

WRITING AN EXPLICATION OF POETRY

EXPLICATION, which means to explain and interpret analytically, gives you the opportunity to show your understanding of a poem, for an explication goes beyond the assimilation required for a paraphrase or summary. A complete explication requires that a poem be examined and explained word by word and line by line - a technique that is, obviously, exhaustive. Thus, a full explication of a poem like Thomas Hardy's, The Man He Killed, might take twenty or thirty pages (whoaa!). That is a full explication. A more manageable and less exhaustive route would be to critique and explicate a poem using a **GENERAL EXPLICATION** that focuses on one or two central and important aspects of a poem, for example: the general content of the poem, the main idea and theme, difficult or unusual words or expressions, and noteworthy elements of style, character, and humour.

ORGANIZING THE ESSAY

In a general explication essay, you demonstrate your ability (a) to follow the essential details of the poem, (b) to understand the issues and the meaning the poem reveals, (c) to explain some of the relationships of content to technique, and (d) to note and discuss especially important or unique aspects of the poem.

INTRODUCTION: as with an introductory paragraph, use your central idea to express a general view of the poem (thesis), which your essay will bear out. In the following sample essay on Thomas Hardy's, The Man He Killed, the central idea of the poem is to show the senselessness of war. Once you have indicated your central idea, your thesis paragraph should further indicate the topics (sub-topics) that you will include in your body and prove your thesis.

THE BODY: the first thing to include in the body is a brief explanation of what the poem contains, not an exact paraphrase, but your own organizing elements by describing the poem in your own words. Next, go on to explicate and analyze the poem in relationship to your central idea (thesis). The body is the place for discussing those aspects of the meaning and technique that bear upon the interpretation you wish to assert.

THE CONCLUSION: to reinforce the thematic structure of your essay, stress again your major idea in the conclusion. A general explication allows the writer to analyze certain parts of the poem, so the conclusion can also be an area that brings up certain questions about the poem, for example: the last stanza of Hardy's poem contains the words "quaint and curious" in reference to war. These words are unusual, particularly because the speaker might have chosen "hateful," "senseless," or "destructive" to describe the war. The conclusion may want to raise this interesting question and unusual element, but NOT to analyze it to death.

SAMPLE LITERARY ESSAY: An Explication of Hardy's, *The Man He Killed*

The Man He Killed (1902)

'Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin!

'But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,
I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place.

'I shot him dead because -
Because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That's clear enough; although

'He thought he'd list, perhaps,
Off-hand like - just as I -
Was out of work - had sold his traps -
No other reason why.

'Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown.'

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

"The Man He Killed" exposes the senselessness of war.¹ It does this through a silent contrast between the needs of ordinary people, as represented by the young man - the speaker - who has killed an enemy in battle and the anti-human and unnatural deaths of war. Of major note in this contrast are the circumstances described by the speaker, his language, his similarity with the dead man, and his typical concerns and wishes.²

The speaker begins by contrasting the circumstances of warfare with those of peace.³ He does not identify himself, but his speech reveals that he is an ordinary sort - a person, of the 'people' -who enjoys drinking in a bar and who prefers friendship

¹ Thesis Statement

² Categories of Analysis

³ Topic Sentence relating and referring to the first Category of Analysis (circumstance). The first body paragraph generally explains how the poem 'fits' the opinion of the essay and uses reference - explicit and inferential - to the content of the poem.

and helpfulness to violence. If he and the man he killed had met in an inn, he says, they would have had many drinks together, but because they met on a battlefield they shot at each other, and he killed the other man. The speaker tries to justify the killing, but can produce no stronger reason than that the dead man was his "foe." Once he states this reason, he again thinks of the similarities between himself and the dead man, and then concludes that warfare is "quaint and curious" (line 17) because one is forced to kill a person he would have befriended if they had met during a time of peace.

*To make the irony of warfare clear, the poem uses easy, colloquial language to bring out the speaker's ordinary qualities.*⁴ His manner of speech is conversational, as in "we should have sat us down" (line 3) and "'list" (for 'enlist', line 13), and his use of "you" in the last stanza. Also, his choice of words is common and informal for the time when the poem was written, as in 'nipperkin', 'traps', and 'fellow' (lines 4, 15 and 18). This language is important, because it establishes that the speaker is an ordinary man who has been thrust into an unnatural role because of the war.

*As another means of stressing the grim stupidity of war, the poem makes clear that the two men - the live soldier who killed and the dead soldier who was killed - were so alike that they could have been brothers or even twins.*⁵ They had similar ways of life, similar economic troubles, similar wishes to help other people, and similar motives in doing things like enlisting in the army. Symbolically, at least, the "man he killed" is the speaker himself, and hence warfare forces not only homicide, but suicide - you literally and figuratively kill yourself. The poem thus raises the question of why two people who are almost identical should be shoved into opposing battle lines in order to try killing each other. This question is rhetorical, for the obvious answer is that there is no good reason at all.

*Because the speaker (and also, very likely, the dead man) is shown as a person embodying the virtues of friendliness and helpfulness, Hardy's poem is a strong disapproval of war.*⁶ Clearly, political reasons for violence as policy are irrelevant to the characters and concerns of the men who fight. They, like the speaker, would prefer to follow their own needs rather than distant, faceless and nameless political leaders. The failure of complex but irrelevant political explanations is brought out most clearly in the third stanza, in which the speaker tries to give a

⁴ Topic sentence relating and referring to the second Category of Analysis (language).

⁵ Topic sentence relating and referring to the third Category of Analysis (similarity).

⁶ Topic sentence relating and referring to the fourth Category of Analysis (concerns and wishes).

reason for shooting the other man. Hardy's use of punctuation - the dashes - stresses the fact that the speaker has no ideological commitment to the cause he served when killing. Thus, the speaker stops at the word "because-" and gropes for a good reason (line 9). Not being subtle or articulate, he can say only "Because he was my foe/Just so: my foe of course he was/That's clear enough" (lines 10-12). These short bursts of language indicate that he cannot explain things to himself or to anyone else except in the most obvious and trite terms, and in apparent embarrassment he inserts "of course" as an expected way of emphasizing hostility even though he felt no hostility toward the man he killed.

A reading thus shows the power of Hardy's dramatic argument in the poem. Hardy does not establish closely detailed reasons against war as a policy - the speaker is unable to articulate and verbalize the gut reaction he feels - but rather dramatizes the idea that all political arguments are unimportant in view of the central and glaring brutality of war - the killing of human beings by human beings. Hardy's speaker does not seem able to express deep feelings, rather he is confused and perplexed because he is an average sort whose idea of life is to live and let live, and enjoy a drink in a bar with friends. But, it is this very commonness that stresses the point that everyone is victimized by war - both those who die and those who are forced to kill. The thoughtful reader reflects that this poem is a powerful argument for peace and reconciliation.⁷

⁷ The conclusion refers to the basic thesis of the poem - senselessness of war - and the categories that establish and fortify the thesis - the inability of the speaker to articulate his emotions and the cost of warfare. The conclusion does not develop new ideas or opinions, but shapes the opinions already expressed into a thoughtful and insightful 'wrap-up'.