

## How to Write an Explication

### Key points to start:

- It's your job to explain everything to your readers. Assume they know nothing, and you have to go into great detail in your explanations (explication).
- You must include all poetic traits critical to the meaning of the poem. This is NOT like a five paragraph essay or literary analysis where you only discuss three examples/traits. You must explicate EVERYTHING that is relevant.

### 1st paragraph/Introduction:

- Identify title and poet
- In 1-2 sentences, state the literal meaning of the poem.
- State the figurative meaning of the poem or theme/main message.

### Body Paragraphs

- \* Using the Explication Checklist, identify all the "keys" that are needed to unlock the poem's meaning.
- Determine which "key" is the most important to understanding the poem's meaning. Discuss it first, then continue with all the other "keys", discussing them in order from most important to least important.
- Quote lines from the poem to illustrate or "prove" your point, and using parenthetical documentation, cite the line number for the quote.
- Explain and interpret the poem simultaneously. Explain what a line or passage means and then insert your opinion or interpretation of the significance of the line/passage.
- Pepper your explanation with literary terms. Use terminology, such as "simile," "metaphor," "iambic pentameter," etc. to teach the poem to your readers.
- Be sure to use all poetic terminology accurately. It is a deadly sin to call a "simile" a "metaphor". You'll lose points.
- Don't confuse the poet with the speaker/persona, unless you are sure they are the same. Most likely, they aren't. Identify the speaker.
- Change paragraphs as you start a new topic to explicate. You do not need to have topic sentences, but you do need to proceed logically so your readers do not get lost.

### Conclusion:

- Discuss the significance of the poem. "So what?" "Who cares?"
- Universalize the meaning, if possible.

## The Poetry Explication

### "Base Details" Siegfried Sassoon

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,  
I'd live with scarlet majors at the Base.  
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.  
You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,  
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel.  
Reading the Roll of Honor. "Poor young chap,"  
I'd say—"I used to know his father well;  
Yes we've lost heavily in this last scrap"  
And when the war is done and youth stone dead;  
I'd toddle safely home and die—in bed.

In Siegfried Sassoon's "Base Details," the speaker, a young ordinary soldier, says that his life would be different if he were an older officer. However, the sarcastic tone of the speaker reveals his true thoughts, developing the poem's central message that officers' indifference unnecessarily leads their troops to death.

The narrator, speaking in first person in this dramatic monologue, speculates that if he were a major, he too would have a "puffy, petulant face" (4) and would spend his time "guzzling and gulping in the best hotel" (5). The speaker believes the majors send young men to die in battle, and safe from the deadly bullets in their headquarters, they read the list of those dead, making callous comments like "Poor young chap," and "Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap" (6,8). To the speaker these remarks indicate that the officers do not seem overly concerned about loss of soldiers' lives but more about their own indolent ones. The speaker resents that the majors will live to die "safely at home" in their beds (10). In addition to literally drawing a contrast between the lives and the deaths of enlisted men and officers, Sassoon imparts a message that the system is unfair and that the officers should not ask soldiers to do what they are unwilling to do themselves.

The poet's sarcastic tone works effectively. The soldier sees the irony in the fact that the officers send the soldiers to die in battle, but they themselves stay behind the lines indulging in luxurious excesses. Through his diction, the soldier expresses this contempt. The majors are puffy-faced and he pictures them "guzzling and gulping" (5), which implies that they are fat and out of shape from eating and drinking too much. He also refers to them as "petulant" (4), a word often used to describe a spoiled child. Again, in the phrase "toddle safely home" (10), the reference would fit a child. Meanwhile, the soldiers are described as "glum heroes" (3), which has the connotation of serious but uncomplaining sadness because of the situation they find themselves in. The speaker also belittles the majors by portraying them as uncaring when they hear the news of the dead soldiers. They refer, too lightly, to the battle in which many soldiers die as "a scrap" (8), and express concern only because they knew the father. Further, the word "speed" in the phrase "speed glum heroes up the line to death" (3) suggests that they issue orders which lead to unnecessary deaths without a second thought. The irony of the poem is epitomized in the play on words in the title, "Base Details." The word "base" can mean not only a military base, but also "of inferior quality." Understanding this double meaning enhances the reader's understanding of the poem and Sassoon's attitude toward war.

A British soldier in World War I, Sassoon well understood the military life. Raised in the carefree, idyllic life of the British upperclasses, Sassoon was at first a strong believer in the righteousness of the war; however, later on his attitude turned negative as he became angered by those who profited at the expense of others. "Base Details" is an example of his often expressed anti-war sentiment.

Technically this lyric poem is organized around an alternating ABABDCDEE rhyme scheme. The rhymed couplet at the end is reminiscent of Shakespeare's use of couplets to express key ideas, in this case, Sassoon's own contempt. Alliteration scattered throughout the poem, such as "puffy petulant face" and "guzzling and gulping" also draw attention to the characteristics Sassoon dislikes most in the officers.

Short, direct, "Base Details" stands testament not only to the speaker's disdain of the war's commanders, but to Sassoon's as well. Though Sassoon used bullets in battle to attack the Germans, he used words to target his own countrymen who sacrificed young lives needlessly. The poem's message speaks to all eras and people who see the futility of war.