**Writing about Literature: Some Guidelines**

**Explication Vs. Analysis**

The most valuable critical analysis of literature points out interesting things going on in the work. Usually the student will explicate (unfold or spread out) or analyze (separate into parts in order to understand functions and relationships) a work or part of a work.

An **explication** is ordinarily a line-by-line or, in a story, an episode-by-episode commentary on what is going on. **It is not a rewording of the story**, but an explanation of the meaning of the work. To this end it calls attention to the significance of certain lines or words, characters, episodes, symbols and so on. But it deals with the significance of the whole story.

An **analysis** is the study of one or more parts of the story. It is more common than an explication because it is easier to limit the topic. An analysis may, for example, consider only the function of the narrator or the setting of a story; it might discuss the role of one character and his or her significance to the story, or the relationship between two characters; it might compare and contrast the theme or some other elements of two stories.

**As you are reading your story for a possible thesis, ask yourself some questions:**

1. What is this part, character, etc. doing? That is, why is this scene in the novel or play?
2. How was this aspect accomplished? That is, how did the author make this character funny or dignified or pathetic? How did he or she communicate the idea to me?

**Suggested “areas” for analysis**

**Plot**—structure of, interlocking of episodes, the ending  
**Theme**—ideas or “comment” of the author  
**Character**—a “sketch”; the contribution of character to theme; one   
 character helping “define” another  
**Foreshadowing**—hints of what will happen along the way  
**Setting**—significance of setting to the events  
**Symbols**—what are they? What do they mean?  
**Language**—are there language patterns that occur in one part, around one   
 character, or throughout the whole work? What is the effect of the   
 language pattern?

**The Process for Writing about Literature**

There is a kind of general process by which one arrives at a paper.

1. Read the work carefully.
2. Choose a worthwhile and limited subject, something that you think merits your time and is not so big that your handling of it requires a thesis that is impossible to handle.
3. With thesis in mind, reread the work, taking notes of all relevant matters. As you read, reflect on your reading and jot down ideas.

**Sample Topics**Here are a few sample topics for other works of fiction that may give you some ideas:

Plot  
“Death as a Device to Link Episodes in *Huckleberry Finn*”  
“The Appropriateness of the Ending of . . . “

Theme  
“The Female as Victim in . . . “  
“Imagery as a Revelation of Theme in . . . “

Character  
(A more sophisticated analysis than a simple character sketch, although that is okay for a study of how a character contributes to the theme or help to define another character)

“Stephanie and Mary Jane as Opposites in *Fire of Torment*”  
“The Distinctive Language of . . . “

Foreshadowing  
“Suspense and Surprise in . . . “  
“Early Tragic Overtones in . . . “

Setting   
“The Function of the Setting in . . . “  
“Contrasts in the Setting in . . . “

Symbolism  
“The Meaning of the White Whale”  
“Walls in *Bartleby*”  
“The River in *Huckleberry Finn*”

Point of View  
“The Unreliable Narrator in . . . “

Language  
“The pattern of . . . . terms in . . . . affects . . . “