

Writing a Poetry Explication

A poetry explication is a short, but in-depth analysis of a poem that relates the structure of the poem to its overall meaning. Don't worry if this definition sounds complicated; when you break it down, it's really just a close reading of a poem that results in a controlling idea, or thesis statement. This handout will be especially helpful if this is your first poetry explication assignment, but it is also nice for a quick refresher.

1. Read the poem.

To read a poem with the intention of analyzing it, you should read it multiple times. You can read it silently, then read it aloud. Take note of the literal meaning of the poem first: What happens in the poem? Who is the speaker? What point is the poet trying to make? If it's a lengthy poem, then it may help to write a small summary next to each line or stanza.

Things you should be looking for in your literal reading of a poem:

- Form (sonnet, haiku, free verse, etc.)
- Meter
- Plot
- Speaker
- Meaning

2. Analyze the Poem.

After you can comprehend the literal meaning of the poem, you can move on to the deeper analysis: What type of language is used? Are there metaphors? What is the mood of the poem? Underlining and making notes of figures of speech, imagery, or literary devices while rereading the poem will help a lot.

Things you should look for in your analysis of the poem:

- Literary devices (alliteration, metaphor, symbolism, etc.)
- Mood/tone
- Word choice
- Word repetition

3. Start explication (First Paragraph)

This genre of writing, explication, will be a line-by-line analysis of the poem. It will begin with the "big picture" of the poem and then chronologically dive deeper to reveal how the structure relates to the entire poem. This genre will still have a thesis statement

So, first thing's first: What is the big picture? What is the poem about in the literal sense? This is where your initial readings will come in handy.

"The Lotus-eaters" by Lord Alfred Tennyson is a poem that alludes to the Lotus Eaters from Homer's *The Odyssey*. It is five Spenserian stanzas in iambic pentameter with two final lines of iambic hexameter followed by eight stanzas of a "Choric Song" without a consistent rhyme scheme. The poem follows the sailors from *The Odyssey* as they explore the Lotus Eaters' island and slowly fall into a sleep-like state, not wishing to return to their "weary" journey across the sea.

After you have the big-picture part of your essay out of the way, you can write your thesis statement.

As Tennyson describes the sailors' slow descent into the dreamy world of the Lotus Eaters' island, his word choice reaches beyond his writing to the reader whom he lulls into this same dream-like existence.

Make sure to make use of the poem as you back your thesis statement. Create a balance between quotation and explanation.

The description of the island's "languid air" and "slumberous sheet of foam" on the beach creates its own "languid" and "slumberous" feeling that the reader, like the sailors, must experience as they continue to the next lines.

4. Following paragraphs

After your first paragraph, you can start your line by line analysis.

In the first stanza, the reader is met with an unnamed speaker who commands the ship to shore. "Courage!" (1) this speaker calls out to the sailors, starting the poem out with a startling force that will soon be softened by the word choice of the author. The sailors step out onto the unknown land and the poem's narrator then steps in to take control of the story. The narrator describes the land in rhymes following an ABABBCBCC rhyme scheme and ends each line with weary words like "swoon" and "moon" as well as "dream" and "stream" and "seem". Placing these languid rhymes at the end of each line, it is as if the reader is being gently lulled to sleep by the narrator.

...

In the beginning lines of the first stanza of the Choric Song, "There is sweet music here that softer falls/Than petals from blown roses on the grass" (46-7), the reader is given a feeling of peace that the sailors are experiencing on the island. When compared to the first few lines of the second stanza, "Why are we weigh'd upon with heaviness / And utterly consumed with sharp distress" (57-8), the word choice distinctly contrasts with the first stanza. This contrast gives the reader a sort of whiplash as they are pushed and pulled between the alternating stanzas of serenity and sorrow. This helps the author convey why the sailors would have chosen the lotus over the trip back home.

Some things to possibly discuss in your body paragraphs:

- The author's choice of words (why would the author choose one word over another?)
- Rhyme scheme
- Repetition (does the author repeat certain words or use alliteration? What does this add to the poem?)
- Poem's visual structure (is the poem arranged in a certain way to convey a message to the reader? Do the line breaks, spaces, or structure relate to the overall message of the poem?)
- Style and tone

There is no conclusion to a poetry explication, so after you get all of your points across by explicating the entire poem, you're done! (With your first draft at least!)

References

Alfred, L. T. (1832). *The Lotos-eaters*. Poetry Foundation,
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45364/the-lotos-eaters>.