

Critical Methods First Paper: Poetry Close Reading*

Due: Tuesday 4 February, 2013, start of class, in print

Also submitted to Digication

The ability to close read a text – also called an “explication” (or *explication de texte*) – is foundational for all literary criticism. This assignment will require you to practice the important skills of close reading, literary analysis, and writing about literature.

Choose one poem that appears in our textbook (it can be one we’ve discussed in class or not) and write a short explication of the work (700 words minimum, 900 words max). The poems appear in Appendix 2, pages 195 – 214. Any one of these poems will be fine, and it’s fine if more than one student works on the same poem. Choose one that you find interesting, confusing, exciting, maddening, or otherwise curious to you.

Before you begin, and as you’re writing & revising, I strongly recommend that you review the following sections of our textbook:

- Chapter 10: “Short Essays” pages 168 - 180
- Chapter 11: “Research Papers” pages 181 – 187
- I particularly recommend that you review the section on “Integrating quotations” on pages 184 – 185
- Review Chapter 1 on Poetry, pages 4 - 44
- Consult the “Glossary of Literary Terms,” Appendix 5, pages 287 - 295

As you read and reread take notes:

- Go through the poem carefully, *line by line*. Look up any and all unfamiliar or unclear words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Read and re-read the work until you can summarize the poem in simple words.
- What is the theme or overall effect of the poem?
- Who is the speaker? Who is being addressed? What is the rhetorical situation? How do you know? How are we meant to feel about the speaker?
- What is happening in the poem? How would you paraphrase the poem?
- How does the poem develop? Most good poems have an arc or movement of some kind, in both form and content. How would you describe the development of the poem?
- Consider the poem’s form. Is it a *sonnet*? *Ballad*? *Lyric*? Is it relatively formal or informal? Is there a regular rhyme scheme and meter? What effect do they have? Are there any surprising deviations from the rhyme scheme, meter, or form?
- Identify examples of figurative language. What patterns do you find? What uses of language do you find surprising or interesting? These might include *metaphors*, *puns*, *alliteration*, and *allusions* to other literary works. (Look up these terms).

Things to Remember:

- Your essay should have a title.
- Your introduction should include the title of the poem, the name of the author, and your overall thesis.
- Organize your paper chronologically, moving from the beginning of the poem through the end. Point out the imagery, irony, rhymes, etc. that support your interpretation of the text. While you can't mention every word, focus on the way the elements of poetry work together to create an overall effect. Pay special attention to moments of tension or uncertainty (indeterminacies).
- Your paper, however, should still have a clear organization *of its own*. Don't just list what each line of the poem means; each of *your* paragraphs should be cohesive (everything is on one topic) and coherent (each sentence moves logically from one to the next).

Formatting Guidelines:

- 12-point font size in Times New Roman (or similar font)
- double-space & 1-inch margins all around the page
- use MLA style for citations and for your "Works Cited" page (it need not be a separate page; just put it a few lines below the end of your final paragraph)

Note: I'm sure you can find examples of your poem explicated on the internet. Do not even think about using those sources. This exercise is designed to see what *you* can do. The only internet sites you should use for this assignment is the *Oxford English Dictionary* (to look up words – available via UML library database), the *Purdue Online Writing Lab* (for MLA format), and *Poets.org* (www.poets.org) *only* to look up the form of the poem (if applicable).

Citing Poems

From *MLA Handbook*: In-text citation sample:

In the first stanza of "The Mother," the speaker refers to "the children you got that you did not get, / The damp small pulps with a little or no hair" (lines 2-3). Then, later she speaks of them as "my dim / killed children" (11). A few lines down, she also calls them "My dim dears" (13), and she describes their "straight baby tears" (18).

Works Cited citation sample:

Brooks, Gwendolyn. "The Mother." 1945. *Texts and Contexts: Writing About Literature with Critical Theory*. Ed. Steven Lynn. 5th ed. Boston: Longman, 2011. 49-50. Print.

Other Tips:

- Mark line breaks with a slash
- keep punctuation and capitalization *exactly* as in original (including title – everything in a poem is there for a *reason*)
- cite the line number(s) in parenthesis *before* the punctuation (comma or period)

*I've adapted this assignment from Professor Sue Kim's assignment. Thanks, Professor Kim!