

Explication

An explication is a close, word by word and sentence by sentence commentary on a literary work. Its aim is to bring out the full meaning and texture of the passage by calling attention to the nuances of words, the rhythms of sentences, the patterns of imagery (including possible symbolic overtones), the atmosphere, the development of contrasts or parallels, the narrative point of view, the characterization, or any other significant element. When it deals with a passage within a long poem or novel, an explication may indicate how the passage contributes to the work as a whole, but its primary focus is on the internal qualities of the passage itself. An explication does not deal with the author's life or the historical background. It is not merely a paraphrase of the passage, although it may include paraphrase. Instead, it makes *explicit* what is *implicit*.

The difference between explication and analysis is that analysis explores one selected element of a whole work, while explication limits itself to one short poem or one passage in a longer work and comments on everything in it. A good explication immerses the reader in the poem or passage. Literally, the word **explication means unfolding**; explications are particularly helpful for passages of literature which carry rich implications beneath their surface meaning.

Because you are commenting on everything, resist the temptation to set yourself too long a passage. Prepare for writing your explication by taking a copy of the passage and making marginal notes; as you read closely, you will probably find more and more to say.

Your thesis statement will be a summary of your overall sense of the poem or passage, and you will probably proceed a line or sentence at a time. Divide the paragraphs of your explication according to the natural subdivisions of the passage. Transitions like "In the next line . . ." "In the second stanza . . ." will sometimes be necessary, but try to avoid mechanical repetition.

For examples, see

- 840.8.2 – *Explication of a Passage of Fiction* OR
- 840.9.1 – *Sample Explication of Poem*