

Sample Explication

The explication below is intended to show you what form to use for the explication. It's very similar to a literary analysis essay, but it proceeds analytical point by point, rather than through general themes.

Sonnet on Reading Burns' Mountain Daisy

By Helena Maria Williams

While soon the "garden's flaunting flowers" decay,
And, scatter'd on the earth, neglected lie,
The "Mountain Daisy," cherish'd by the ray
A poet drew from heav'n, shall never die.

Ah! like that lovely flower the poet rose!
'Mid penury's bare soil and bitter gale,
He felt each storm that on the mountain blows,
Nor ever knew the shelter of the vale.

By Genius in her native vigour nurst,
On Nature with impassion'd look he gazed,
Then through the cloud of adverse fortune burst
Indignant, and in light unborrow'd blaz'd.

Shield from rude sorrow, SCOTIA! shield thy bard: —
His heav'n-taught numbers Fame herself will guard.

Explication

A mountain daisy would be glimpsed at one's feet along the trail. It might be plucked, to last for a few moments, and then thrown away along the path. A poem, composed in celebration of the fragile beauty of the mountain daisy, if the poet is lucky, might last for more than two hundred years. Helena Maria Williams here pays homage to the poet Robert Burns by addressing one of his poems, but in doing so praises the art of poetry as one that gives a lasting quality to whatever aspect of nature it describes.

Williams opens the poem with two time markers: "while" and "soon" (1). "While" points to the meantime, a time between birth and death perhaps. "Soon" points to a future time, here, the time when the flower will fade or "decay." Williams introduces the theme of death or impermanence, a theme which she'll develop into her larger praise of poetry's capacity to make the objects of its art eternal. She presents the image of Burns's poem, the mountain daisy, and pictures it in its biological life as "scatter'd" (2), an image that brings to mind the image of a daisy's petals torn from the flower and lying on the ground in disorder. It's not unexpected that a faded flower would "neglected lie" (2), because all spent flowers are ignored, if not just swept away. This word "neglected," though brings to mind its opposite, "cherished." Williams

time



theme of death vs what

metaphor lasts

poet sheds light on

poet to flower

odd comp.

sound-emphatic

light image again (ray above)

? why "numbers"?

penury: poverty, gale - strong wind, vale - valley

Explication

presents the poet as someone aided by heaven's "ray" coming to the rescue of the neglected flower and fixing it forever as a thing of beauty.

Williams shifts the poem's focus when she introduces Robert Burns's biography; in this depiction, she presents the image of the Romantic artist, rejected by society, but shining in his genius nonetheless. She parallels the flower's rise with the sun to Burns's rise to fame. It seems odd to compare a poet, especially one with the force of Robert Burns, to a daisy, which has just been shown as faded, scattered, and neglected. The only element Williams uses of that vehicle, though, is its being neglected. Here, she addresses Burns's working class origins. Unlike other famous poets, Burns came from a poor background. ETC., ETC.

Note, when this explication is expanded into a research paper, the writer would

1. find out about Robert Burns's life story, Helena Williams's life story. Was she also from the working class? Does her status as a woman make her parallel his status as a working class man?
2. Find out about how poets made a living through patrons. Did Burns not have a patron? Did Williams? Did the system of patronage change during the Romantic era? Who supported poets so they could write?
3. Find out about the idea of the Romantic artist as someone who struggled against a neglectful society. Look up the word "Genius" in the OED to see what it means to them. If it's a goddess at some point in its history.
4. Look up analyses of this poem itself, Burns's poem, or poems about poetry creating an eternity. How does Williams work this theme differently from other poets?