

Week 10 Required Reading

Explicating Poems: A Step-by-Step Guide

The word “explicate” comes from the Latin root, meaning to “unfold.”

When we explicate a poem, we are literally unfolding the language in order to create an interpretation. That interpretation is drawn from a careful study of words, images, rhythms, and sound. From these elements, we discover the key pieces that, using the process of analysis, allow us to create an integral interpretation through the process of synthesis. Analysis and synthesis are two of the three highest levels of thinking a human being can do. They are essential to the development of a mind that thinks carefully and critically. In effect, reading poetry is one of the best ways to develop such a mind. Like all tasks that allow the mind to grow, it’s hard work and it takes time.

In order to begin the process of reading a poem, be sure to have the following tools at hand:

- A pen or pencil for marking up a text—if you don’t mark, you won’t understand;
- The text of the poem;
- A good dictionary—use a book or an online dictionary. If you don’t know the meaning of the words—including the second and third levels of meaning—you won’t be able to make sense of the poem.

Step #1

Read the poem. First read the poem silently, slowly and note words and phrases that draw your interest. These words or phrases may startle, confuse, or evoke an emotional response. That’s good. Now, read the poem aloud. **It is essential to read the poem aloud.** Read slowly and try to get a sense of the tone of the poem. Consider these questions:

- Does the poem have an angry, happy, resigned, frustrated, confused, or contemplative voice?

- As you read, try to state literally in a sentence or two what the poem is basically about. What is the subject of the poem?

Step #2

Try to explain who is speaking (the narrator) in the poem.

- Is it a person, an animal, or an inanimate object? A poet's imagination can travel anywhere and into anything, so don't assume that the speaker is always a person.
- Is the narrator reliable or unreliable? Sane or insane? Honest or insidious? Earnest or cynical? And so on.

Step #3

Now, consider the poem in terms of its smallest units—sounds, words, lines and stanzas. Don't try to make sense of the poem all at once. Begin marking key words or phrases—pay special attention images, especially metaphors.

Be sure to note the sounds, as certain letters have a quality that a poet may employ.

Here are some key categories of sound used to create meaning:

Sibilants: /s/ sh/ sch/ch/. Such sounds can indicate something soft, hissing or insidious, or sinister (think snake).

Plosives: / /b/ /p/ /t/ /d/. Such sounds can create an abrupt, sharp, sometimes shocking effect. Look for plosives blended with sibilants or liquids - as a short, sharp shock after the softer mood or look for places where both are interlaced (sib/plo/sib/plo/sib/plo) think about which feels stronger—does it create a jarring effect?

Liquids: /l/ These sounds give a sense of flow, creating a sense of quick, light movement--or of water--'light slipped down the lee of the hill', or sound thick, heavy when combined with dull sounds, as in 'ladle', 'paddle' and 'pedal.'

Nasals: /m/n/ These sounds can create a melancholy tone in a poem. Note how these lines by Tennyson creates that tone:

“The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
And murmuring of innumerable bees.”

You can't read this line quickly or happily without making the lines sound absurd.

Fricatives: /f/ /v/ /th/ /th/ These sounds are divided into voiced (hard) and voiceless (soft). It's fun to notice the connection: the <f> in 'knife', is soft, and becomes hard in the plural 'knives'. The same thing happens in 'loaf' and 'loaves.' In the poem 'Flag' by John Agard, he repeats voiceless fricatives at the start of the first two stanzas: 'flag', 'fluttering' 'unfurled', to create a free, flowing and airy effect of freedom.

Remember you need to listen to the sounds. Poets depend on sound to communicate meaning, so you need to hear the words and note the patterns.

- Does the poem rhyme?
- Does it use alliteration? (Repetition of beginning consonant sounds like “peter piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.”)
- Does the poem move at a fast or slow pace? Can you hear or feel a rhythm?

Step #4

Once you have marked up the poem, go back and look for images that create patterns. Note elements that seem to be connected in terms of visual, sound or emotive effects. Look at the poem.

- What does the poem tell you when you put all the elements together?
- Try to write a few sentences that give you a basic outline of your interpretation. Just start with the words: “This poem considers. . .”