

## **EXPLICATION**

The word "explication," meaning roughly "explanation," derives from a Latin word meaning "to unfold" or "to spread out." Thus, in the explication of a poem, the outside of the poem (the literal meanings of words and literal images) is unfolded or spread out to reveal the inside of the poem (the connotative meanings of words and the associative possibilities of images). By stating specifically what is only suggested, the explication explains how the poem works, revealing meanings that are not readily apparent on a casual reading.

Your explication should display an orderly progression—proceeding line by line and stanza by stanza—and should provide commentary revealing both the physical, external structure (the stanzaic configuration, 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. Be careful, however, not to do this in a mechanical, lockstep manner. That is, try to 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 will probably be helpful for your readers to have a copy of the text of the poem before them as they read the explication. You ought, therefore, to quote the poem somewhere in the explication—either the entire poem at the outset or each chunk of the poem as you deal with it.

And remember: "Explication" is only a general term. You are not bound to follow a set of rigid rules, and approaches may vary. It is your job, however, to open up and unfold the hard shell or wrapping of the poem so that others can get at the treasure within.

### **Examples of Explication**

#### **Example 1**

The following is one model for an explication. (From: Gordon, Edward. Writing About Imaginative Literature. New York: Harcourt, 1973. 94, 96.) It is set up in a standard essay form—having an introduction with a clear thesis statement, a body, and a conclusion that ties everything together.

#### Base Details

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,  
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the base,  
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.  
You'd see me with my puffy, petulant face,  
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,  
Reading the Roll of Honor. "Poor young chap,"

I'd say—"I used to know his father well;  
Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap."  
And when the war is done and youth stone dead,  
I'd toddle safely home and die—in bed.  
—Siegfried Sassoon

### The Diction of "Base Details"

Old men make and run wars; young men fight and die in them. In "Base Details," Siegfried Sassoon reveals through his diction a bitterness toward the fact that young men die in wars while the officers live safely behind the lines. The speaker in the poem is an ordinary soldier talking about the majors at the army base. By pretending what he would do if he were an officer, he condemns war.

Through his choice of words, the soldier expresses an attitude of contempt for the officers behind the lines who "speed glum heroes up to the line of death" (3). He speaks with sarcasm of their fierceness and goes on to describe them as "bald, and short of breath" (1). If he were a major, he too would have a "puffy, petulant face / guzzling and gulping in the best hotel" (4-5). The connotations of these words suggest men who are overweight and out of shape from drinking and eating too much. The reference to "scarlet Majors" (2) recalls the red dress uniforms of British officers and the color of the blood.

The speaker then goes on to describe the attitude toward soldiers that is held by the officers. One speaks of losing many men in "this last scrap" (8). The understatement of that last word contrasts sharply with the mention in the same line of a heavy loss in battle. In the last two lines of the poem, further contrast is set up between "youth stone dead" (9) and the officer who will "toddle home and die—in bed" (10).

When the entire poem is read, the title becomes ambiguous. The apparent meaning refers to the details of a military base. But "base" can also mean low and contemptible. "Detail" also has two meanings. It can mean a detachment of men sent out on a particular mission—"speed glum heroes up to the line" (3)—but it can also mean a minor matter, as if sending people off to die is not important to the officers. So the apparent meaning that we see as we begin reading turns into a second meaning when we finish reading the poem.

The diction, then, makes a comment on the theme of the poem: old men who direct wars at a safe distance behind the lines seem to have little understanding of what it means to die in battle and appear on the "Roll of Honor" (6).

## Example 2

Here is another example of an explication. (From: Barnett, Sylvan, Morton, Berman, and William Burto, eds. Literature for Composition: Essays, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama. Boston: Scott, 1988. 730-32.) This one is set up as one long paragraph, with emphasis on one particular aspect of the poem.

The Balloon of the Mind  
Hands, do what you're bid:  
Bring the balloon of the mind  
That bellies and drags in the wind  
Into its narrow shed.

—William Butler Yeats

### W.B. Yeats's "The Balloon of the Mind"

Yeats's "Balloon of the Mind" is about the difficulty of getting one's floating thoughts ("the balloon of the mind") down to earth, that is, into lines on the page. The first line, a short, stern, heavily stressed command to the speaker's hands, implies by its severe or impatient tone that these hands will be disobedient or inept or careless if not watched closely: The poor bumbling body so often fails to achieve the goals of the mind. The bluntness of the command in the first line is emphasized by the fact that all of the subsequent lines have more syllables. Furthermore, the first line is a grammatically complete sentence, whereas the thought of line 2 spills over into the subsequent lines, implying the difficulty of fitting one's ideas into confining spaces, that is, of getting one's thoughts in order, especially into a coherent poem. Lines 2 and 3 amplify the metaphor already stated in the title (the product of the mind is an airy but unwieldy balloon), and they also contain a second command, "Bring." Alliteration ties this command to the earlier "bid"; it also ties both of these verbs to their object, "balloon," and to the verb that most effectively describes the balloon "bellies." In comparison with the peremptory first line of the poem, lines 2 and 3 themselves seem almost swollen, bellying and dragging, an effect aided by using adjacent, unstressed syllables ("of the," "bellies and," "in the") and by using an eye-rhyme ("mind" and "wind") rather than an exact rhyme. And then comes the short last line; almost before we could expect it, the cumbersome balloon—here, the idea that is to be packed into the last stanza—is successfully lodged in its "narrow shed." Aside from the relatively colorless "into," the only words of more than one syllable in the poem are "narrow," "balloon," and "bellies," and all three emphasize the difficulty of the task. But after "narrow,"—the word itself almost looks long and narrow, in this context like a hangar—we get the simplicity of the monosyllable "shed"; and the difficult job is done, the thought is safely packed away, the poem is completed—but again with an off-rhyme ("bid" and "shed"), for neatness can go only so far when hands and mind and a balloon are involved.