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## Explicating Poetry: Shakespeare's Sonnet 46

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#### **Abstract:**

The term “explication” comes from a Latin participle of *explico*, which means to “unfold” or “disentangle.” The term is often applied to philosophy and to literature; in literature, it has become a procedure very important to New Criticism. In the process of explication, a reader forges a **detailed analysis** of the **structural and figurative components** within a work, focusing on **ambiguities, multiple possibilities of interpretation, and interrelationships** between various elements of the text.

This lesson introduces students to explication through the reading of a complex poem, practice explicating it as a class, and reading a model explication about the poem.

This lesson can take 40-60 minutes, depending on the size of your class.

#### **Common Core Standards:**

RL.9-10.1. Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RL.9-10.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

#### **Procedure:**

1. Distributing copies if necessary, ask a student to read Shakespeare's Sonnet 46 (“Mine eye and heart are at a mortal war”; **see Appendix 1**) aloud.
2. Lead a discussion on the meaning of the poem. Begin by finding terms with which they may not be familiar (e.g., “cide,” “impaneled”).
3. Students may at first be confounded by the language, so help them look for patterns. They should note the language of conflict and war, as well as the use of courtroom terms, especially later in the poem.
4. Focus on the first two lines, as they are central to the theme of the poem. You may discuss **metonymy** in the use of “eye” and “heart.” High school students tend to be very conscious of this conflict between physical and emotional desire or love.
5. Develop Shakespeare's argument by asking the students to further define the relationship between eye and heart in this poem. This will help them see and examine some of the ambiguities essential to poetry explication.
6. Ask the students what the poem seems to conclude about the relationship (and tension) between eye and heart.

7. Once discussion has been exhausted (usually 15 minutes or so), distribute the attached sample paper “A New Twist on the Courtroom Drama”<sup>1</sup> (see **Appendix 2**). Have the class read it aloud, going around the room with each student reading a full sentence.
8. Discuss the paper as a class. What is the thesis? Note when the paper points out something that the students themselves highlighted during your discussion; this can make explication seem less alien and more of a natural analytical process when reading poetry.
9. If students don’t notice, be sure to point out how the sample paper links structure and content, discussing variations of meter and connecting them to thematic points.
10. Encourage students to discuss other strengths and weaknesses they see in the poetry.

**Materials:**

Sonnet 46

Sample Paper “A New Twist on the Courtroom Drama”

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<sup>1</sup> Also available online (as of 06/2012) at <http://www.unm.edu/~aobermei/Eng200/samplepapers/assignment2sonnet46/index.html>. This sample paper is posted on the website of Dr. Anita Obermeier, a professor of English and Medieval Studies at the University of New Mexico.

## Appendices

Appendix 1

Sonnet 46

by William Shakespeare

Mine eye and heart are at a mortal war  
How to divide the conquest of thy sight;  
Mine eye my heart thy picture's sight would bar,  
My heart mine eye the freedom of that right.  
My heart doth plead that thou in him dost lie --  
A closet never pierced with crystal eyes --  
But the defendant doth that plea deny  
And says in him thy fair appearance lies.  
To 'cide this title is impaneled  
A quest of thoughts, all tenants to the heart,  
And by their verdict is determined  
The clear eye's moiety and the dear heart's part:  
As thus; mine eye's due is thy outward part,  
And my heart's right thy inward love of heart.

Appendix 2  
Sample Paper

[Warner 1](#)

Connor Warner

Dr. Obermeier

English 200

1 March 2000

[\[comment1\]](#) A New Twist on the Court Room Drama:

An Examination of Physicality and Emotional Attachment in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 46" [\[comment2\]](#)

In "Sonnet 46" of his works about the blond young man, William Shakespeare presents a unique view on the classic debate about physical lust versus emotional love. The poet struggles to decide if his feelings are based upon superficial desire and infatuation, represented by the "eye" (1), or true love independent of the physical world, symbolized by the "heart" (1). With a deft movement from violent imagery in the first two lines to the civilized language of law, Shakespeare dismisses the commonly accepted view of a battle between the eye and the heart.

[\[comment3\]](#) The diction of warfare denotes two very separate alien sides clashing in destructive confrontation. Shakespeare advances quickly away from such wording, setting his debate in the civilized context of a courtroom. While the parties engaged in a lawsuit are competing, they are not seeking the destruction of their opposition. A common bond exists between the two sides of a legal case, the bond of society. They are parts of the same whole, or they would not be bound by the laws of that whole. The same holds for the eye and the heart, as well as their metaphysical counterparts, lust and spiritual bonding. The eye and the heart are but organs that make up the body. Physical desire and emotional attraction are just aspects of the overlying concept of love.

[\[comment4\]](#) This is Shakespeare's final point: both physicality and emotional attachment combine to form the powerful force humans know as love.

The opening quatrain of "Sonnet 46" sets up the conflict of infatuation versus true love, acknowledging the classic view of a battle between opposing forces, but swiftly moving beyond such a black and white portrayal of the issue. The first line of the poem seems to say that Shakespeare, like many others, sees infatuation and spiritual attraction as hostile, warring parties. He even chooses to modify "war" (1) with the word "mortal" (1), signifying a conflict to the death with no possibility for reconciliation or pacification. But in the next line he contradicts himself. Though the poet continues to utilize martial imagery such as "conquest" (2), his choice of verbs subtly changes the meaning. [\[comment5\]](#) "[D]ivide" (2) suggests that both parties in the conflict will receive some portion of the prize, an unlikely occurrence if the eye and heart are truly in "mortal war" (1). Shakespeare underscores this change in direction by substituting a trochee for the standard iamb as the initial foot of the line. Already, the poet is shifting focus away from the idea of warfare and onto the image of a courtroom.

The second quatrain completes that movement and establishes equality between the two sides. Words of violence are conspicuously absent from this point on in the poem, replaced by legal vocabulary, such as "plead" (5), "deny" (7), and "lies" (8). [\[comment6\]](#) No longer bitter enemies, the eye and the heart become the plaintiff and the "defendant" (7) in a civil dispute over the possession of Shakespeare's love. The diction in this section of the poem also serves to contradict the traditional negative connotations of infatuation. Physical attraction is often portrayed as [\[comment7\]](#) coarse or unclean, but Shakespeare disagrees. He describes eyes, the tangible representation of lust, as "crystal" (6), an adjective that implies colorless beauty and perfect purity. [\[comment8\]](#) Crystals are used in folklore to divine the future, to perceive the truth,

and, by using this word to modify eyes, Shakespeare implies that physical attraction stands on equal footing with true love. The meter echoes this equality. Lines 5-6, and 7-8, which present the arguments of the heart and eye respectively, are identical sets of rhymed, un-variated iambic pentameter, separated only by an initial trochee in line 7 which underscores the clear distinction between the heart's contention and that of the eye.

The third quatrain builds suspense, as the poet's internal trial nears conclusion. Having established equality between lust and true love, Shakespeare moves on to introduce the fulcrum that adjudicates the balance between the two--the mind. Continuing with his legal imagery, the poet builds a "quest of thoughts" (10) to try the case and "determine [. . .]" (11) the "verdict" (11). He throws in a curious twist, informing his readers that the members of the jury are all "tenants to the heart" (10). In doing so, Shakespeare once again calls to mind the classic view of the heart's pure love versus the tainted infatuation of the eye. Despite the apparent bias of the mind toward the heart, the poet does not now share that bias. He once again describes the eyes with diction of purity and cleanliness, naming them "clear" (12). The conflict between eye and heart is manifesting itself in the conflicting message of the third quatrain. Leading his readers into the terminal couplet, the author builds tension by utilizing alternating spondaic and pyrrhic feet in line 12. [\[comment9\]](#) This produces an effect of slowness followed by celerity, almost like a human consumed by indecision, reaching a solution and then falling back into doubt.

Such a build-up leads readers to expect a dramatic conclusion, a declaration of victory in favor of either true love or infatuation; but Shakespeare provides only a simple, anti-climactic division between the two. [\[comment10\]](#) The couplet seems to blend in with the rest of the poem, having almost no metrical variation and a recycled rhyme scheme. Usually the final couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet presents an ironic turning point, and therefore often begins with an initial

trochee in line 13 to sign-post that reversal. This couplet is different. Because Shakespeare is proving that physicality and emotional attachment are simply parts of the same whole, he strives not for reversal in the couplet, but for harmony. Therefore, he begins line 13 with an iambic foot, "As thus" (13), allowing the third quatrain to flow directly into couplet. The poet also repeats the rhyme of "part" (13) and "heart" (14) from lines 12 and 10 of the third quatrain, tying the couplet even closer to the body of the poem. Shakespeare presents a common sense solution to the problem, declaring the entire conflict to be almost irrelevant. Lust is based on external aesthetic appeal, so the poet bestows the "outward part" (13) of the poem's young object upon the eye. True love draws its strength from an internal bonding of spirits, and therefore Shakespeare deeds the "inward love" (14) to the heart. And these two halves together form love.

#### Work Cited

Shakespeare, William. "Sonnet 46." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Eds. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt. 7th ed. 2 vols. New York: Norton, 2000. 1: 1033.