

How to Explicate a Poem

*special thanks to
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An Explication is . . .

an explanation of how all the elements in a poem work together to achieve the total meaning and effect

A Poem is a Puzzle

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."

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? Is it lyric?
- 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? How does the punctuation contribute to conveying the poet's ideas or emotions?
- **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?
- **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** of 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?