

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, if possible, 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 papers, I will often write “show me” in the margins at some point. The need to make specific reference to language from the poem or passage is what is pointed to by “show me.”
- (When appropriate, you would support your argument by explaining how the passage is significant in relation to the whole work.)
- Do NOT merely summarize or paraphrase the poem.
- 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 the foregoing basic questions for everything you read should help make explications—and more importantly, close, attentive reading—become something like second nature.

Specific Instructions

We will cover the conventions of the sonnet genre in class, then see how Shakespeare plays with those conventions in some of his sonnets.

For this assignment, you must explicate one or the other of the two sonnets provided in class on September 29 or October 4. Both are by Shakespeare, both have an overall signification, and both demonstrate a similar awareness of the generic conventions of the sonnet. You will be expected 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 want you to do with either of the two sonnets provided just what we will have done in class with other sonnets (including Sidney's).

You will not be allowed to consult any outside source. You'll be given an entire class period to work on your paper, which you will compose on your computer then submit via Acorn. Despite the fact this is an in-class essay, you are still expected to proofread your work carefully before submitting it.

Submit your work in the native format of your word processor, and use your last name to name the file. In my case, this would look like this: Cunningham.docx. Under no circumstances are you to submit your paper as a .pdf file.

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

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.

Double-space your text.

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

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 before submitting your paper.

Grading Rationale

- 1) You will be graded on your ability to convince the professor that you paid attention and carefully took notes as we practiced this exercise in the classes prior to the day on which you write.
- 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 very detrimental to your grade.