

How to Explicate a Poem

A good poem is like a puzzle--the most fascinating part is studying the individual pieces carefully and then putting them back together to see how beautifully the whole thing fits together. A poem can have a number of different "pieces" that you need to look at closely in order to complete the poetic "puzzle." This sheet explains one way to attempt an explication of a poem, by examining each "piece" of the poem separately. (An "explication" is simply an explanation of how all the elements in a poem work together to achieve the total meaning and effect.)

Examine the **situation** in the poem:

- Does the poem tell a story? Is it a narrative poem? If so, what events occur?
- Does the poem express an emotion or describe a mood?
- **Poetic voice:** Who is the speaker? Is the poet speaking to the reader directly or is the poem told through a fictional "persona"? To whom is he speaking? Can you trust the speaker?
- **Tone:** What is the speaker's attitude toward the subject of the poem? What sort of tone of voice seems to be appropriate for reading the poem out loud? What words, images, or ideas give you a clue to the tone?

Examine the **structure** of the poem:

- **Form:** Look at the number of lines, their length, their arrangement on the page. How does the form relate to the content? Is it a traditional form (e.g. sonnet, limerick) or "free form"? Why do you think the poem chose that form for his poem?
- **Movement:** How does the poem develop? Are the images and ideas developed chronologically, by cause and effect, by free association? Does the poem circle back to where it started, or is the movement from one attitude to a different attitude (e.g. from despair to hope)?
- **Syntax:** How many sentences are in the poem? Are the sentences simple or complicated? Are the verbs in front of the nouns instead of in the usual "noun, verb" order? Why?
- **Punctuation:** What kind of punctuation is in the poem? Does the punctuation always coincide with the end of a poetic line? If so, this is called an **end-stopped line**. If there is no punctuation at the end of a line and the thought continues into the next line, this is called **enjambment**. Is there any punctuation in the middle of a line? Why do you think the poet would want you to pause halfway through the line?
- **Title:** What does the title mean? How does it relate to the poem itself?

Examine the **language** of the poem:

- **Diction** or Word Choice: Is the language colloquial, formal, simple, unusual? Do you know what all the words mean? If not, look them up.
- What **moods** or attitudes are associated with words that stand out for you? Has the poem created a change in mood for you—or a change in attitude? How have the technical elements helped the poet create this effect?
- **Allusions:** Are there any allusions (references) to something outside the poem, such as events or people from history, mythology, or religion?
- **Imagery:** Look at the figurative language of the poem--metaphors, similes, analogies, personification. How do these images add to the meaning of the poem or intensify the effect of the poem?

Examine the **musical devices** in the poem:

- **Rhyme scheme:** Does the rhyme occur in a regular pattern, or irregularly? Is the effect formal, satisfying, musical, funny, disconcerting?
- **Rhythm or meter:** In most languages, there is a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a word or words in a sentence. In poetry, the variation of stressed and unstressed syllables and words has a rhythmic effect. What is the tonal effect of the rhythm here?
- **Other "sound effects": alliteration, assonance, consonance repetition.** What tonal effect do they have here?

REMEMBER to use **DIDLS**—diction, imagery, details, language, syntax!