

Passage Explication

STEPS & EXAMPLE - *The Great Gatsby*

An explication is a mini-essay (a page or less) on a very short passage (a paragraph or two) from a literary work. In an explication, it is important that you discuss a thematic issue that the novel addresses. You only examine the issue as it is presented by the passage and through close reading: A close reading is an analysis of the passage's language and literary elements.

An explication should:

- **Name & Identify:** the work and the author, the speaker and/or characters involved, the context of the passage and the thematic issue that you will examine.
- **Argument:** How the passage illustrates the novel's attitude toward or stance on a specific thematic issue.
- **Support** this argument: literary elements that create the meanings of the passage and/or the work as a whole. Be specific. Refer to (and quote) specific words and phrases.
- **Explain:** How the passage is significant in relation to the whole work.
- **Focus:** Focus on the specifics that support your argument.

STEPS

- **READ**
 - Reading the passage carefully and underlining any interesting words or phrases that catch your eye and relate topics/themes.
 - Circle any words that you don't understand. Look them up.
- **IMAGERY**
 - Look for the ways that the author uses figurative language to convey meanings.
 - What affect do the words s/he chose have on this passage's significance to the thematic issue that you are examining.
- **DICTION**
 - What words or other characteristics "jump out" at you or seem particularly striking or even "weird"?
 - What words seem to have multiple meanings? What connotations do these words carry? How do these connotations relate to your topic?
- **ELEMENTS**
 - You might consider any of the following that apply: POV, tone, style, sentence structure (long,
 - Remember, these elements only matter in so far as they affect your interpretation of the topic you are investigating.

Passage Explication
Example - *The Great Gatsby*

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The Great Gatsby's Fantastic Ashes

“This is a Valley of Ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of gray cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-gray men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight.” (Fitzgerald 17).

This passage, the opening of the second chapter of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, has the narrator Nick Carraway thinking about the Valley of Ashes between West Egg and New York City. Though his descriptions are poetic, they refer to a relatively worn out and oppressed region that helps highlight the differences between the rich and the poor.

Fitzgerald accomplishes this effect by using a set of semi-sarcastic words and uncanny images. The nouns in the area “farm,” “ridges,” “hills,” “gardens,” “houses,” and “chimneys” all would seem to describe a normal rural environment—yet all these characteristic signs of civilization are composed of dust instead of actual materials. This Valley, then is “fantastic” only in that the dust has entirely replaced the physical environment. That the “ashes grow like wheat” indicates that debris has replaced actual agricultural production, while the constitution of the men as themselves in the form of ashes dehumanizes them and makes them the mere result of the smog. The imagery speaks to both the squalor caused by the roaring twenties culture and the relative blindness of many Americans to those effects: the dust in the valley is the direct result of New York industry—and of the wish to outsource unsightly waste. The “impenetrable cloud” and “obscure operations” stresses how that outsourcing has allowed those with money to entirely ignore the effects of their exploits.

This passage is thus a condemnation of the social and economic class systems in the novel. Fitzgerald implies that people may travel through the Valley between West Egg and New York City, but they relate to its environment only as various combinations of undifferentiated dust.

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Class Activity - *The Great Gatsby*

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The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald
Chapter 9 p119

I couldn't forgive him or like him, but I saw that what he had done was, to him, entirely justified. It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy — they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made. . . .
