



Poetry Memorization & Explication

ASSIGNMENT PACKET

A.P. ENGLISH LITERATURE & COMPOSITION
Archbishop Moeller High School, Mr. Rose

Poetry Memorization

The first part of this assignment is to choose two poems to memorize. You will be reciting these two poems from memory on the “Presentation Day” in January. The second part of the assignment is to write an explication response for each of the poems. The third and final part of the project is to write a 5-paragraph explication essay on one of the poems.

How Do I Choose My Poems?

Over Christmas break, you will be choosing the two poems you want to memorize and explicate from a list that can be found on the “[Poetry Out Loud](#)” website. But, not just any poem qualifies. You must meet the following requirements:

1. The poem must be written by a British or Irish poet: This includes Welsh, Scottish, and English poets. Be sure to look up the nationality of the poet!
2. The two poems must add up to a minimum of 40 full lines of poetry. Thus, you can choose a 7-line poem and a 35-line poem, two 20-line poems, etc. Be sure to do the math!
3. The poem must be found on the Poetry Out Loud list:
<http://poetryoutloud.org/poems-and-performance/find-poems>
4. At least one of the poems must date from before 1900.
5. The poems should be ones you like, enjoy, find fascinating, etc. You get to pick them, so do a little research and find two that you really want to work with.
6. No one else in your section may be doing the same poem; that means “first come, first serve.” I’ll personally deal with tie-breakers. (You should come to class with one or two “back up” poems in case one or both of your poems is already taken.
7. After you have your assigned poems, be sure to read or re-read the “Got Poetry?” article in the Brit Lit Reader for tips on how to approach memorizing poetry.

British and Irish Poets

As stated in criteria #1 above, your poems must be written by a British (English, Welsh, or Scottish) poet or Irish poet. The following is a list of popular British and Irish poets. You are not limited to choosing poems from the authors listed below. This list is merely to assist you.

Betjeman, John	William Blake	Anne Bronte	Gerard Manley Hopkins
Charlotte Bronte	Emily Bronte	Elizabeth Browning	Seamus Heaney
Lord Byron	Geoffrey Chaucer	Robert Browning	James Joyce
John Donne	Ted Hughes	John Keats	Jonathan Swift
Ben Johnson	Rudyard Kipling	D.H. Lawrence	C.S. Lewis
John Milton	Wilfred Owen	Christina Rossetti	Dante Gabriel Rossetti
William Shakespeare	Alfred Tennyson	Dylan Thomas	W.H. Auden
J.R.R. Tolkien	Oscar Wilde	William Wordsworth	T.S. Elliot
Percy Shelley	Samuel Coleridge	Matthew Arnold	Christopher Marlowe

What Is Explication & How Do I It?

Analytical writing with the purpose to explain or interpret is also called **explication**: unfolding or making clear the meaning of a text. When we write an explication of a poem, we are explaining its **meaning**. This necessarily involves **interpretation**. An explication of a poem will explain to us the possible meanings of an element or a particular passage of a poem while pointing out the ways and means the author uses to imbue the poem with meaning. I will refer to two types of explication assignments: **explication responses** and **explication essay**.

Explication Responses (2) – 100 points

In order to write an explication response, you should follow these seven steps in the order they are listed and respond to each prompt in a short paragraph:

- 1. Literal content.** Before you try to explain and interpret, you must understand what is literally happening. Ask yourself these questions: Who is the speaker (narrator) or what kind of person is the speaker? What is the occasion or context of the poem? What is the setting in time (hour, season, century, etc.) and place (indoors or out, city or country, land or sea, etc.)?
- 2. Summarize.** Once you have identified the elements above, provide a brief summary of the poem in your own words, following the sequence given by the poet. Refer to the previous “How to Paraphrase of Poem” hand out.
- 3. Purpose/Theme.** Identify the central purpose or theme of the poem, and state it in a single sentence.
- 4. Tone.** Once you understand the literal meaning of the poem and have identified the central purpose, begin to look at tone. What is the tone? How is it achieved? Is there a change in tone during the poem? When does it occur and why does it occur?
- 5. Diction (Choice of Words).** Point out words that are particularly well-chosen in relation to tone. Answer the question: Why did the poet choose the words he used and why did he use them in that order? Remember, you are analyzing and interpreting here.
- 6. Figurative Language.** Examine the passage carefully for allusions, similes, personification, metaphors, paradox, hyperbole, understatement, irony, etc. These are “vessels of meaning.” Why are they used? What are their effects?
- 7. Structure.** Describe the form or pattern of the poem. Point out significant examples of sound repetition and explain their function.

The Explication Essay (1) – 300 points

Although you will be writing two explication responses (on the two poems you were assigned to memorize), you will be writing only one explication essay. It’s up to you to decide which of your two poems you’ll use for your essay. So, before you write your explication essay, you will have already

completed steps one through seven for your response, so that you have the “raw materials” to use in order to craft your essay.

Of course, all of the elements of composition still apply. That means that explications need to be guided by a strong, clear **thesis** and supported with references to the text. The thesis should take the form of an **assertion** about the meaning and function of the poem which is your subject. It must be something which you can argue for and prove in your essay. Explications should be **coherent** and **unified**.

8. Your thesis. The final step in pre-writing is penning the working thesis. The thesis should take the form of an assertion about the meaning and purpose of the poem. It must be something which you can argue for and prove in your essay. Everything you say in support of the thesis must reference the text – by quotations, paraphrases, or summary.

Be sure to apply the knowledge you’ve learned through your readings in this unit thus far. Please also read through the sample explication response on Emily Dickinson’s “Because I Could Not Stop For Death” and the sample explication essay on “The Fountain” by Sara Teasdale. This gives you an excellent idea of what I am looking for with this assignment.

In summary

On our “Poetry Presentations Day” you will be prepared with three things:

1. You will dramatically recite your two assigned poems (and briefly introduce each).
2. You will print out and turn in to me your two explication responses.
3. You will print out and turn in to me your 3-page explication essay on one poem. The essay must be written in MLA format, including double-spacing!

NOTE: See the next few pages for an example of an explication and an explication essay as well as the rubric for the poem memorization project.

POETRY RECITATION CRITERIA & TIPS

PHYSICAL PRESENCE

This category is to evaluate the physical nature of the recitation: eye contact, body language, and poise.

Some tips for success:

- Present yourself well and be attentive. Use good posture. Look confident.
- Use eye contact to make a direct connection with the entire audience; don't focus solely on the teacher.
- Nervous gestures, poor eye contact with the audience, and lack of poise or confidence will detract from your grade.
- Relax and be natural. Enjoy your poem.

Qualities of a strong recitation:

- You will appear at ease and comfortable with the audience. You will engage the audience through physical presence, including appropriate body language, confidence, and eye contact—without appearing artificial. All qualities of your physical presence will work together to the benefit of the poem.

VOICE AND ARTICULATION

This category is to evaluate the auditory nature of the recitation: volume, pace, rhythm, intonation, and proper pronunciation.

Some tips for success:

- Project to the audience. You want to capture the attention of everyone, including the people in the back row. However, do not mistake yelling for good volume or projection.
- Proceed at a fitting and natural pace. People may speak or express themselves too quickly when they are nervous, which can make a recitation difficult to understand. Do not speak so slowly that the language sounds unnatural or awkward.
- With rhymed poems, be careful not to recite in a sing-song manner.
- Make sure you know how to pronounce every word in your poem. Articulate.
- Line breaks are a defining feature of poetry, with each one calling for different treatment. Decide if a break requires a pause and, if so, how long to pause.

Qualities of a strong recitation:

- All words will be pronounced correctly, and the volume, rhythm, and intonation will greatly enhance the recitation. Pacing will be appropriate to the poem.

DRAMATIC APPROPRIATENESS

Recitation is about conveying a poem's sense primarily with one's voice. In this way, recitation is closer to the art of oral interpretation than theatrical performance. (Think storyteller or narrator rather than actor.) You may find it challenging to convey the meaning of a poem without acting it out, but a strong performance will rely on a powerful internalization of the poem rather than distracting dramatic gestures.

Some tips for success:

- Do not act out the poem. Too much dramatization can distract your audience from the language of the poem. Your goal should be to help audience members understand the poem more deeply

than they had before hearing your recitation. Movement or accents must not detract from the poem's voice.

- Have confidence that your poem is strong enough to communicate its sounds and messages without a physical illustration. In other words, let the words of the poem do the work.
- Depending on the poem, occasional gestures may be appropriate, but the line between appropriate and overdone is a thin one. When uncertain, leave them out.
- Avoid monotone delivery. If you sound bored, you will project that boredom onto the audience. However, too much enthusiasm can make your performance seem insincere.

Qualities of a strong recitation:

- The dramatization subtly underscores the meaning of the poem without becoming the focal point of the recitation. The style of delivery is more about oral interpretation than dramatic enactment. A low score in this category will result from recitations that have affected character voices and accents, inappropriate tone and inflection, singing, distracting and excessive gestures, or unnecessary emoting.

EVIDENCE OF UNDERSTANDING

This category is to evaluate whether you evidence an understanding of the poem in your recitation.

Some tips for success:

- In order for the audience to understand the poem fully, you must understand the poem fully. Be attentive to the messages, meanings, allusions, irony, tones of voice, and other nuances in your poem.
- Be sure you know the meaning of every word and line in your poem. If you are unsure about something, it will be apparent to the audience. Don't hesitate to ask me for help.
- Think about how you should interpret the tone and volume and voice of your poem. Is it a quiet poem? Is it a boisterous poem? Should it be read more quickly or slowly, with a happy or mournful tone? Your interpretation will be different for each poem, and it is a crucial element of your performance.

Qualities of a strong recitation:

- The meaning of the poem will be powerfully and clearly conveyed to the audience. The student will display an interpretation that deepens and enlivens the poem. Meaning, messages, allusions, irony, tones of voice, and other nuances will be captured by the recitation.
- Before you recite the poem you should clearly state the name of the poem, the author, the date of the poem, and give a brief background about the poem's meaning, purpose and/or theme. You only need give enough info to provide some context for your audience.

ACCURACY

This category evaluates your preparedness and accuracy, including pronunciation of all words. If you skips lines, recite the words incorrectly, or rely on me to prompt you, points also will be subtracted from the accuracy score.

Student name: _____

Poem: _____ Poet: _____

RUBRIC for Poetry Recitation

100 points total

Explanation – Student provides accurate and comprehensible background and context

- 20 points – Excellent
- 18 points – Good
- 16 points – Average
- 12 points -- Weak
- 0 points – Student cannot deliver

Physical Presence & Demeanor

- 20 points – Student is comfortable and confident in reciting the poem
- 18 points – Student is generally confident but fidgets on occasion
- 16 points – Student is fidgety and clearly nervous
- 12 points -- Student is unable to get through the speech but tries
- 0 points – Student cannot deliver

Voice and Articulation – Student uses appropriate inflection, pacing, and volume

- 20 points – Excellent
- 18 points – Good
- 16 points – Average
- 12 points -- Weak
- 0 points – Student cannot deliver

Accuracy – Student properly recites the words and uses correct pronunciations

- 20 points – Student recites speech with no more than one inaccuracy
- 18 points – Student stumbles 2-3 times
- 16 points – Student stumbles 4-5 times
- 12 points -- Student is unable to get through the speech but tries
- 0 points – Student cannot deliver

Dramatic Appropriateness – Student underscores the meaning of the poem without becoming the focal point of the recitation.

- 20 points – Excellent
- 18 points – Good
- 16 points – Average
- 12 points -- Weak
- 0 points – Student cannot deliver

TOTAL POINTS: _____ / 100

SAMPLE POETRY EXPLICATION

John Q. Student
British Literature – Honors
Mr. Rose – B2
January 28, 2012

Because I Could Not Stop For Death by Emily Dickinson

Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.

We slowly drove, he knew no haste,
And I had put away
My labor, and my leisure too,
For his civility.

We passed the school, where children strove
At recess, in the ring;
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.

Or rather, he passed us;
The dews grew quivering and chill,
For only gossamer my gown,
My tippet only tulle.

We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice but a mound.

Since then 'tis centuries, and yet each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses' heads
Were toward eternity.

1. Literal content

This poem reveals the narrator's calm acceptance of death. She illustrates this point by comparing death to a casual carriage ride and personifying Death and Immortality as kind callers. The carriage ride is an analogy for her passing through the different stages of life: youth, middle age, and old age.

2. Summarize

Because she was too involved with life to stop and accept death, Death kindly called on her in a carriage. The only other passenger in the carriage was Immortality. Slowly the carriage travels as she puts away her worldly cares for his civility. She passes through a schoolyard of children playing, a field of ripe grain, and the setting sun. She is dressed only in a thin gown of gossamer, and the air chills her. They stop before her grave, which she calls a house. She says that since then, the centuries have passed shorter than the day that she realized she was heading for an eternal life in the grave.

3. Purpose/Theme

This poem is used to illustrate the narrator's personal view of death. She does not see death as something to be feared; rather, she sees it as a calm, natural journey that everyone must take. The poem tells the reader not to fear death's calling, for it is just another part of nature.

4. Tone

The narrator's tone is calm and casual; she is describing death as just an ordinary, natural occurrence. She achieves this theme through the analogy of a carriage ride, by personifying Death as a courtly caller, and by comparing her grave to a house.

5. Diction

The narrator shows a friendly attitude towards death, using words such as "kindly" and "civility" when referring to it. This adds to the easygoing tone of the poem, and could help to relieve most readers' fears about death.

6. Figurative Language

Personification: Both death and immortality are personified as polite gentlemen callers. The author does this to illustrate her theme that death is not something to be feared, but rather a natural happening. The sun is also personified.

Symbols: The tomb is used as a symbol for a house. This shows how death is the beginning of a new life. Death is compared to a carriage ride. In this way the author illustrates the theme, by comparing death to everyday occurrences. The children playing are used as a symbol for early life and innocence. The ripe grain is a symbol for middle age. The setting sun is a symbol for old age. These scenes show how one must travel through the different stages of life in order to reach death.

Irony: Gossamer is the material that wedding dresses are made out of. It is ironic that she is wearing this material on the way to her death rather than to a wedding, which usually signifies life.

7. Structure

The poem has six four-line stanzas. The rhyming is A-B-C-B. The poem is rhythmic and easy to read.

SAMPLE EXPLICATION ESSAY

John Q. Student
British Literature – Honors
Mr. Rose – B2
January 28, 2012

The Fountain

Fountain, fountain, what do you say
Singing at night alone?
"It is enough to rise and fall
Here in my basin of stone."
But are you content as you seem to be
So near the freedom and rush of the sea?
"I have listened all night to its laboring sound,
It heaves and sags, as the moon runs round;
Ocean and fountain, shadow and tree,
Nothing escapes, nothing is free."
-- Sara Teasdale

Explication Essay
Fountain, Fountain, What Do You Say?

As a direct address to an inanimate object "The Fountain" presents three main conflicts concerning the appearance to the observer and the reality in the poem. First, since the speaker addresses an object usually considered voiceless, the reader may abandon his normal perception of the fountain and enter the poet's imaginative address. Secondly, the speaker not only addresses the fountain but asserts that it speaks and sings, personifying the object with vocal abilities. These acts imply that, not only can the fountain speak in a musical form, but the fountain also has the ability to present some particular meaning ("what do you say" (1)). Finally, the poet gives the fountain a voice to say that its perpetual motion (rising and falling) is "enough" to maintain its sense of existence. This final personification fully dramatizes the conflict between the fountain's appearance and the poem's statement of reality by giving the object intelligence and voice.

The first strophe, four lines of alternating 4- and 3-foot lines, takes the form of a ballad stanza. In this way, the poem begins by suggesting that it will be story that will perhaps teach a certain lesson. The opening trochees and repetition stress the address to the fountain, and the iamb which ends line 1 and the trochee that begins line 2 stress the actions of the fountain itself. The response of the fountain illustrates its own rise and fall in the iambic line 3, and the rhyme of "alone" and "stone" emphasizes that the fountain is really a physical object, even though it can speak in this poem. The second strophe expands the conflicts as the speaker questions the fountain. The first couplet connects the rhyming words "be" and "sea" these connections stress the question, "Is the fountain content when it exists so close to a large, open body of water like the ocean?"

The fountain responds to the tempting "rush of the sea" with much wisdom (6). The fountain's reply posits the sea as "laboring" versus the speaker's assertion of its freedom; the sea becomes characterized by heavily accented "heaves and sags" and not open rushing (7, 8). In this way, the fountain suggests that the sea's waters may be described in images of labor, work, and fatigue; governed by the moon, these waters are not free at all. The "as" of line 8 becomes a key word, illustrating that the sea's waters are not free but commanded by the moon, which is itself governed by gravity in its orbit around Earth. Since the moon, an object far away in the heavens, controls the ocean, the sea cannot be free as the speaker asserts.

The poet reveals the fountain's intelligence in rhyming couplets which present closed-in, epigrammatic statements. These couplets draw attention to the contained nature of all objects in the poem, and they draw attention to the final line's lesson. This last line works on several levels to address the poem's conflicts. First, the line refers to the fountain itself; in this final rhymed couplet is the illustration of the water's perpetual motion in the fountain, its continually recycled movement rising and falling. Second, the line refers to the ocean; in this respect the water cannot escape its boundary or control its own motions. The ocean itself is trapped between landmasses and is controlled by a distant

object's gravitational pull. Finally, the line addresses the speaker, leaving him/her with an overriding sense of fate and fallacy.

The fallacy here is that the fountain presents this wisdom of reality to defy the speaker's original idea that the fountain and the ocean appear to be trapped and free. Also, the direct statement of the last line certainly addresses the human speaker as well as the human reader. This statement implies that we are all trapped or controlled by some remote object or entity. At the same time, the assertion that "Nothing escapes" reflects the limitations of life in the world and the death that no person can escape. Our own thoughts are restricted by our mortality as well as by our limits of relying on appearances. By personifying a voiceless object, the poem presents a different perception of reality, placing the reader in the same position of the speaker and inviting the reader to question the conflict between appearance and reality, between what we see and what we can know.