

WHAT'S YOUR PURPOSE? COMMON APPROACHES TO WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

It is crucial to keep your paper's purpose in mind. When you write an academic paper, you are likely to have been given a specific set of marching orders. Maybe you have been asked to write for a particular audience besides the obvious one (your professor, that is). Perhaps you have been asked to describe your personal reaction to a literary work. Maybe your purpose is to interpret a work, analyzing how one or more of its elements contribute to its meaning. You may have been instructed to write an evaluation in which you judge a work's merits. Let the assignment dictate your paper's tone and content. Below are several commonly used approaches to writing about literature.

Explication

Explication is the patient unfolding of meanings in a work of literature. An explication proceeds carefully through a story, passage, or poem, usually interpreting it line by line—perhaps even word by word, dwelling on details a casual reader might miss and illustrating how a work's smaller parts contribute to the whole. Alert and willing to take pains, the writer of such an essay notices anything meaningful that isn't obvious, whether it is a colossal theme suggested by a symbol or a little hint contained in a single word.

To write an honest explication of an entire story takes time and space, and is a better assignment for a long term paper, an honors thesis, or a dissertation than a short essay. A thorough explication of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," for example, would likely run much longer than the rich and intriguing short story itself. Ordinarily, explication is best suited to a short passage or section of a story: a key scene, a critical conversation, a statement of theme, or an opening or closing paragraph.

In drama, explication is best suited to brief passages—a key soliloquy, for example, or a moment of dialogue that lays bare the play's theme. Closely examining a critical moment in a play can shed light on the play in its entirety. To be successful, an explication needs to concentrate on a brief passage, probably not much more than 20 lines long.

Storytellers who are especially fond of language invite closer attention to their words than others might. Edgar Allan Poe, for one, is a poet sensitive to the rhythms of his sentences and a symbolist whose stories abound in potent suggestions. Here is a student's explication of a short but essential passage in "The Tell-Tale Heart." The passage occurs in the third paragraph of the story, and to help us follow the explication, the student quotes the passage in full at the paper's beginning.

An unusually well-written essay, "By Lantern Light" cost its author two or three careful revisions. Rather than attempting to say something about

everything in the passage from Poe, she selects only the details that strike her as most meaningful. In her very first sentence, she briefly shows us how the passage functions in the context of Poe's story: how it clinches our suspicions that the narrator is mad. Notice too that the student who wrote the essay doesn't inch through the passage sentence by sentence, but freely takes up its details in an order that seems appropriate to her argument.

Kim 1

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20 May 2015

By Lantern Light: An Explication of
a Passage in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"

And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it—oh, so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, so that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly—very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha!—would a madman have been so wise as this? And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously—oh, so cautiously—cautiously (for the hinges creaked)—I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights—every night just at midnight—but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye. (par. 3)

*Quotes passage
to be explicated*

Although Edgar Allan Poe has suggested in the first lines of his story "The Tell-Tale Heart" that the person who addresses us is insane, it is only when we come to the speaker's account of his preparations for murdering the old man that we find his madness fully revealed. Even more convincingly

*Thesis sentence
—statement of
paper's main
claim*

Kim 2

Textual
evidence
supports claim

than his earlier words (for we might possibly think that someone who claims to hear things in heaven and hell is a religious mystic), these preparations reveal him to be mad. What strikes us is that they are so elaborate and meticulous. A significant detail is the exactness of his schedule for spying: “every night just at midnight.” The words with which he describes his motions also convey the most extreme care (and I will indicate them by italics): “how wisely I proceeded—with *what caution*,” “I turned the latch of his door and opened it—oh, *so gently!*” “how *cunningly* I thrust it [my head] in! I moved it slowly—*very, very slowly*,” “I undid the lantern *cautiously*—oh, *so cautiously—cautiously*.” Taking a whole hour to intrude his head into the room, he asks, “Ha!—would a madman have been so wise as this?” But of course the word *wise* is unconsciously ironic, for clearly it is not wisdom the speaker displays, but an absurd degree of care, an almost fiendish ingenuity. Such behavior, I understand, is typical of certain mental illnesses. All his careful preparations that he thinks prove him sane only convince us instead that he is mad.

Topic sentence
on narrator's
mad logic

Obviously his behavior is self-defeating. He wants to catch the “vulture eye” open, and yet he takes all these pains not to disturb the old man’s sleep. If he behaved logically, he might go barging into the bedroom with his lantern ablaze, shouting at the top of his voice. And yet, if we can see things his way, there is a strange logic to his reasoning. He regards the eye as a creature in itself, quite apart from its possessor. “It was not,” he says, “the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye.” Apparently, to be inspired to do his deed, the madman needs to behold the eye—at least, this is my understanding of his remark, “I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work.” Poe’s choice of the word *work*, by the way, is also revealing. Murder is made to seem a duty or a job; and anyone who so regards murder is either extremely cold-blooded, like a hired killer for a gangland assassination, or else deranged. Besides, the word suggests again the curious sense of detachment that the speaker feels toward the owner of the eye.

Kim 3

In still another of his assumptions, the speaker shows that he is madly logical, or operating on the logic of a dream. There seems to be a dreamlike relationship between his dark lantern “all closed, closed, so that no light shone out,” and the sleeping victim. When the madman opens his lantern so that it emits a single ray, he is hoping that the eye in the old man’s head will be open too, letting out its corresponding gleam. The latch that he turns so gently, too, seems like the eye, whose lid needs to be opened in order for the murderer to go ahead. It is as though the speaker is *trying* to get the eyelid to lift. By taking such great pains and by going through all this nightly ritual, he is practicing some kind of magic, whose rules are laid down not by our logic, but by the logic of dreams.

Conclusion
pushes thesis
further, making
it more specific.

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Work Cited

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Explication is a particularly useful way to help unravel a poem’s complexities. An explication, however, should not be confused with a paraphrase, which puts the poem’s literal meaning into plain prose. While an explication might include some paraphrasing, it does more than simply restate. It explains a poem, in great detail, showing how each part contributes to the whole. In writing an explication of a poem, keep the following tips in mind:

- **Start with the poem’s first line, and keep working straight through to the end.** As needed, though, you can take up points out of order.
- **Read closely, addressing the poem’s details.** You may choose to include allusions, the denotations or connotations of words, the possible meanings

of symbols, the effects of certain sounds and rhythms and formal elements (rime schemes, for instance), the sense of any statements that contain irony, and other particulars.

- **Show how each part of the poem contributes to the meaning of the whole.** Your explication should go beyond dissecting the pieces of a poem; it should also integrate them to cast light on the poem in its entirety.

Here is a successful student-authored explication of Robert Frost's "Design." The assignment was to explain whatever in the poem seemed most essential, in not more than 750 words. This excellent paper finds something worth unfolding in every line of Frost's poem, without seeming mechanical. Although the student proceeds sequentially through the poem from the title to the last line, he takes up some points out of order, when it serves his purpose. In paragraph two, for example, he looks ahead to the poem's ending and briefly states its main theme in order to relate it to the poem's title. In the third paragraph, he explicates the poem's later image of the heal-all, relating it to the first image. He also comments on the poem's form ("Like many other sonnets"), on its similes and puns, and on its denotations and connotations.

Robert Frost (1874–1963)

Design

1922
I found a (dimpled) spider, fat and (white),
On a white (heal-all), holding up a moth

Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—
Assorted characters of (death and blight)

Sarcasm? → Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a (witches' broth)

A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And (dead) wings carried like a paper kite.

Questions who is the designer? God/nature? → What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and (innocent) heal-all?

What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?

What but (design of darkness) to appall?—
If design govern in a thing (so small).

Rhyme Scheme:
abba, abba, acaa, cc A sonnet?

8 6

Jasper 1

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An Unfolding of Robert Frost’s “Design”

“I always wanted to be very observing,” Robert Frost once told an audience, after reading aloud his poem “Design.” Then he added, “But I have always been afraid of my own observations” (qtd. in Cook 126–27). What could Frost have observed that could scare him? Let’s examine the poem in question and see what we discover.

Starting with the title, “Design,” any reader of this poem will find it full of meaning. As the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines *design*, the word can denote among other things a plan, purpose, or intention (“Design”). Some arguments for the existence of God (I remember from Sunday School) are based on the “argument from design”: that because the world shows a systematic order, there must be a Designer who made it. But the word *design* can also mean “a deliberate undercover project or scheme” such as we attribute to a “designing person” (“Design”). As we shall see, Frost’s poem incorporates all of these meanings. His poem raises the old philosophic question of whether there is a Designer, an evil Designer, or no Designer at all.

Like many other sonnets, “Design” is divided into two parts. The first eight lines draw a picture centering on the spider, who at first seems almost jolly. It is *dimpled* and *fat* like a baby, or Santa Claus. The spider stands on a wildflower whose name, *heal-all*, seems ironic: a heal-all is supposed to cure any disease, but this flower has no power to restore life to the dead moth. (Later, in line ten, we learn that the heal-all used to be blue. Presumably, it has died and become bleached-looking.) In the second line we discover, too, that the spider has hold of another creature, a dead moth. We then see the moth described with an odd simile in line three: “Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth.” Suddenly, the moth becomes not a creature but a piece of fabric—lifeless and dead—and

Interesting
opening.
Quotes author

Central
question raised

Defines key
word. Sets up
theme

Topic sentence
on significance
of title

Begins line-by-
line unfolding
of meaning

Discusses
images

Jasper 2

Explores
language

yet *satin* has connotations of beauty. Satin is a luxurious material used in rich formal clothing, such as coronation gowns and brides' dresses. Additionally, there is great accuracy in the word: the smooth and slightly plush surface of satin is like the powder-smooth surface of moths' wings. But this "cloth," rigid and white, could be the lining to Dracula's coffin.

Refers to
sound

In the fifth line an invisible hand enters. The characters are "mixed" like ingredients in an evil potion. Some force doing the mixing is behind the scene. The characters in themselves are innocent enough, but when brought together, their whiteness and look of *rigor mortis* are overwhelming. There is something diabolical in the spider's feast. The "morning right" echoes the word *rite*, a ritual—in this case apparently a Black Mass or a Witches' Sabbath. The simile in line seven ("a flower like a froth") is more ambiguous and harder to describe. Froth is white, foamy, and delicate—something found on a brook in the woods or on a beach after a wave recedes. However, in the natural world, froth also can be ugly: the foam on a polluted stream or a rabid dog's mouth. The dualism in nature—its beauty and its horror—is there in that one simile.

Transition
wordsQuotes
secondary
sourceDiscusses
theme

(So far), the poem has portrayed a small, frozen scene, with the dimpled killer holding its victim as innocently as a boy holds a kite. Already, Frost has hinted that Nature may be, as Radcliffe Squires suggests, "Nothing but an ash-white plain without love or faith or hope, where ignorant appetites cross by chance" (87). Now, in the last six lines of the sonnet, Frost comes out and directly states his theme. What else could bring these deathly pale, stiff things together "but design of darkness to appall"? The question is clearly rhetorical; we are meant to answer, "Yes, there does seem to be an evil design at work here!" I take the next-to-last line to mean, "What except a design so dark and sinister that we're appalled by it?" "Appall," by the way, is the second pun in the poem: it sounds like *a pall* or shroud. (The derivation of *appall*, according to *Merriam-Webster*, is ultimately from a Latin word meaning "to be pale"—an interesting word choice for a poem full of pale white

Defines key
word

Jasper 3

images ["Appall"].) *Steered* carries the suggestion of a steering-wheel or rudder that some pilot had to control. Like the word *brought*, it implies that some invisible force charted the paths of spider, heal-all, and moth, so that they arrived together.

Having suggested that the universe is in the hands of that sinister force (an indifferent God? Fate? the Devil?), Frost adds a note of doubt. The Bible tells us that "His eye is on the sparrow," but at the moment the poet doesn't seem sure. Maybe, he hints, when things in the universe drop below a certain size, they pass completely out of the Designer's notice. When creatures are this little, maybe God doesn't bother to govern them but just lets them run wild. And possibly the same mindless chance is all that governs human lives. And because this is even more senseless than having an angry God intent on punishing us, it is, Frost suggests, the worst suspicion of all.

Answers
question raised
in introduction

Conclusion

Jasper 4

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