**Poetry Explication Assignment**

*Definition of the genre*

An explication is a close reading of a single poem or passage of poetry. The purpose of this exercise—originally a staple of French literary training from secondary school onward—is to talk about the meaning(s) of the poem primarily in terms of how the poem works—that is, through diction, stanza and line structure, meter, rhythm and imagery. X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia explain, “Not intent on ripping a poem to pieces, the author of a useful explication instead tries to show how each part contributes to the whole.”1

A good explication requires some basic familiarity with the language of poetry. An explication can either be an assignment unto itself or part of a larger assignment that asks for broader analysis and argument. For example, a ten-page paper on imagery of the sea in Derek Walcott’s poetry might contain explications of four or five poems as evidence for the essay’s claims. An explication on its own is a set of “microstatements” about the inner workings of the poem, typically giving equal weight to each word, line and stanza. You’ll still be formulating a strong argument in an explication, but your primary task is to let the text guide you to that argument rather than to come into the poem with a preconceived agenda.

***Questions to ask:***

*About the poem as a whole:*

• Who is the speaker?

• What is the structure of the poem? Two of the most important features to note here are stanza and meter form.

• Does the poem fall into an identifiable subgenre—for example; is it a sonnet, ballad, haiku, or dramatic monologue?

• What, primarily, is the poem about, and how do you know that?

*About specific parts of the poem (stanzas, couplets, lines or even individual words):*

• Diction (word choice): Why has the poet chosen these particular words? What words might she have used instead, and why were they rejected in favor of others?

• Imagery: What images does the poem evoke? How are they evoked? How has the poet placed them? How do different images connect or contrast with one another?

• Literary devices: What kind of figurative language is the poem using—for example, simile, metonymy, hyperbole, apostrophe, or conceit? What about symbolism or literary allusions?

• Other aural and visual details: What about punctuation? When read aloud, do the sounds of the words contribute to the poem’s meaning?

*Actions to take:*

• Read the poem straight through once, then read it a second time with a pencil in hand. Your explication should follow the structure of the poem itself, starting with the first line and ending with the last.

• Make several general points about the poem’s structure and main purpose before you start discussing individual lines. This will save you the trouble of repeating yourself as you go through the text, and help you ensure that your explication is working to relate individual parts of the poem to the poem as a whole.

• Consider three key tasks as you explicate: *first*, to take the poem apart into its smallest units and study them on their own terms; *second*, to talk about how those units relate to each other; *third*, to make some connections between these smaller units and the poem in its entirety. You may find it useful to work on each of these tasks in this order—as a first, second and third draft of your explication—or it may be easier to put all these different levels of analysis together from the start.

• ***Remember that poetry explication is a focused type of textual analysis, but that doesn’t mean you don’t have to formulate a thesis. What is the poem doing and how is it doing it? These are the questions at hand; let your close reading guide you to the answers.***

Your task:

Using the poem that your team taught to the class, create and compose an explication of the poem’s content and meaning. Use all of the skills you already have used in past poem analysis (the TPCASTT will be especially useful for you). Hint: very often Form = Function

Requirements:

* 400-500 words (1.5-2 pages)
* Essay must have a thesis (What is the poem’s argument and how does the poet accomplish that?).
* Must include a copy of the poem (no to be included in the essay’s word count)
* Typed and in MLA format (including Heading, Header, Word Count, etc.)
* Uploaded to Turnitin.com by 11:59 pm on Tuesday, December 22.
* PLEASE NOTE: **I will not be accepting any late papers.** If Turnitin is acting up, then you must email me an attachment (NOT copy/pasted into the body of the email).

**williams.ck@easthartford.org**

**www.thatenglishteacher.com**

**If you spend some time exploring my website (in particular, the AP Lit home page), you will find my website has a plethora of poetry resources. Students interested in earning a higher score may want to explore these pages.**

**Here is an example of an explication**.   
Below is a short poem by Robert Frost and an explication based upon its content.

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| --- |
| **The Road Not Taken**  Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, And sorry I could not travel both And be one traveler, long I stood And looked down one as far as I could To where it bent in the undergrowth;  Then took the other, as just as fair, And having perhaps the better claim, Because it was grassy and wanted wear; Though as for that the passing there 1Had worn them really about the same,  And both that morning equally lay In leaves no step had trodden black. Oh, I kept the first for another day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back.  I shall be telling this with a sigh Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-- I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference. |

**Explication of "The Road Not Taken."**

The poem titled "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost is about a man reflecting on a choice he once made. While the outcome of this choice is not implied to be positive or negative the speaker notes that the choice in itself and the consequences of that choice have made a huge difference in the way his life has unfolded.  
       The poem is about the importance of choices. The poem begins with the speaker regretting that he could not have been two people so he could have at some point in his life taken two roads instead of being confined to one. He looked as far as he could to see what was ahead on one of the roads he could have taken, but he was limited to seeing only as far as where it turned and disappeared in the bushes. In the second stanza he says he took the other road because it was grassy and was possibly better because it was less traveled, though not much more than the other road. The third stanza says both roads were covered in leaves that had been walked on infrequently, to the extent that the leaves covering them had not been made black from tramping feet. He also says he continued on the road he chose, and because he knew that one thing leads to another ("way leads on to way") he doubted he would ever return to this part of the road. Finally, he says he will tell the story when he is much older ("Somewhere ages and ages hence") that he had the choice of taking one road over another, and having taken the one he did made a big difference in his life.  
        Adding to development of the theme is the element of color. It is a yellow wood, not green, which suggests the fall season when leaves turn colors. Seasons are frequently associated with periods in people's lives, such as spring for youth, and autumn for late middle age. So this is the "fall" of his life, or possibly around middle age. Therefore, he is a speaker who has had enough experiences to realize how important some decisions can be and that he must live with the consequences. The speaker also notes the leaves are not "trodden black" which would represent heavy traffic.  
        However, the most crucial trait related to the theme is the metaphorical language where Frost compares roads to optional courses people can take in their lives. By the speaker regretting he could take only one "road," it means he does not have the chance to take several directions in life at one time to see how each will work out, since he cannot look ahead to see where each choice might lead ("undergrowth": or our inability to foretell the future), or where the next choices in each of those "roads" would also lead. He must choose one and see where it will lead and what other choices will follow on that road. One thing the speaker knows is the choice is not to be taken lightly because it could, as he realizes while he reflects, be the difference between two very different life experiences ("And that has made all the difference").   
        Frost's use of metaphor is effective in him presenting his theme. Even if readers did not know that "road" was being used metaphorically, they would still know the poem is about a man making a choice. Using the idea of roads is something we can relate to because we have probably all come to two roads, literally, and have been uncertain about which way to turn. Sometimes we have turned and found that it was the wrong way and that has cost us time, made us late, or lead us somewhere we did not want to go. We can see in some way how even relatively insignificant decisions alter our lives, at least a temporarily.  
        "The Road Not Taken" is a pleasant and thought-inspiring poem. It is pleasant because Frost keeps the tone and mood light though it is about a very serious subject. Though it is subtly reminiscent, it still makes a strong point. Reading it can also make one think more consciously about future decisions and their potential consequences. Reading this poem was like taking a little side road. It can make a difference.  
        Frost uses a common experience to which we can all relate -- making a choice at the junction of two roads -- in order to show that a decision will lead us in one direction, and making the choice to go in that direction can make a profound difference in our lives.

**Things to note in the sample explication:**

1. It generally follows general organization rules. It includes an introduction and a conclusion.
2. The introduction includes the **thesis statement**.
3. Each paragraph has a **topic sentence** that expresses the main idea of the paragraph.
4. The conclusion summarizes the main points of the explication.
5. **Transitions** are used to show the relationship between ideas and help lead the reader smoothly from one idea to the next.
6. Each element is **explained** and **lines or examples** from the poem are given for clarification.
7. It demonstrates understanding beyond the obvious or literal.
8. It's detailed. Yours may not always be so long; it depends on the nature of the poem being used.