Poetry Explication

Preparation

1. Read the poem silently; then read it aloud to get a feel for its sound. Repeat this step as necessary.

2. Consider the poem as a performance, as though someone were performing it in front of you. Begin your analysis by identifying and describing the speaking voice or voices, the conflicts or ideas, and the language in the poem.

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 the 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?

Details

To analyze the design of the poem, we must focus on the poem’s parts, namely how the poem dramatizes conflicts or ideas in language. Some of the details that require consideration include the following:

- **Form:** Does the poem represent a particular form (sonnet, haiku, 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?
- **Syntax:** Consider the subjects, verbs, and objects of each statement and what these elements reveal about the speaker. Do any statement 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 Do any of the words have multiple or archaic (outdated) meanings that add other meanings to the line? Use the dictionary as a resource to answer this question.
**Patterns**

As you analyze the design line by line, look for certain patterns that develop that may provide insight into the dramatic situation, the speaker’s state of mind, or the poet’s use of details. Common patterns include the following:

- **Rhetorical Patterns:** Statements that follow the same format.
- **Rhyme:** Consider the significance of how the words at the ends of each line are joined by sound; in a poem with no rhymes, consider the importance of the words at the end of each line.
- **Sound Patterns:** Alliteration (repetition of consonant sounds, e.g., baby buggy bumpers) and assonance (repetition of vowel sounds, e.g., men sell the wedding bells) 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.

**Writing the Explication**

The explication should follow the same format as the preparation: begin with the large issues and basic design of the poem and work through each line to the more specific details and patterns.