

Writing Center

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Poetry Explication or Analysis

Poetry explication or analysis is a method of literary criticism involving a detailed examination of each part of a poem or work, and an exposition of the relationship of these parts to each other and the work as a whole. This comprehensive treatment attempts to deal with all major elements of a poem—and the ways that the various parts relate to one another and to the unified meaning of the poem. An essay that explicates a work or a passage interprets or clarifies a poem's meaning. Explication means “unfolding”.

In order to interpret the meaning of a poem, it must be analyzed, that is, the reader focuses on a single aspect of the poem, for example, visual imagery, the use of onomatopoeia, or the characterization of the speaker. The reader may also focus on the use of irony, the use of color, or the use of a fixed form such as the sonnet.

Understanding a Poem

The ideas of the poem

1. Read the poem several times. Read it aloud at least once.
2. Write your immediate response to the poem.
3. Look up the definitions of any unfamiliar words.
4. What is the setting, the time and place, of the poem?
5. Paraphrase (rewrite in your own words) the poem.

The emotions of the poem

1. Look closely at the word and their connotative meanings.
2. What is the poem's tone (the speaker's attitude toward the subject and theme)?

The literary techniques of the poem

1. Look for metaphors, similes, personifications, symbols, metonymy, irony, etc.
2. What are the major images, both literal and figurative?
3. What specific elements contribute to sound, for example, rhyme and verse patterns, rhythm, and other sound effects such as alliteration?

The style of the poem

1. Consider the level of language and the sentence structure of the poem.
2. Does the poet use deceptively simple language to express complex ideas? Or are both the language and ideas comparatively simple to grasp?

3. Is the sentence structure complicated? Is the language elevated and formal?

The theme of the poem

1. The ideas of the poem all relate to, support and enhance on the theme or central idea of the poem.
2. Based upon the ideas of the poem, state the theme, the underlying meaning, of the poem in one complete sentence. This sentence will be a general statement about human nature or the human condition.
3. Remember the theme of the poem will be the thesis of your essay and, as in the case of short stories, there is no one correct statement of theme.

The critique of the poem

1. Give your personal evaluation of and reaction to the poem.
2. Write a conclusion that ties together everything that you have said about the poem.
3. This section may include some researched background on the poet or and the poem, if you so desire.

Outline for an Explication of a Poem

- I. Introduction
 - A. Lead-in
 - B. Identify the poem, the poet, the speaker and the situation
 - C. Thesis: a one-sentence statement of theme
- II. Ideas – a careful paraphrase/interpretation of all the ideas expressed in the poem
- III. Emotions – a discussion of the emotions expressed within the poem
- IV. Literary techniques – identify and discuss figurative language, imagery, symbols, etc.
- V. Style – a brief discussion of language and sentence structure
- VI. Critique – your reaction to the poem, some background (if needed), and a conclusion

A Critical Analysis of “Richard Cory” by Edwin Arlington Robinson

Edwin Arlington Robinson’s “Richard Cory” contrasts the discontented, frustrated lives of small town people with the seemingly successful and wealthy existence of their hero, Richard Cory. As the ordinary men compare their daily grind of denial with the glitter of Cory’s world, they envy him. But, as the poem reveals, their envy is foolish. For Richard Cory’s final action reveals a different person from the townspeople’s image of him, a person who has been suffering

in secret. The poem's final lines indicate that people who are caught up in their own pain fail to see the anguish in others.

The poem begins by describing Cory as he appears to others. The speaker of "Richard Cory" speaks for the people of a small town, and he begins by describing the citizens' interest in Cory. Whenever Cory came to town, those below him in rank, the "people on the pavement," looked at him. He was in every way a gentleman, clean-cut, handsome, and aristocratically slender.

But, the speaker continues, Cory did not flaunt his status; he was always "quietly arrayed" and "human when he talked." Still, a mere "Good morning" from Richard Cory sets people's hearts racing because they are in awe of him. He seems to glitter as he moves among them.

Not only is Cory handsome and fine; he is rich and genteel, "admirably schooled in every grace," knowing all the social graces, a true aristocrat. Yet this seeming perfection and the townspeople's lack of money, social background, and social skills create a distance between Cory and the others. They see him as a model of what they have been denied: "we thought that he was everything/To make us wish that we were in his place."

The townspeople remain stuck in their rut, waiting for the "light," perhaps for the hope of better times. Seeing Cory, who has so much, they are discontented, for they must do without the luxuries of life ("the meat"), and they are dissatisfied with what they do have ("they cursed the bread"). The final lines of the poem reveal another person's hidden pain, as Richard Cory, so quietly dazzling, goes home and puts "a bullet through his head." The ideal man, the model for the townspeople, is revealed as a person different from other's fantasies of him.

As Robinson contrasts the idealized Cory perceived by the town with the real man, he attributes a range of emotions to both the ordinary people and the extraordinary man. The town, for example, is in awe of Cory, he is so far above those "on the pavement" that a few words from him can set pulses to flutter. They admire his manners, his money, and his clean, slim appearance. And, of course, they envy him and wish to be him: "we thought he was everything/To make us wish that we were in his place." He has what they do not have, and he is what they cannot be. They feel unhappy with what they do have – the "bread" they curse, and they wait only for something better, some "light" in their dark lives.

Cory, on the other hand, begins as an enigma. We cannot, at first, be sure what he feels. He is always so quiet, so polite, so gently, that he seems utterly in control of his existence. Not until the end of the poem, in Cory's suicide, do we, like the town, see the hidden despair.

The impact of Robinson's poem is heightened by his use of poetic techniques. One of the most effective techniques is the use of irony, developed by contrasting the town's image of Richard Cory with the reality later exposed. To the townspeople, Cory is associated with regal images; he is an "imperial slim" gentleman "from sole to crown," richer "than a king," who "glittered" when he walked. The people are surprised that he is even "human" when he talks, an ironic statement because they fail to see the human suffering that conflicts with their image of Cory. And, ironically, seeing only the royal image of the man, they wish they were "in his place."

Other techniques reinforce this contrast. There is the metaphor of a hero who can set one's blood to racing ("he fluttered pulses"). In a sight image, Cory "glittered" in light, while the townspeople "waited" for their own "light," perhaps a symbol of the happiness of which they felt deprived. Symbolically, they hate what they have (they "cursed the bread") and must do without what they feel they need ("went without meat"). Sound imagery builds the tension of the poem, with its hidden and open miseries; in the beginning every sound is soft. Cory is "quietly arrayed", there is the quiet beat of fluttering pulses, the curses of discontented people, and "one calm summer night." But then there is the loud climatic sound of a gunshot.

There is a frequent use of alliteration, another technique related to sound, as well. There is, for example, the repetition of the "p" of, "we people of the pavement" which connects the speaker to the streets. There is much use of the "w" and "th" sounds in lines such as, "In fine, we thought he was everything/To make us wish that we were in his place." Through such sound devices, as well as through sight imagery, symbols and images, the poet enhances his contrast between a town's illusions and its sudden awakening to reality.

The style of "Richard Cory" expresses the poem's meaning simply and clearly. The language is easily understood and the sentence structure uncomplicated. Robinson also uses the first person point of view so the reader participates in the poem as one of the townspeople, thus emphasizing the irony of the ending couplet even more.

Conveying its ironic message through simple language, "Richard Cory" is an effective poem. It expresses an emotion that many of us feel: envy for those we think lead happier lives than we

do. And it reveals the foolishness of such envy and the secret pain and sorrow in an individual's life.

This theme of the individual in isolation is common to the work of Edward Arlington Robinson. Many of his poems, such as "Miniver Cheevy," "Mr. Flood's Party," and "Bewick Finzer," describe individuals who cannot fulfill their dreams or who consider themselves failures.

Robinson, an American poet who wrote in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, explores the inner lives of such individuals, people who face defeat and who still try to maintain some moral values. His work challenges us to look beneath the surface of others' lives and to look within ourselves as well. If we do so, we may, like the townspeople of "Richard Cory", attain some insight into what a "happy life" truly involves.