**Essay 1: Poem Explication, fall 2012, 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 passage of poetry. In this essay, you are to examine one poem of your choice and carefully and persistently pay attention to small units of meaning, such as the words, the patterns of imagery, the meaningfulness of rhythms, the suggestiveness and power of the sounds—trying to show how the poem works. In all your later writings on other sorts of literary texts, you will find that solid explication skills are truly valuable, forming the basis of concrete, exciting, and intelligent work. The poets X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia explain that the purpose of explication is not to rip a “poem to pieces, the author of a useful explication instead tries to 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 those characteristics of the poem that seem important to you:

1. How does the poem make you feel? Shocked, saddened, angered, annoyed, happy, romantic? (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, take the poem apart into its smallest units and study them on their own terms; second, talk about how those units relate to each other; third, 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 that looks like an argument. Your thesis could be something as simple as: What is this poem doing with allusion, metaphor, and line breaks? and how is it doing it?

Helpful sites for further information on explication and writing about poetry:

From the University of North Carolina: <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/poetry-explication.html>

From the University of Wisconsin: <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/ReadingPoetry.html>

Details:

**Chose**: one poem from our readings

**Page length**: 3-4 pages, typed, using standard margins and font. Use MLA format. See me or the Purdue OWL website for details on formatting.

**Due Date**: October 10, 2012, at the beginning of class. Late papers will be penalized.