

## Essay 2: Poem Explication, spring 2016, Prof. Scanlan

**On Explication:** To “explicate” means, according to the Latin root, to unfold. An explication is a close reading of a single poem or a close reading of one passage of a longer poem. In this essay, you are to examine one poem from *101 Great American Poems* and carefully and persistently pay attention to small units of meaning, such as the connotation and denotation of the words, the patterns of imagery, the meaningfulness of rhythms, the symbols, and metaphors—in order to show how the poem works to generate meaning. The poets X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia explain that the purpose of explication is not to rip a “poem to pieces,” instead the best explications “show how each part contributes to the whole.”

In writing an explication, you will need to consider some of the following eight poetry characteristics, but you will not be able to cover everything. Chose only those characteristics of the poem that seem important to you:

1. How does the poem make you feel? Shocked, saddened, angered, annoyed, happy, romantic? What generates these feelings? (feelings/emotion)
2. Who is the speaker? What do you know about him or her? What tone do they use? (speaker)
3. What is the setting? (setting/situation/context)
4. What happens in the poem? Some poems are lyrics, while others are narrative. A lyric poem suggests a mood or emotion, while narrative poems tell a story. (plot)
5. How does the poet use language? Metaphors, symbols, and personification are key terms for poetry; these three terms are types of figurative language. (figurative language)
6. Does the poem rhyme? Does it have interesting sounds? Is it musical or fragmented? (sound/rhythm)
7. What is the form or structure of the poem? How does it use couplets, line length, stanzas, etc? (form/structure)
8. What themes or subjects are present in the poem? For example, does the poem include references to death or love or nature? (themes/subjects)

• **Consider three key tasks as you explicate:** first, break the poem down into its smallest units and study them on their own terms; second, describe how those units relate to each other; third, make some connections between these smaller units and the poem’s central meaning(s). 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.

• **Tips to Keep in Mind:** Don’t forget to write a clear thesis statement; does the poem have a lot of images? Then focus on them. Does the poem have a lot of characters? Then focus on them. What key poetry terms are you going to use? Quote from the poem to prove your points.

• **Poetry Terms:** it is important to use specific terms when applicable. Metaphor, symbol, personification, enjambment, irony, image, allusion, denotation, connotation, assonance, alliteration.

• **Helpful Sites:**

- This explanation of poetic imagery from Purdue OWL is particularly helpful: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/617/02/>
- From the University of Wisconsin: <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/ReadingPoetry.html>

**Grading Rubric:**

1. Title, Introduction, Thesis, Summary of poem (25%)
2. Use of poetry terms, knowledge of poem (25%)
3. Paragraphs, Word Choices, Grammar (25%)
4. Quotations (5 minimum), Conclusion, Works Cited (25%)

**Page length:** 750 words (3-4 pages), typed, using standard margins and font. Use my format.

**Due Dates:** March 29, First Draft of essay due for peer review  
March 31, Final Draft of essay due