

## Diction in Poetry

*"The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."--Mark Twain*

**Warning:** If you don't like gory details, skip the next three sentences. Detectives spend a great deal of time studying the means of committing crimes. Good forensic pathologists know what size gun was used to kill the victim because of the size of the bullet hole, what kind of knife by the wounds on a victim, and what method of strangulation by the kinds of bruises left on the body. Good fictional detectives also identify exotic poisons by the smell on the victim's breath or by the symptoms. (Can you tell I spend a lot of time reading mysteries?) Good detectives know what kinds of options are available to criminals as they commit crimes. By studying these options and clues, good detectives can dispassionately make more informed decisions about the crimes they are investigating--and often those decisions lead to a conclusion about who did what, and why.

Similarly, good poetry detectives dig and ask questions of a poem as they seek to come to conclusions about it. They don't have to study guns, wounds, knives, or poisons. Instead of literal weapons, the means poets use to accomplish their ends are words, words, and more words. Poets and good poetry detectives are vitally concerned with words and their uses. Words shape how we relate to the world, how we believe it is, how we believe it ought to be. Our chosen words then reveal how we think about the world, and they escape our mouths to influence someone else. The words we use to communicate can make a difference in the message our hearers get. Words can be used as weapons, and the better honed your word sense is, the more ways there are to use words.

Just think about words for a whole minute. Consider these two questions: What do you use words to do? What kinds of words do you use? Start thinking now. What messages have you used words to send today? Did the right messages go through? What messages did you have to explain in other words? What messages came back unanswered? Have you gotten an e-mail lately that isn't clear? Or maybe it used unfamiliar terms? For how many of those emails did you have to send an email back to the sender and ask for an explanation? Sending messages is what words can do. What happens, however, when you can't send words back to clarify the message or ask the author of the e-mail questions? Then what?

### The Best Words for the Best Situation

Poets have an obligation to pick the *right* words--since typically we as readers aren't in a position to ask them for additional explanations. While good poetry contains words with clear, sharp, or sometimes strikingly new meanings and images, bad poems rely on phrases or words that are typical, usual, or so generic that nothing really gets said. The only way poets can share their messages is through words, which can be both positive and negative. This lesson looks at words--and some of the specific ways poets pick their words. I am passionate about words, and I hope by the end of this lesson you will be too.

Poets have an obligation to use the right words--the almost right word won't do. Sometimes, depending on who the speaker is and what point the poet wants to get across, those words change the feeling and attitude readers have toward the poem. Just as good detectives know what social class their suspects come from by their language and dress, poetry detectives know those same things by the speaker's use of words. Poets use two devices that help them form the ideas they want to get across. The first is *diction*. This has to do with the levels on which words are chosen: formal, informal, or more common speech. You wouldn't speak to a professor using the same words as you would speak to the president of the college. You wouldn't use the same words to speak to your friends that you would use to speak to either the college president or the professor. This is diction. Certain types of people use certain types of diction. An English teacher speaks differently than does a cowboy who has always been on the range. A hunter uses different words and ideas to convey his message than does a fisherman.

The diction in "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" sounds like what kind of person? Is it casual or common speech? Or does it sound like some of the words you would use to talk to a professor? A college president? Consider words like "fellow," "stooped," and "secure." This would be an example of diction.

### **A narrow Fellow in the Grass**

A narrow fellow in the grass  
Occasionally rides;  
You may have met him,--did you not,  
His notice sudden is.

The grass divides as with a comb,  
A spotted shaft is seen;  
And then it closes at your feet  
And opens further on.

He likes a boggy acre,  
A floor too cool for corn.  
Yet when a child, and barefoot,  
I more than once, at morn,

Have passed, I thought, a whip-lash  
Unbraiding in the sun,--  
When, stooping to secure it,  
It wrinkled, and was gone.

Several of nature's people  
I know, and they know me;  
I feel for them a transport  
Of cordiality;

But never met this fellow,  
Attended or alone,  
Without a tighter breathing,  
And zero at the bone.

--Emily Dickinson

The other general concept that poets consider when they think about picking the right words and placing them in a poem is called *word order*. How words are put together can make a difference in how a reader perceives them. Sometimes, we know people don't speak English natively because the way they order words is different, even though they may not have an accent. In "A Narrow Fellow" consider the line "His notice sudden is." By putting those words in a different, unusual order, Dickinson has made them stand out, made us notice suddenly, just as we would suddenly notice a snake. When poets consider diction and word order, they begin to shape their poems.

### Connotations and Denotations of Words in Poems

Okay, poetry detectives, in order to talk about connotation and denotation we need to know what they mean. *Denotation* is the dictionary definition of a word; it's what Webster tells you--in so many words, what the word means. *Connotation* is the implied meaning of the word, the suggested "feeling" the word communicates, beyond the basic dictionary definition.

Nice definitions, but so what? Think for a minute about the words you use every day. For instance, how many times have you used the word "nice" today? Have all of those "nices" meant the same thing? I have to confess here that "nice" is one of my personal pet peeve words. Here's a definition of "nice": pleasing, agreeable, socially acceptable, appropriate, fitting. Notice that this is the denotation. Did you use "nice" to mean any of those things? All of those things? Some of those things?

How did you use the word today? I like watching people, and one of my favorite things to do is to hear snatches of conversations--often because they're so interesting in small bits. One of my favorite types of conversations is when one female roommate is trying to convince another roommate to go out with a young man the second roommate does not know. Chances are, if the best description the first roommate can come up with is "He's a nice guy," the second roommate won't be going out with him. When "nice" is the only term to describe a young man (or a young woman), what does that really mean in a young adult vocabulary? (Hint: How many "I'm dumping you conversations" start with "You're a nice guy (or girl) but . . ."? ) Does the connotation convey the same thing as the denotation? Which one do you respond to the most?

Another way to look at connotation is to look at the words I used to describe the male in the last scenario. If you were a girl, would you have changed your mind if I had just used "male"? What about "guy"? Would you go out with him if I said "nice dude"? How would the word "young fellow" have changed your mind? How is "young man" different in meaning than some of the other choices? Even simple words have connotations. What's the difference between "hello" and

"hi" and "hey"--and how does "hey" change if you're originally from the South or have Southern friends? Does the connotation behind each word change how you respond to that greeting?

One more good example of the difference between denotation and connotation involves the words "house" and "home." In the dictionary, we might find definitions (denotations) for these two words which are virtually the same, yet which word conjures up more positive associations for you? For me, the word "house" connotes little more than the actual structure of a dwelling, while connotations for the word "home" suggest ideas such as comfort and security, the smell of cookies baking, family. See the difference?

We've talked about all the abstract concepts about connotation and denotation. Now look at our sample poem, "A narrow Fellow in the Grass." The first obvious word of interest is "fellow." How does that differ from "guy" or "thing?" How does the connotation of the more formal "fellow" change how you view the snake as opposed to the more familiar "guy" or "thing?" Better yet, why do you suppose Dickinson just doesn't say "snake"? Other interesting word choices include the idea of "wrinkle." Why or how does a snake wrinkle? Why not "slither?" Additionally, wrinkle gives a visual that slither does not. My other two favorite words to look at for connotation and denotation are "whiplash" and "unbraiding." Why not a whole whip? What's different about a whiplash? And why "unbraiding"? How does unbraiding connote differently than just undone? Is the narrow fellow really undone--with its connotations--or does unbraiding have an element of relaxation that undone does not? Read the poem using some of the different words I've suggested, or even try coming up with your own. Does the strength or impact of the poem change? For better or worse? Which version--Dickinson's or ours--do you like better? (Personally, I like Dickinson's better.) Not just Dickinson, but all poets must choose words whose connotations and denotations help project their intended ideas, images, or messages most clearly. Poets must extend those connotations and denotations over the length of the whole poem. If they lose focus or the systematic building of connotations and denotations changes, the meaning and feeling of the poem changes.

It's easy to talk about connotations and denotations when you can look up the word, but what happens to connotation and denotations when we've got nonsense words? Read "Jabberwocky" (p. 771). Make sure you read it out loud. I'm almost sure that while your initial response is "Huh?" you still have the basic story.

### **Jabberwocky**

ˆTwas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!

Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun  
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:  
Long time the manxome foe he sought --  
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,  
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,  
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,  
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,  
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through  
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!  
He left it dead, and with its head  
He went galumphing back.

"And, has thou slain the Jabberwock?  
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!  
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!"  
He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

--Lewis Carroll

So what does this poem mean? The Alice of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* also questions the meaning of the poem. Humpty Dumpty gives his explanation:

"You seem very clever at explaining words, Sir", said Alice. "Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem 'Jabberwocky'?"

"Let's hear it", said Humpty Dumpty. "I can explain all the poems that ever were invented--and a good many that haven't been invented just yet."

This sounded very hopeful, so Alice repeated the first verse:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"That's enough to begin with", Humpty Dumpty interrupted: "there are plenty of hard words there. '*Brillig*' means four o'clock in the afternoon--the time when you begin *broiling* things for dinner."

"That'll do very well", said Alice: "and '*slithy*'?"

"Well, '*slithy*' means 'lithe and slimy'. 'Lithe' is the same as 'active'. You see it's like a portmanteau--there are two meanings packed up into one word."

I see it now", Alice remarked thoughtfully: "and what are '*toves*'?"

"Well, '*toves*' are something like badgers--they're something like lizards--and they're something like corkscrews."

"They must be very curious creatures."

"They are that", said Humpty Dumpty: "also they make their nests under sun-dials--also they live on cheese."

"And what's to '*gyre*' and to '*gimble*'?"

"To '*gyre*' is to go round and round like a gyroscope. To '*gimble*' is to make holes like a gimlet."

"And '*the wabe*' is the grass plot round a sun-dial, I suppose?" said Alice, surprised at her own ingenuity.

"Of course it is. It's called '*wabe*', you know, because it goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it--"

"And a long way beyond it on each side", Alice added.

"Exactly so. Well then, '*mimsy*' is 'flimsy and miserable' (there's another portmanteau for you). And a '*borogove*' is a thin shabby-looking bird with its feathers sticking out all round--something like a live mop."

"And then '*mome raths*'?" said Alice. "If I'm not giving you too much trouble."

"Well a '*rath*' is a sort of green pig, but '*mome*' I'm not certain about. I think it's sort for 'from home'--meaning that they'd lost their way, you know."

"And what does '*outgrabe*' mean?"

"Well, '*outgribing*' is something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of sneeze in the middle: however, you'll hear it done, maybe--down in the wood yonder--and when

you've once heard it, you'll be *quite* content. Who's been repeating all that hard stuff to you?"

"I read it in a book", said Alice.

Did you like Humpty Dumpty's explanation of the poem? Do you believe him or not? Does his explanation help you understand the poem? How does the explication change your impression of the poem? How do the "portmanteau" words heighten the impressions of the poem? (My favorite word is "galumphing." I think of a St. Bernard puppy learning to run--awkward, not quite in control.) Notice that even though these are nonsense words, by using sound, word order, and the right nonsense word, a strong and lasting poem can be created. It doesn't hurt the poem's fame that it is also just plain fun.

Another poem that illustrates word choice in both connotations and denotations is "Not Waving but Drowning." This is a slightly more complex poem than some of the poems we've been dealing with. Let's walk through the pattern of investigating poetry. While we're doing this, notice how good poetry detectives incorporate the skills they already know (like speaker and tone).

### **Not Waving but Drowning**

Nobody heard him, the dead man,  
But still he lay moaning:  
I was much further out than you thought  
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking  
And now he's dead  
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,  
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always  
(Still the dead one lay moaning)  
I was much too far out all my life  
And not waving but drowning.

--Stevie Smith

- Read the poem once, twice, three times out loud. What do you hear?
- What phrases, ideas, pictures catch you? Are there words you don't know and need to look up? (The words and phrases that catch me are "not waving but drowning," "he always loved larking," "It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way/They said," and finally, ". . . too cold always . . . [and] too far out all my life.")
- If we're looking at denotations and connotations here--what do the words "larking" or "lark" mean? What about the connotations and denotations of "heart" and "cold" and "drowning"?

- Ask who, what, when, where, why, how questions:
  1. Who is speaking? (My guess is at least two and perhaps three people. One of them is the dead man, one a neutral observer "they said," and the third may be the group of people on the shore.)
  2. What is happening? (Someone drowned while waving to get people's attention. They waved back, not recognizing he was serious. Why was this? Was it his character? Their lack of attention? A combination?)
  3. What do I feel? (I feel sad. Here's someone struggling and everyone has missed it. He was crying for help, and they thought he was joking.)
  4. What words are important? (Cold is repeated. It's not only cold in the water, but cold where? If people's hearts are cold, how does that connect? How does the repetition of this word change or heighten the impact of the poem? What happens to us when we find people or the world cold?)
  5. Does everybody in the poem see the reason the man died? (No. The group on the shore just assumed it was a joke gone wrong; the dead man was seriously calling for help and moaning when he didn't get it, and the observer of both groups just reports.)
  6. What kinds of real life events does this remind me of? (Class clowns are often the most troubled people. Humor or "larking" can be used as a way to cry for help. Do we know when people are merely "larking" or when they are crying for help?)

The application of each new skill can open a door to a poem. Sometimes, applying one skill won't work where another skill will. Notice how good poetry detectives read carefully, and use what skills they know to begin to work on a poem on several levels. Let's move on to a different skill.

### **Concrete and Abstract Words**

When poets write a poem, they are trying to make/leave an emotion, a feeling, or sometimes even just a picture with their readers. But because they are limited by pattern or space in their use of words, they have to make sure each word gives the right idea. We've talked about connotations and denotation; let's talk about concrete and abstract words.

What mental picture do you see when someone says, "abstract painting"? I'm willing to bet you see a painting with large blobs of color, no distinct lines, and no distinct up or down. An abstract word works much the same. It's a generic word, or a word you can't perceive with your five senses. "Beauty," "truth," and "love" all are abstract words. These are ideas and concepts, rather than specifics. Poets use abstract words to talk about qualities everyone can relate to.

But usually, poets want to give readers a specific idea. Then they want to use concrete words. Concrete words are specific words, or words you can perceive with your five senses. For instance, in "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," the use of "daffodils" is concrete. Wordsworth could have used just "beautiful flowers," but that is a generic image. Why do you suppose it is daffodils and not tulips?



### **I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud**

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the milky way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
Along the margin of a bay:  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they  
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:  
A poet could not but be gay,  
In such a jocund company:  
I gazed---and gazed---but little thought  
What wealth the show to me had brought:

For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

--William Wordsworth

S.I. Hayakawa writes of a ladder of abstraction:

|                                       |
|---------------------------------------|
|                                       |
| <i>animal</i> is more abstract than   |
| <i>cow</i> is more abstract than      |
| <i>Holstein</i> is more abstract than |
| <i>Bessy</i> , the cow in my backyard |
|                                       |

The more specific the images poets wish to give us, the more specific the words they use. If poets want to generalize ideas, they move up the ladder a little. If they want to create specific images, they move down the ladder.

In abstract terms "the narrow fellow in the grass" is generic or abstract. It's a kind of snake, but it's about in the middle of the ladder of abstraction. However, Dickinson gets much more concrete when she tells us about the whiplash and unbraiding. It gives a pattern to the snake that makes it identifiable. Other concrete ideas include the "boggy acre." How much more specific is that than simply an acre? Or a bog?

Abstract and concrete words are very important to poets. Picking the right rung on the ladder can make or break a poem and give meaning and life to a series of words, making it a lasting poem.

"Fire and Ice" by Robert Frost uses concrete and abstract words together to make its point.

- After reading the poem, what word equates with fire? With ice? Why does Frost generalize desire? What ideas go along with fire/desire? What do you desire?
- Why do you suppose ice is equated with hate? Is hate a cold emotion? In what way does that concrete word "ice" change the abstract word "hate"?
- Why the use of "suffice"? How does that one word change the tone of the poem? Does it? What are its connotations and denotations?

### **Fire and Ice**

Some say the world will end in fire;  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.

--Robert Frost

Hopefully, thinking about these questions will help you shape some of your ideas about this poem and about poetry.