

Literary Term Warm-Up 1: **Explication de texte**

Source: Dr. Janice E. Patten, Department of English, San Jose State University, San Jose CA

An explication de texte (*cf. Latin explicare, to unfold, to fold out, or to make clear the meaning of*) is a finely detailed, very specific examination of a short poem or short selected passage from a longer work, in order to find the focus or design of the work, either in its entirety in the case of the shorter poem or, in the case of the selected passage, **the meaning of the microcosm, containing or signaling the meaning of the macrocosm** (the longer work of which it is a part).

12 Approaches, or steps, to dealing with *explication de texte*. In essence, the best way to handle close readings, multiple choice tests (AP Language, AP Literature, ACT, SAT, etc).

1. **Figurative Language.** Examine the passage carefully for similes, images, metaphors, and symbols. Identify any and all. List implications and suggested meanings as well as denotations. What visual insights does each word give? Look for multiple meanings and overlapping of meaning. Look for repetitions, for oppositions. Consider how each word or group of words suggests a pattern and/or points to an abstraction (e.g., time, space, love, soul, death). Can you visualize the metaphoric world? Are there spatial dimensions to the language?
2. **Diction.** This section is closely connected with the section above. Diction, with its emphasis on words, provides the **crux** of the explication. Mark all verbs in the passage, mark or list all nouns, all adjectives, all adverbs etc. Be careful to always check back to the text, keeping meaning contextually sound. Do not assume you know the depth or complexity of meaning at first glance. Can you see what the metaphoric words are suggesting?
3. **Literal content:** this should be done as succinctly as possible. Briefly describe the skeletal contents of the passage. Answer the journalist's questions (Who? What? When? Where? Why?) in order to establish character/s, plot, and setting as it relates to this passage. What is the context for this passage?
4. **Structure.** Divide the passage into the more obvious sections (stages of argument, discussion, or action). What is the interrelation of these units? How do they develop? Again, what can you postulate regarding a controlling design for the work at this point? If the work is a poem, identify the poetic structure and note the variations within that structure. Is this free verse or blank verse? What is the significance of such a form? Does the form contribute to the meaning?
5. **Style.** Look for any significant aspects of style—parallel constructions, antithesis, etc. Look for patterns, polarities, and problems. Periodic sentences, clause structures? Polysyndeton etc.? Look for alliteration, internal rhymes and other such poetic devices which are often used in prose as well as in poetry. A caesura? Enjambment? Anaphora? Polysyndeton? You need to look closely here for meanings that are connected to these rhyme schemes.
6. **Characterization.** What insight does this passage now give into specific characters as they develop through the work? Is there a persona in this passage? Any allusions to other literary characters? To other literary works that might suggest a perspective. Look for a pattern of metaphoric language to give added insight into their motives and feelings which are not verbalized
7. **Tone.** What is the tone of the passage? How does it elucidate the entire passage? Is the tone one of irony? Sentimental? Serious? Humorous? Ironic?
8. **Assessment.** This step is not to suggest a reduction; rather, an "close reading" or explication should enable you to *problematize* and expand your understanding of the text. Ask what insight the passage gives into the work as a whole. How does it relate to themes, ideas, larger actions in other parts of the work? Make sure that your hypothesis regarding the theme(s) of the work is contextually sound. What does it suggest as the polarity of the whole piece?
9. **Context:** If your text is part of a larger whole, make brief reference to its position in the whole
10. **Texture:** This is an examination of its structure, including features of grammar, syntax, diction, rhythm, and (for poems, and to some extent) prosody; its imagery, that is, all language which appeals to the senses; and its figuration, better known as similes, metaphors, and other verbal motifs.
11. **Theme:** A theme is not to be confused with thesis; the theme or more properly themes of a work of literature is its broadest, most pervasive concern, and it is contained in a complex combination of elements. In contrast to a thesis, which is usually expressed in a single, argumentative, declarative sentence and is characteristic of expository prose rather than creative literature, a theme is not a statement; rather, it often is expressed in a single word or a phrase, such as "love," "illusion versus reality," or "the tyranny of circumstance." Generally, the theme of a work is never "right" or "wrong." There can be virtually as many themes as there are readers, for essentially the concept of theme refers to the emotion and insight which results from the experience of reading a work of literature. As with many things, however, such an experience can be profound or trivial, coherent or giddy; and discussions of a work and its theme can be correspondingly worthwhile and convincing, or not. Everything depends on how well you present and support your ideas. Everything you say about the theme must be supported by the brief quotations from the text. Your argument and proof must be convincing. And that, finally, is what explication is about: **marshaling the elements of a work of literature in such a way as to be convincing**. Your approach must adhere to the elements of ideas, concepts, and language inherent in the work itself. Remember to avoid phrases and thinking which are expressed in the statement, "what I got out of it was. . . ."
12. **Thesis:** An explication should most definitely have a thesis statement. Do not try to write or conjure up your thesis until you have finished all 12 steps. The thesis should take the form, of course, of an assertion about the meaning and function of the text which is your subject.