

Explicatory Essay

Definition of Explicatory Essay

“[Explication](#)” means to explain the work of an item of literature. An explication, or “explicatory” [essay](#), is used to explain and interpret a piece of literature such as a poem, a play, a novel, or a short story. It often examines sentences, verses, or passages extracted from longer literary works. Like all other types of essays, however, it also needs a clear [thesis](#) around which body parts focus, ending on a [conclusion](#). The text is cited at different places to support the main [claim](#) and move the [argument](#) forward.

Difference Between an Explicatory Essay and a Critical Essay

A [critical essay](#) is also a literary type of essay. It discusses only the piece’s literary merits and demerits, by comparing it with other literary pieces. An explicatory essay, on the other hand, discusses the full structure of the literary piece.

Examples of Explicatory Essay in Literature

Example #1: *A Poetry of Proximity* (By Solmaz Sharif)

“Language, of course, is constantly being redefined, not just by demagogues, but by people who employ it. Language is we realized. Each word has passed mouth by mouth over the centuries, changed by intonation and accent, changed by wit and utility. Those before us decided that a certain thing—an amaranth, a colander—needs naming. Naming, as Emerson argues, is a poet’s undertaking. It is not happenstance that the poet’s job is the job of language itself—to reach beyond the impossible chasm of two minds, of multiple times, and make

known the inner things. And language, like the other democratic things—freedom of assembly, habeas corpus—is among first casualties of war. The maiming and obliteration of language preempts and attempts to excuse the maiming and obliteration of bodies. Poets, as the caretakers of language, if by no other contested purpose of poetry—to humanize, to emote, to demand a ‘total reaction’ as Muriel Rukeyser puts it—are called upon to respond, to defend their medium.”

This is the best example of an explication of poetry. Solmaz Sharif has given a review of the what is proximity in poetry and how proximity of poetry helps poets to humanize feelings.

Example #2: *The Well Wrought Urn* (by Cleanth Brooks)

“T. S. Eliot, for example, says that ‘this line [“Beauty is truth,” etc.] strikes me as a serious blemish on a beautiful poem; and the reason must be either that I fail to understand it, or that it is a statement which is untrue.’ But even for persons who feel that they do understand it, the line may still constitute a blemish. Middleton Murry, who, after a discussion of Keats’s other poems and his letters, feels that he knows what Keats meant by ‘beauty’ and what he meant by ‘truth,’ and that Keats used them in senses which allowed them to be properly bracketed together, still, is forced to conclude: ‘My own opinion concerning the value of these two lines in the [context](#) of the poem itself is not very different from Mr. T. S. Eliot’s.’ The troubling [assertion](#) is apparently an intrusion upon the poem—does not grow out of it—is not dramatically accommodated to it.”

This is another example of explication of Ode to Urn by John Keats. Cleanth Brooks has reviewed the poem and the role of Urn it along with Eliot’s thought about Keats’ poetry.

Example #3: *Metaphysical Poets* (by T. S. Eliot)

“Not only is it extremely difficult to define metaphysical poetry, but difficult to decide what poets practise it and in which of their verses. The poetry of Donne (to whom Marvell and Bishop King are sometimes nearer than any of the other authors) is late Elizabethan, its feeling often very close to that of Chapman. The ‘courtly’ poetry is derivative from Jonson, who borrowed liberally from the Latin; it expires in the next century with the sentiment and witticism of Prior. There is finally the devotional [verse](#) of Herbert, Vaughan, and Crashaw (echoed long after by Christina Rossetti and Francis Thompson); Crashaw, sometimes more profound and less sectarian than the others, has a quality which returns through the Elizabethan period to the early Italians. It is difficult to find any precise use of [metaphor](#), [simile](#), or other [conceit](#), which is common to all the poets and at the same time important enough as an element of [style](#) to isolate these poets as a group. Donne, and often Cowley, employ a device which is sometimes considered characteristically ‘metaphysical’; the elaboration (contrasted with the condensation) of a [figure of speech](#) to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it.”

This is an example of Eliot’s explication of poetry by metaphysical poets such as Herbert, Vaughan, and Crashaw. He has explicated several of their poems in his essay.

Example #4: *Pride and Prejudice* (by Jane Austen)

“Mr. Bingley was good-looking and gentlemanlike; he had a pleasant countenance, and easy, unaffected manners. ... he was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased; and not all his large estate in Derbyshire could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance, and being unworthy to be compared with his friend.”

Mr. Bingley, the romantic interest of Jane, and his friend, Mr. Darcey, are described in this excerpt through direct [characterization](#). She has admired

Example #5: *The Canterbury Tales* (by Geoffrey Chaucer)

“He yaf nat of that text a pulled hen,
That seith that hunters ben nat hooly men,
Ne that a monk, whan he is recchelees...
His heed was balled, that shoon as any glas,
And eek his face, as he hadde been enoynt.
His eyen stepe, and rolynge in his heed,
That stemed as a forneys of a leed;
His bootes souple, his hors in greet estaat.”

Through monk's portrait, his physical and social life, readers see a [satire](#) of the religious figures that should live a proper monastic life of hard work and deprivation. This is the achievement of the description of Chaucer that he has described a [character](#) through [direct characterization](#).

Function of an Explanatory Essay

An explanatory essay does not directly point out merits and demerits of a poem or a short story. Rather, it discusses the text and its structure. The merits of the work emerge out of its explanatory analysis. Readers fully understand the deficiencies or demerits if there are any, but a critic only discusses the structure and what is presents within the text in a critical essay.