

**Paper #1: Formal Analysis of a Poem**  
**1300 – 1600 words (~4 – 6 pages)**

Please refer to the syllabus for the due date!

In a formal analysis of a poem (sometimes called an "explication"), you focus on the specific details of the text—on the words, considering how the formal properties of verse (what we've covered in the first five weeks of class) contribute to some overall meaning or significance in the text. Usually the analysis moves through the text sequentially; it discusses how the meaning of the text unfolds as readers make their way through it. An explication makes explicit the implicit points of the poem, and then goes on to explain how the poem does this by focusing on the formal properties most relevant to the particular text.

A formal analysis is an argumentative and thesis-driven paper—it's not just a summary or a paraphrase of the text. And while you'll need to examine the poem bearing in mind all the formal properties of poetry, your actual paper will focus only on those formal properties most relevant to this particular text. Explications usually move through the text sequentially, but not mechanically (that is, avoid writing a paper that's essentially a list: "In line one, the speaker says \_\_\_\_\_, and the reader understands \_\_\_\_\_. In line two, he goes on to say \_\_\_\_\_, and the reader understands \_\_\_\_\_.")

In *preparing* a formal analysis, you should examine every formal aspect of verse in the poem you're analyzing: speaker and tone, situation, figurative language, rhetorical strategies, structure—including rhythm and rhyme, verse form, and stanzaic form. Some of these formal properties will be more important than others to any specific poem; you'll ultimately ignore in your actual paper those formal elements that are less significant. (If rhyme isn't an issue in a poem, then don't mention it.) But in writing your notes on the text you should consider them all; a poem that doesn't sound as if it rhymes initially may prove to rely on internal rhyme or near rhyme. Don't make assumptions.

Your formal analysis should lay out a specific thesis about the poem (e.g., "In Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'Spring and Fall' a young child's innocent and perhaps naïve response to a natural event inspires an older companion to reconsider the nature of human loss"); the body of the paper should move through the poem systematically. For an examples, look at Eagleton's discussion of Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (96 – 99). Eagleton focuses on what rhyme and meter in the poem contribute to its tone; he doesn't devote nearly as much time to "symbols" (although most people will agree that this poem lends itself to a symbolic reading). Eagleton builds to a thesis about the poem, rather than stating the thesis in the beginning; you may or may not be persuaded by his interpretation, but it's a good model of close attention to detail and how an accumulation of observations (and especially *focused* observation) can lead to a larger statement about a text's meaning. You might also consider his reading of Wordsworth's "Solitary Reaper," where he moves through the poem a stanza at a time, as the reader herself experiences the poem on a first reading (149 – 153).

You should also refer to the handout "Lit Crit Papers: What Faculty Know but Don't Always Articulate." It covers a variety of missteps that students take in critical essays. There's a link to it on the readings page of the course website.