

Understanding and Interpreting Poems

ENGL 1102

Prof. Bishop

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Interpreting Poetry: Two Approaches

I. Explication

An explication (literally, an “unfolding”) is a detailed elucidation of a work, sometimes line by line or word by word, which interested not only in *what* that work means but in *how* it means what it means. It thus considers all relevant aspects of a work—speaker or point of view, connotative words and double meanings, images, figurative language, allusions, form, structure, sound, rhythm,—and discusses, if not all of these, at least the most important. (There is no such thing as exhausting meanings and the ways to those meanings in a complex piece of literature, and the explicator must settle for something less than completeness.) Explication follows from what we sometimes call “close reading”—looking at a piece of writing, as it were, through a magnifying glass.

Clearly, the kinds of literature for which an explication is appropriate are limited. First, the work must be rich enough to repay the kind of close attention demanded. A thorough explication of *Othello* would be much longer than the play itself and would tire the patience of the most dogged reader. Explications work best with short poems. (Sonnets like Shakespeare’s “That time of year” and Frost’s “Design” almost beg for explication.) Explication sometimes may also be appropriate for passages in long poems, as, for example, the spoken by Macbeth after the death of his wife or the “sonnet” from *Romeo and Juliet*, and occasionally for exceptionally rich or crucial passages of prose, perhaps the final paragraphs of stories. But explication as a critical form should perhaps be separated from explication as a method. Whenever you elucidate even a small part of a literary work by a close examination that relates it to the whole, you are essentially explicating (unfolding). For example, if you point out the multiple meanings in the title of “Time Flies” as they relate to that play’s themes, you are explicating the title.

II. Analysis

An analysis (literally a “breaking up” or separation of something into its constituent parts), instead of trying to examine all parts of a work in relation to the whole, selects for examination *one* aspect or element or part that relates to the whole. Clearly, an analysis is a better approach to longer works and to prose works than is an explication. A literary work may be usefully approached through almost any of its elements—point of view, characterization, plot, setting, symbolism, structure, and the like—so long as you relate this element to the central meaning or the whole.

Understanding and Evaluating Poetry

The following is a list of questions or techniques that you may apply to any poem.

1. Who is the speaker? What kind of person is the speaker?
2. Is there an identifiable audience for the speaker? What can we know about that audience?
3. What is the occasion of the poem?
4. What is the setting in time (hour, season, century, and so on)?
5. What is the setting in place (indoors or out, city or country, land, region, nation, etc.)?
6. What is the central purpose of the poem?
7. State the central idea or theme of the poem in a sentence.
8. Outline the poem to show its structure and development, or summarize the poem.
9. Paraphrase the poem.
10. Discuss the diction of the poem. Point out words that interesting or intriguing.
11. Discuss the imagery of the poem. What kinds of images do you see? Is there a pattern?
12. Point out metaphors, similes, personifications, and metonyms in the poem. What is the significance?
13. Point out and explain any symbols.
14. Is the poem allegorical? What is the allegory?
15. Point out and explain examples of paradox, overstatement, understatement, and irony.
16. Point out and explain any allusions. What is the function?
17. What is the tone of the poem? How is it achieved?
18. Point out significant examples of sound repetition and explain their function.
19. What is the meter of the poem? Is there any tension between rhythm and meter?
20. Is there any tension between the form and function, shape and content of the poem?

*Adapted from *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*. 9th ed. Eds. Thomas R. Arp and Greg Johnson. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006.