

## General Instructions

### WHAT IS AN EXPLICATION?

An explication is a **short** piece of writing on a short literary work—most commonly a poem, occasionally a short piece of prose, or an excerpt from a longer work. An explication is essentially a written record of a **close reading** or analysis of the poem's or passage's language and structural devices. Your explication should do as many of the following as possible:

- Name the work and the author; identify the speaker and/or characters involved; briefly explain the context of the poem or passage (its genre [e.g. pastoral, heroic] or historical context [e.g. Christian, tribal, or nationalistic], where it occurs in the work [when relevant], any important incidents associated with it) and the overall signification [i.e. meaning, interpretation] that you find in it (or give it, create out of it, if you prefer).
- Assert an argument about the overall signification of the poem (or passage). Support your argument by pointing to literary characteristics (sentence structure, figurative language, imagery, tone, plot, word choice) that show *your* reader how to elucidate the meanings of the passage and/or the work as a whole. **Be specific. Refer to (and quote) specific words and phrases.** In marking most people's first papers, I will have written "show me" in the margins at some point. The need to make specific reference to language from the poem is what is pointed to by "show me."
- Support your argument by explaining how the passage is significant in relation to the whole work.
- Do NOT merely summarize or paraphrase the passage.
- Do NOT feel like you need to cover everything or list all that you've found—you will usually have to focus on a few significant details in order to write in paragraph form. **Focus on the specifics** that support your argument.
- Remember that this is to be a **short** assignment.

### The explication process, broken down:

- *In a very basic sense, what is happening here?*
- *HOW, specifically, is it being represented? (through choices of structure, word choice, tone, plotting, imagery, etc. . .)*
- *AND what significance do those representational choices have for the work/passage in question?*

Getting in the habit of asking these basic questions for everything you read should help make explications—and more importantly, close reading—become something like second nature.

## Specific Instructions

We covered the conventions of the sonnet genre in class, then we saw how Shakespeare played with those conventions in those of his sonnets included in the course anthology.

For this assignment, you must explicate one or the other of the two sonnets below. Both are by Shakespeare, both have an overall signification, and both demonstrate a similar awareness of the generic conventions of the sonnet. So that I can tell you wrote your paper, rather than simply accessing and parroting some online interpretation, I require you to use Philip Sidney's sonnet 9 to discuss the conventions of the sonnet genre. Then you must determine whether Shakespeare reiterates the sonnet tradition, or subverts it. The determination at which you arrive might not be absolute, by which I mean Shakespeare might obey one or some conventions, only to challenge or undermine another or others. In essence, I require you to do with either of the two sonnets below just what we did in class with the sonnets from the course anthology.

Be sure to include in your list of references any source, online or in print, you consult as you work to make sense of the Shakespeare sonnet you choose from those below. **The purpose of this assignment is for you to show the professor that you are doing your own thinking**, and not simply cribbing from some website. To that end, **much of your grade will depend on what you submit *not* reading like anything anyone else submits, and *not* reading like anything in your list of references, and *not* reading like anything the professor can find online about the two Shakespeare sonnets or about Sidney's sonnet 9.**

Specific formatting instructions must also be followed, and are listed below the two sonnets.

When forty winters shall beseege thy brow,  
 And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,  
 Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,  
 Will be a tatter'd weed, of small worth held:  
 Then being ask'd where all thy beauty lies,  
 Where all the treasure of thy lusty days,  
 To say, within thine own deep-sunken eyes,  
 Were an all-eating shame and thriftless praise.  
 How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use,  
 If thou couldst answer 'This fair child of mine  
 Shall sum my count and make my old excuse,'  
 Proving his beauty by succession thine!  
     This were to be new made when thou art old,  
     And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold.

Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest  
 Now is the time that face should form another;  
 Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest,  
 Thou dost beguile the world, unbless some mother.  
 For where is she so fair whose unear'd womb  
 Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?  
 Or who is he so fond will be the tomb  
 Of his self-love, to stop posterity?  
 Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee  
 Calls back the lovely April of her prime:  
 So thou through windows of thine age shall see  
 Despite of wrinkles this thy golden time.  
     But if thou live, remember'd not to be,  
     Die single, and thine image dies with thee.

## Specific formatting instructions

No title page.

Do NOT underline, italicize, or boldface your title.

Give your paper a meaningful, communicative title.

Single-space your name beneath your title, both centered above your first paragraph.

Format titles (including website titles) in accordance with MLA style.

Double-space your text.

Do NOT space between paragraphs any larger than between the lines within each paragraph.

Format your list of References) in accordance with MLA style.

Number your pages from 2 ff.

Have margins on all four sides of approximately 1” or 2.4cm.

Aim to submit three or, at most, four pages in total.

Proofread your writing, in print-on-paper, to catch ALL of the small errors proofreading ought to catch.

### **Grading Rationale**

- 1) You will be graded on your ability to convince your reader that you, and no one else, have done the work of explicating the sonnet you choose.
- 2) You will be graded on your account of the relevant traditions of the sonnet genre, and on what Shakespeare does to or with them in your chosen sonnet.
- 3) You will be graded on your ability to follow the assignment instructions: both those given on this assignment sheet, and any added during class.
- 4) You will be graded on the correctness, clarity, and overall quality of your writing.
- 5) Failure to **proofread carefully** will be treated harshly.