Explication

Definition of Explication

Explication is a literary technique in criticism and research, used for a close analysis of an excerpt or text taken from a lengthy piece of work. It originates from the French word, "*explication de texte*," meaning explanation of a text. It is neither a summary, nor a rewording, nor a [paraphrase](#), but a commentary that reveals the meanings of a literary work. It usually tells about figures of speech, tone, [setting](#), connotations, points of view, themes, contrasts, and anything else that could add to the meaning of a text.

Example #1: *The Scarlet Letter* (by Nathaniel Hawthorne)

Nathaniel Hawthorne opens his novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, with a paragraph that depicts a crowd assembled in front of a prison door. The people are waiting for Hester Prynne to show up with her scarlet letter "A." The author describes the crowd as a "throng," suggesting a mob-like and densely packed group. The mood is not pleasant, but somber – displayed by their "sad-colored" garments, hoods, and gray hats.

Another interesting description about the men's hats is that they were "steeple-crowned," which suggests that the people of the town are associated with the church that had punished Hester. The author's description of women as "intermixed" with men, alludes to the people in town lacking individuality. The use of passive [voice](#) "was assembled" further implies lack of individuality.

Example #2: *Traveling Through the Dark* (by William Stafford)

In the opening stanza of his blank verse poem "Traveling through the Dark," William Stafford ponders over the connection between the nature and technology, without giving any judgment. However, inviting the readers to think carefully about what would be the consequences of such a world human beings are creating. This stanza sets tone and setting of the scene. The tone is direct, simple and conversational as it is always in telling a story.

In the first and the second lines, the speaker describes how he comes across a dead deer at night while driving. In the third and fourth lines, the speaker describes setting by telling about the narrow road along with a running river nearby. He suggests how to get rid of its dead body from narrow road by pushing it into the canyon. The poet introduces the metaphor of the journey by comparing the road with life and journey. We also get a lot about the speaker who is not going for the first time on the dark country road.

Example #3: *A Tale of Cities* (by Charles Dickens)

In his very first paragraph of *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens demonstrates both similarity and contrast existed between the two countries, England and France during the French Revolution. This passage presents an image of chaos and turmoil, which ensue due to a clash between extreme ideas between the two different countries and their people.

The tone of this story is both chaotic and melancholic, presenting a theme of duality. In fact, Dickens has used paradoxes to establish the plot and theme of this novel. The rich were enjoying lives of abundance, while, on the other hand, the poor were suffering from deprivation. In England, there was a lack of security, and in France, the clergymen practiced inhuman activities against the masses. In other words, this passage emphasizes the issue of juxtaposition of these two countries, and sets up the basis for upcoming events in the novel.

Example #4: *The Road Not Taken* (by Robert Frost)

In the final stanza of his poem *The Road Not Taken*, Frost talks about his dilemma of coming upon two diverging paths, and not knowing which one

to choose. The third line is very important, as it delivers an idea of choosing between the two divergent paths.

The tone in this stanza shifts from regretful to optimistic. The two roads symbolically represent individual choices. The mood is neither depressed nor unhappy, but the poet sighs because he knows what the complexities our life may have for him. Whether he has chosen a right or a wrong path, it has a compelling impact on his life. The phrase "less traveled" suggests the theme of individualism.

Function

Explication not only illuminates a piece of literature, but also serves to remind the readers about its historical setting and formal properties of style and language. It does not give deeper level meanings, but explores an explicit view of a piece of writing. In fact, it brings clarity to certain meanings of a work. It is also very helpful for the students to evaluate the books and articles they read during their academic career.