”:

U U / U U / U U /
 The Assy | rian came down | like the wolf | on the fold

(4) **DACTYLIC** (the noun is “dactyl”): a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables, as in Thomas Hardy’s “The Voice”:

/ U U / U U / U U /
 Woman much | missed, how you | call to me, | call to me

Meter also refers to the number of feet in a line:

Monometer one
Dimeter two
Trimeter three
Tetrameter four
Pentameter five
Hexameter six

Any number above six (hexameter) is heard as a combination of smaller parts; for example, what we might call heptameter (seven feet in a line) is indistinguishable (aurally) from successive lines of tetrameter and trimeter (4-3).

To **scan** a line is to determine its metrical pattern. Perhaps the best way to begin scanning a line is to mark the natural stresses on the polysyllabic words. Take Shelley's line:

And walked with inward glory crowned.

Then mark the monosyllabic nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs that are normally stressed:

/ U / U

And walked with inward glory crowned

Then fill in the rest:

/ / U / U /

And walked with inward glory crowned

U / U / U / U /

And walked with inward glory crowned

Then divide the line into feet:

U / U / U / U /

And walked | with in | ward glory | crowned

Then note the sequence:

iamb | iamb | iamb | iamb

The line consists of four iambs; therefore, we identify the line as **iambic tetrameter**.

I got rhythm

Rhythm refers particularly to the way a line is voiced, i.e., how one speaks the line. Often, when a reader reads a line of verse, choices of stress and no stress may need to be made. For example, the first line of Keats' "Ode on Melancholy" presents the reader with a problem:

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist

If we determine the regular pattern of beats (the **meter**) of this line, we will most likely identify the line as **iambic pentameter**. If we read the line this way, the statement takes on a musing, somewhat disinterested tone. However, because the first five words are monosyllabic, we may choose to read the line differently. In fact, we may be tempted, especially when reading aloud, to stress the first two syllables equally, making the opening an emphatic, directive statement. Note that monosyllabic words allow the meaning of the line to vary according to which words we choose to stress when reading (i.e., the choice of rhythm we make).

The first line of Milton's *Paradise Lost* presents a different type of problem.

Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit

Again, this line is predominantly iambic, but a problem occurs with the word *Disobedience*. If we read strictly by the meter, then we must fuse the last two syllables of the word. However, if we read the word normally, we have a breakage in the line's metrical structure. In this way, the poet forges a tension between meter and rhythm: does the word remain contained by the structure, or do *we choose* to stretch the word out of the normal foot, *thereby disobeying the structure in which it was made*? Such tension adds meaning to the poem by using meter and rhythm to dramatize certain conflicts. In this example, Milton forges such a tension to present immediately the essential conflicts that lead to the fall of Adam and Eve.

Writing the explication

The explication should follow the same format as the preparation: begin with the large issues and basic design of the poem and work through each line to the more specific details and patterns.

The first paragraph

The first paragraph should present the large issues; it should inform the reader which conflicts are dramatized and should describe the dramatic situation of the speaker. The explication does not require a formal introductory paragraph; the writer should simply start explicating immediately. According to UNC's Professor William Harmon, the foolproof way to begin any explication is with the following sentence: "This poem dramatizes the conflict between ..." Such a beginning ensures that you will introduce the major conflict or theme in the poem and organize your explication accordingly.

Here is an example. A student's explication of Wordsworth's "Composed upon Westminster Bridge" might begin in the following way:

This poem dramatizes the conflict between appearance and reality, particularly as this conflict relates to what the speaker seems to say and what he really says. From Westminster Bridge, the speaker looks at London at sunrise, and he explains that all people should be struck by such a beautiful scene. The speaker notes that the city is silent, and he points to several specific objects, naming them only in general terms: "Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples" (6). After describing the "glittering" aspect of these objects, he asserts that these city places are just as beautiful in the morning as country places like "valley, rock, or hill" (8,10). Finally, after describing his deep feeling of calmness, the speaker notes how the "houses seem asleep" and that "all that mighty heart is lying still" (13, 14). In this way, the speaker seems to say simply that London looks beautiful in the morning.

The next paragraphs

The next paragraphs should expand the discussion of the conflict by focusing on details of form, rhetoric, syntax, and vocabulary. In these paragraphs, the writer should explain the poem line by line in terms of these details, and he or she should incorporate important elements of rhyme, rhythm, and meter during this discussion.

The student's explication continues with a topic sentence that directs the discussion of the first five lines:

However, the poem begins with several oddities that suggest the speaker is saying more than what he seems to say initially. For example, the poem is an Italian sonnet and follows the abbaabbacdedcd rhyme scheme. The fact that the poet chooses to write a sonnet about London in an Italian form suggests that what he says may not be actually praising the city. Also, the rhetoric of the first two lines seems awkward compared to a normal speaking voice: "Earth has not anything to show more fair. / Dull would he be of soul who could pass by" (1-2). The odd syntax continues when the poet personifies the city: "This City now doth, like a garment, wear / The beauty of the morning" (4-5). Here, the city wears the morning's beauty, so it is not the city but the morning that is beautiful ...

The conclusion

The explication has no formal concluding paragraph; do not simply restate the main points of the introduction! The end of the explication should focus on sound effects or visual patterns as the final element of asserting an explanation. Or, as does the undergraduate here, the writer may choose simply to stop writing when he or she reaches the end of the poem:

The poem ends with a vague statement: "And all that mighty heart is lying still!" In this line, the city's heart could be dead, or it could be simply deceiving the one observing the scene. In this way, the poet reinforces the conflict between the appearance of the city in the morning and what such a scene and his words actually reveal.

Tips to keep in mind

Refer to the speaking voice in the poem as the speaker" or "the poet." For example, do not write, "In this poem, Wordsworth says that London is beautiful in the morning." However, you can write, "In this poem, Wordsworth presents a speaker who..." We cannot absolutely identify Wordsworth with the speaker of the poem, so it is more accurate to talk about "the speaker" or "the poet" in an explication.

Use the present tense when writing the explication. The poem, as a work of literature, continues to exist!

To avoid unnecessary uses of the verb "to be" in your compositions, the following list suggests some verbs you can use when writing the explication:

dramatizes	asserts	contrasts	addresses
presents	posits	juxtaposes	emphasizes
illustrates	enacts	suggests	stresses
characterizes	connects	implies	accentuates
underlines	portrays	shows	enables

An example of an explication written for a timed exam

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The Fountain

Fountain, fountain, what do you say
Singing at night alone?
“It is enough to rise and fall
Here in my basin of stone.”

But are you content as you seem to be
So near the freedom and rush of the sea?
“I have listened all night to its laboring sound,
It heaves and sags, as the moon runs round;
Ocean and fountain, shadow and tree,
Nothing escapes, nothing is free.”

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—Sara Teasdale (American, 1884-1933)

As a direct address to an inanimate object “The Fountain” presents three main conflicts concerning the appearance to the observer and the reality in the poem. First, since the speaker addresses an object usually considered voiceless, the reader may abandon his/her normal perception of the fountain and enter the poet’s imaginative address. Secondly, the speaker not only addresses the fountain but asserts that it speaks and sings, personifying the object with vocal abilities. These acts imply that, not only can the fountain speak in a musical form, but the fountain also has the ability to present some particular meaning (“what do you say” (1)). Finally, the poet gives the fountain a voice to say that its perpetual motion (rising and falling) is “enough” to maintain its sense of existence. This final personification fully dramatizes the conflict between the fountain’s appearance and the poem’s statement of reality by giving the object intelligence and voice.

The first strophe, four lines of alternating 4- and 3-foot lines, takes the form of a ballad stanza. In this way, the poem begins by suggesting that it will be story that will perhaps teach a certain lesson. The opening trochees and repetition stress the address to the fountain, and the iamb which ends line 1 and the trochee that begins line 2 stress the actions of the fountain itself. The response of the fountain illustrates its own rise and fall in the iambic line 3, and the rhyme of “alone” and “stone” emphasizes that the fountain is really a physical object, even though it can speak in this poem.

The second strophe expands the conflicts as the speaker questions the fountain. The first couplet connects the rhyming words “be” and “sea” these connections stress the question, “Is the fountain content when it exists so close to a large, open body of water like the ocean?” The fountain responds to the tempting “rush of the sea” with much wisdom (6). The fountain’s reply posits the sea as “laboring” versus the speaker’s assertion of its freedom; the sea becomes characterized by heavily accented “heaves and sags” and not open rushing (7, 8). In this way, the fountain suggests that the sea’s waters may be described in images of labor, work, and fatigue; governed by the moon, these waters are not

free at all. The “as” of line 8 becomes a key word, illustrating that the sea’s waters are not free but commanded by the moon, which is itself governed by gravity in its orbit around Earth. Since the moon, an object far away in the heavens, controls the ocean, the sea cannot be free as the speaker asserts.

The poet reveals the fountain’s intelligence in rhyming couplets which present closed-in, epigrammatic statements. These couplets draw attention to the contained nature of the all objects in the poem, and they draw attention to the final line’s lesson. This last line works on several levels to address the poem’s conflicts. First, the line refers to the fountain itself; in this final rhymed couplet is the illustration of the water’s perpetual motion in the fountain, its continually recycled movement rising and falling. Second, the line refers to the ocean; in this respect the water cannot escape its boundary or control its own motions. The ocean itself is trapped between landmasses and is controlled by a distant object’s gravitational pull. Finally, the line addresses the speaker, leaving him/her with an overriding sense of fate and fallacy. The fallacy here is that the fountain presents this wisdom of reality to defy the speaker’s original idea that the fountain and the ocean appear to be trapped and free. Also, the direct statement of the last line certainly addresses the human speaker as well as the human reader. This statement implies that we are all trapped or controlled by some remote object or entity. At the same time, the assertion that “Nothing escapes” reflects the limitations of life in the world and the death that no person can escape. Our own thoughts are restricted by our mortality as well as by our limits of relying on appearances. By personifying a voiceless object, the poem presents a different perception of reality, placing the reader in the same position of the speaker and inviting the reader to question the conflict between appearance and reality, between what we see and what we can know.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT:

The writer observes and presents many of the most salient points of the short poem, but she could indeed organize the explication more coherently. To improve this explication, the writer could focus more on the speaker’s state of mind. In this way, the writer could explore the implications of the dramatic situation even further: why does the speaker ask a question of a mute object? With this line of thought, the writer could also examine more closely the speaker’s movement from perplexity (I am trapped but the waters are free) to a kind of resolution (the fountain and the sea are as trapped as I am). Finally, the writer could include a more detailed consideration of rhythm, meter, and rhyme.