

## Poetry Explications

A **poetry explication** is a relatively short analysis, which describes the possible meanings and relationships of the words, images, and other small units that make up a poem.

### Preparing an Explication

1. **READ** the poem silently, then read it aloud (if not in a testing situation). Repeat as necessary. Truthfully, the more familiar you are with the selection, the better chance you have at understanding it. Do not make the mistake of only reading it silently.
2. Consider the poem as a **dramatic situation** in which a speaker addresses an audience or another character. In this way, begin your analysis by identifying and describing the speaking voice or voices, the conflicts or ideas, and the language used in the poem.

### The Large Issues

Determine the basic design of the poem by considering the *who, what, when, where, and why* of the dramatic situation.

- What is being dramatized? What conflicts or themes does the poem present, address, or question?
- Who is the speaker? Define and describe the speaker and his/her voice. What does the speaker say? Who is the audience? Are other characters involved?
- What happens in the poem? Consider the plot or basic design of the action. How are the dramatized conflicts or themes introduced, sustained, resolved, etc.?
- When does the action occur? What is the date and/or time of day?
- Where is the speaker? Describe the physical location of the dramatic moment.
- Why does the speaker feel compelled to speak at this moment? What is his/her motivation?

### The Details

To analyze the design of the poem, we must focus on the poems' parts, namely how the poem dramatizes conflicts or ideas in language. By concentrating on the parts, we develop our understanding of the poem's structure, and we gather support and evidence for our interpretations. Some of the details we should consider include the following:

- Form: Does the poem represent a particular form (sonnet, sestina, etc.)? Does the poem present any unique variations from the traditional structure of that form?
- Rhetoric: How does the speaker make particular statements? Does the rhetoric seem odd in any way? Why? Consider the predicates and what they reveal about the speaker.
- Syntax: Consider the subjects, verbs, and objects of each statement and what these elements reveal about the speaker. Do any statements have convoluted or vague syntax?
- Vocabulary: Why does the poet choose one word over another in each line? Do any of the words have multiple or archaic meanings that add other meanings to the line? Use the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a resource.

### Do a TPCASST of the poem

- **Title** – Write three questions about the title of the poem BEFORE you read the poem. Is the title a name or do you think it will interact with the poem?
- **Paraphrase** – read the poem and put it in your own words. You must do this WORD FOR WORD. Use a dictionary or thesaurus as you need to. You will type this and hand it in on Friday.
- **Connotation** – what examples of figurative language can you find? What do you think the author wants you to think?
- **Attitude** – What is the attitude of the poet? The speaker? How can you tell?
- **Shifts** – at what point does the poem shift or move?
- **Title** – answer the questions you wrote for the title at the top of this page. How does the title illuminate the poem?
- **Theme** - After identifying a subject/topic of the poem, determine what the poet *thinks* about the subject. What is his/her opinion?

### The Patterns

As you analyze the design line by line, look for certain **patterns** to develop which provide insight into the dramatic situation, the speaker's state of mind, or the poet's use of details. Some of the most common patterns include the following:

- Rhetorical Patterns: Look for statements that follow the same format.
- Rhyme: Consider the significance of the end words joined by sound; in a poem with no rhymes, consider the importance of the end words.
- Patterns of Sound: Alliteration and assonance create sound effects and often cluster significant words.
- Visual Patterns: How does the poem look on the page?
- Rhythm and Meter: Consider how rhythm and meter influence our perception of the speaker and his/her language.

## Basic Terms for Talking about Meter

Meter (from the Greek *metron*, meaning measure) refers principally to the recurrence of regular beats in a poetic line. In this way, **meter** pertains to the structure of the poem as it is written.

The most common form of meter in English verse since the 14th century is *accentual-syllabic meter*, in which the basic unit is the **foot**. A **foot** is a combination of two or three stressed and/or unstressed syllables. The following are **the four most common metrical feet** in English poetry:

(1) **IAMBIC** (the noun is "iamb"): an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, a pattern which comes closest to approximating the natural rhythm of speech. Note line 23 from Shelley's "Stanzas Written in Dejection, Near Naples":

And walked | with in | ward glory | crowned

(2) **TROCHAIC** (the noun is "trochee"): a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable, as in the first line of Blake's "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence*:

Piping | down the | valleys | wild

(3) **ANAPESTIC** (the noun is "anapest"): two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable, as in the opening to Byron's "The Destruction of Sennacherib":

The Assyrian | came down | like the wolf | on the fold

(4) **DACTYLIC** (the noun is "dactyl"): a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables, as in Thomas Hardy's "The Voice":

Woman much | missed, how you | call to me | call to me

**Meter** also refers to the number of feet in a line:

<b>Monometer</b>	<b>one</b>
<b>Dimeter</b>	<b>two</b>
<b>Trimeter</b>	<b>three</b>
<b>Tetrameter</b>	<b>four</b>
<b>Pentameter</b>	<b>five</b>
<b>Hexameter</b>	<b>six</b>

Any number above six (hexameter) is heard as a combination of smaller parts; for example, what we might call heptameter (seven feet in a line) is indistinguishable (aurally) from successive lines of tetrameter and trimeter (4-3).

To **scan** a line is to determine its **metrical pattern**. Perhaps the best way to begin scanning a line is to mark the natural stresses on the polysyllabic words. Take Shelley's line:

And walked with in | ward glory | crowned

Then mark the monosyllabic nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs that are normally stressed:

And walked with in | ward glory | crowned

Then fill in the rest:

And walked with in | ward glory | crowned

Then divide the line into feet:

And walked | with in | ward glory | crowned

Then note the sequence:

iamb | iamb | iamb | iamb

The line consists of four iambs; therefore, we identify the line as **iambic tetrameter**.