**Paper #2: Poetry Explication**

A good poem is like a puzzle—the most fascinating part is studying the individual pieces carefully and then putting them back together to see how beautifully the whole thing fits together. A poem can have a number of different “pieces” that you need to look at closely in order to complete the poetic “puzzle.” This sheet explains one way to attempt an explication of a poem, by examining each “piece” of the poem separately. (An explication is simply an explanation of how all the elements in a poem work together to achieve the total meaning and effect.)

Include a title (often something clever based off of the poem) and a subtitle (often “An explication of Poe’s ‘The Raven’”). Please include the works cited at the end, likely just our textbook. Please use one of the poems from our book.

1.         Examine the situation in the poem. After reading the poem carefully, decide what you think the poem is trying to say. What is its theme? Don’t just say “this poem is about X.” Tell me what the poem is saying ABOUT X. So, for example, don’t say “this poem is about springtime.” Rather, say something like “The speaker in this poem finds the renewed life of springtime a painful reminder of her husband’s death.”

a.      Does the poem tell a story? Is it a narrative poem? If so, what events occur?

b.      Does the poem express an emotion or describe a mood? Is it a lyric?

c.       Poetic voice: Who is the speaker? Is the poet speaking to the reader directly or is the poem told through a fictional persona? To whom is he speaking? Can you trust the speaker?

d.     Tone: What is the speaker’s attitude toward the subject of the poem? What sort of tone of voice seems to be appropriate for reading the poem out loud? What words, images, or ideas give you a clue to the tone?

1. Examine the structure of the poem:

a.      Form: Look at the number of lines, their length, their arrangement on the page. How does the form relate to the content? Is it a traditional form (e.g., sonnet, villanelle) or “free form”? Why do you think the poet chose that form for his poem?

b.      Movement: How does the poem develop? Are the images and ideas developed chronologically, by cause and effect, by free association? Does the poem circle back to where it started, or is the movement from one attitude to a different attitude (e.g., from despair to hope)?

c.       Syntax: How many sentences are in the poem? Are the sentences simple or complicated? Are the verbs in front of the nouns instead of in the usual “noun, verb” order? Why?

d.     Punctuation: What kind of punctuation is in the poem? Does the punctuation always coincide with the end of the poetic line? If so, this is called an end-stopped line. Is there any punctuation in the middle of a line? Why do you think the poet would want you to pause halfway through the line?

e.      Title: What does the title mean? How does it relate to the poem itself?

1. Examine the language of the poem:

a.      Diction or Word Choice: is the language colloquial, formal, simple, unusual?

b.      Do you know what all the words mean? If not, look them up.

c.       What moods or attitudes are associated with words that stand out?

d.     Allusions: Are there any allusions (references) to something outside the poem, such as events or people from history, mythology, religion?

e.      Imagery: Look for words that evoke one or more of the senses. What associations do these images suggest?

f.        Figurative Language: Look at metaphors, similes, analogies, personification, symbols. How does this figurative language added to the meaning of the poem or intensify its effect?

After looking at these literary techniques, decide which three or four of them you think are MOST important in this poem. For example, you might choose 1) a central **symbol**; 2) the **form** of the poem; 3) the figurative language, and 4) the pattern of dark **imagery.**

1. Examine the musical devices of the poem:

a.      Rhyme scheme: Does the rhyme occur in a regular pattern, or irregularly? Is the effect formal, satisfying, musical, funny, disconcerting?

b.      Rhythm or Meter: in most languages, there is a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a word or words in a sentence. In poetry, the variation of stressed and unstressed syllables and words has a rhythmic effect. What is the tonal effect of the rhythm here?

c.       Other “sound effects”” alliteration, assonance, consonance repetition. What tonal effect do they have here?