

The Literary Essay

Analysis / Explication

An **analysis** will often focus on a selected element of a whole work (e.g. point of view and its implications), while explication limits itself to one short poem or one passage in a longer work and comments on everything in it.

An **explication** is a close, word by word and sentence by sentence commentary on a literary work. Its aim is to bring out the full meaning and texture of the passage by attending to the nuances of words, the rhythms of sentences, the patterns of imagery, the development of contrasts or parallels, the narrative point of view, the characterization, or any other significant element. When it deals with a passage within a long poem or novel, an explication may indicate how the passage contributes to the work as a whole, but its primary focus is on the internal qualities of the passage itself. An explication does not need secondary sources. It is not merely a paraphrase of the passage, although it may include paraphrase. Instead, it makes *explicit* what is *implicit*. Literally, the word **explication means unfolding**.

Your thesis statement will be a summary of your overall sense of the poem or passage, and you will probably proceed a line or sentence at a time. Divide the paragraphs of your explication according to the natural subdivisions of the passage. Transitions like "In the next line . . ." "In the second stanza . . ." will sometimes be necessary, but try to avoid mechanical repetition.

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In general, **essays about literature** are the same as any academic essays. They require clear, logical development, and they must be written in grammatical English. There are a number of points, however, that need special attention:

1. Tense: One always refers to the events in a work of literature in the present tense. Since a novel's events unfold as we read, we see them as taking place in the perpetual present, e.g. we would write, "At the end of the story, Kofi *falls* from the bridge" or "David

takes the trip to Wales to escape reality." One only uses the past tense for prior events in the story: "When he was a child, David *pretended* to be drunk while reading."

Also, one refers to the author's writing in the present tense: "In *In Our Time*, Hemingway *portrays* a young man's adventures," even though Hemingway wrote the book in 1925 and has been dead since 1961.

- 2. Quotations:** You need to provide evidence for your statements. Don't make any generalizations that are not supported by specific reference to the text. Quote the text to make your point, and no more. You can use single words:

Kofi is "blinded" by the sun . . .

Or short sentences or parts of sentences can be fitted into the text of your essay:

At the beginning of the story Kofi is seen as "no one in particular" (24).

Alternatively, you can quote longer passages of the text, which need to be set off or indented without quotation marks. Always explain how the quotation illustrates the points that you are making. Don't simply quote a passage and expect the reader to figure out how it relates to your point. You must make the relation clear. Also, quote only as much as you need to make the point -- readers tend to get lost in long quotations.

- 3. Repeating the content:** You can assume that the reader of your essay has a good knowledge of the work of literature you are discussing. Therefore it is not necessary to repeat the content. The purpose of your essay is to express an interpretation of the literary work, not summarize it.
- 4. Creativity:** You are free to be creative and to explore the work from a new and unexpected angle. However, don't allow your imagination to carry you away from the work. Your aim is to illuminate the work itself; do not twist the work to express your own personal ideas.
- 5. Secondary Sources:** You may well be using secondary sources as part of your essay, just as you use quotations from the primary text. You must acknowledge your use of those sources with a parenthetical reference and Works Cited entry. Similarly, when you quote from the literary text, give a page reference and list the work under the author's name in your Works Cited.