Poetry Explication

EXPlicate means “to make clear the meaning of, explain” (The American Heritage Dictionary). When we explicate a literary text, we are using part-to-whole analysis to produce a detailed reading that examines various parts of the text (imagery, diction, irony, rhythm, and rhyme in a poem, for example) and discusses the relationships of the parts among one another and with the poem as a whole. An explication discusses WHAT a text means and HOW it means.

This is a two part job:

First, you have to come to a fair and complete reading of the poem yourself, developing an understanding of the poem’s message(s) that accommodates all its components. In addition, you have to notice HOW the poem develops its messages. What experience does the poem provide for a reader? What words and phrases help you reach your experience?

Second, you have to present your reading of the poem and your analysis of how it works to a reader who has the poem available and may have read it, but who has probably not spent as much careful time working with it as you have. Your job is to share your understandings of the poem’s meanings and how it develops those meanings with your reader.

This is not an easy task and it takes time. If you try to shortcut part one, you can count on part two being a dismal failure. You simply won’t have anything to say! Be smart! Use all the tools in the hardware store!

READING TOOLS

SROS/ Three readings (at least) and markings. Notice, notice, notice. Look at structure before reading. Then, in your first reading, sort out the rhetorical situation. Use readings two and three to think about organization (narrative? description? analysis? argument?) and style (tone, diction, syntax, figurative language, rhythm, rhyme, etc.)

Look at the title. How does it help you? Think about how the titles suggested important things to notice in “Three Uses of Chopsticks,” “Abandoned Farmhouse,” “The River-merchant’s Wife: A Letter.” and “The Wife’s Complaint.” The title won’t always be helpful, but don’t neglect it!

Progression. Look for movements of time (verb tenses help here), space, and emotional resonance. Do things change as the poem develops? Is there a turn and where does it begin?
Punctuation. Mark all the periods and colons to see where complete ideas start and stop. Is there other punctuation that needs to be attended to?

Repetition of words, images, phrases (think about “Three Uses of Chopsticks”). Repetition often signals a key to a poem’s meanings. Why might the poet repeat this, and not something else?

WRITING TOOLS
Once you are confident that you have a good understanding of your poem and have noticed some interesting things about the way it works, plunge into your first draft. Freewrite (quickwrite) to get your thoughts on paper quickly. Don’t worry about an introduction or conclusion yet (though you may want to write a “working introduction” to get yourself going). The easiest organizational mode for explicating a poem is stanza by stanza, but you may find that another mode works better for your poem and what you want to say about it.

Print your draft (double or triple space with BIG margins) and read it paragraph by paragraph. Ask yourself, “What else does my reader need to know here?” “Is this in the best order?” Make notes in the margin about what you need to do.