

Chapter 12

Words: The Building Blocks of Poetry



Words are the spoken and written signifiers of thoughts, objects, and actions. They are also the building blocks of both poetry and prose, but poetry is unique because by its nature it uses words with the utmost economy. The words of poetry create rhythm, rhyme, meter, and form. They define the poem's speaker, the characters, the setting, and the situation, and they also carry its ideas and emotions. For this reason, each poet searches for perfect and indispensable words, words that convey all the compressed meanings, overtones, and emotions that each poem requires, and also the words that sound right and look right.

Life—and poetry—might be simpler (but less interesting) if there were an exact one-to-one correspondence between words and the objects or ideas they signify. Such close correspondences exist in artificial language systems such as chemical equations and computer languages. This identical correlation, however, is not characteristic of English or any other natural language. Instead, words have the independent and glorious habit of attracting and expressing a vast array of different meanings.

Even if we have not thought much about language, most of us know that words are sometimes ambiguous, and that much literature is built on ambiguity. For instance, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, when Mercutio says, "Seek for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man" (3.1.97), the joke works because *grave* has two separate meanings, both of which come into play. In reading poetry, we recognize that poets rejoice in this shifting and elusive but also rich nature of language.

Choice of Diction: Specific and Concrete, General and Abstract

Because poets always try to use only the exactly right words, they constantly make conscious and subconscious decisions about diction. One of the major categories of their choice is diction that is either specific and concrete or general and abstract.

Specific language refers to objects or conditions that can be perceived or imagined; **general language** signifies broad classes of persons, objects, and phenomena. **Concrete diction** describes conditions or qualities that are exact and particular; **abstract diction** refers to qualities that are rarefied and theoretical. In practice, poems using specific and concrete words tend to be visual, familiar, and compelling. By contrast, poems that use general and abstract words tend to be detached and cerebral, and they often deal with universal questions or emotions. These distinctions become clear when we compare Housman's "Loveliest of Trees" and Eberhart's "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment." Many of the terms and

images that Housman uses, such as "cherry . . . /hung with bloom" and "three-score years and ten," are specific and concrete; they evoke exact time and clear visualization. By contrast, Eberhart's terms, such as "infinite spaces" and "eternal truth," are general and abstract, and it is therefore hard to define them with clarity and exactness. This contrast, which by no means implies that Housman's poem is superior to Eberhart's, reflects differences in word choices for different objectives.

Most poets employ mixtures of words in these categories because in many poems they draw general observations and abstract conclusions from specific situations and concrete responses. They therefore interweave their words to fit their situations and ideas, as in Roethke's "Dolor," which uses specific and concrete words to define a series of abstract emotional states.

Levels of Diction

Like ordinary speakers and writers of prose, poets choose words from the category of the three levels of diction: high or formal, middle or neutral, and low or informal. Often, the high and middle levels are considered standard or "right," while low language is dismissed as substandard or "wrong." In poetry, however, none of the classes is more correct than any other, for what counts is that they all function according to the poet's wishes, from broadly formal and intellectual to ordinary and popular.

High or Formal Diction Is Elevated and Elaborate

High or formal diction exactly follows the rules of syntax, seeking accuracy of expression even if unusually elevated or complex words are brought into play. Beyond "correctness," formal language is characterized by complex words and a lofty tone. In general, formal diction freely introduces words of French, Latin, and Greek derivation, some of which are quite long, so some people might think that formal language is "difficult." Graves uses formal diction in "The Naked and the Nude" when the speaker asserts that the terms in the title are "By lexicographers construed / As synonyms that should express / The same deficiency of dress." The Latinate words stiffen and generalize the passage: We find *lexicographers* instead of *dictionary writers*, *construed* (from Latin) instead of *thought* (native English), *express* (from Latin) instead of *say* or *show* (native English), and *deficiency* (Latin) instead of *lack* (English). It is simply a fact that our language contains thousands of words that have descended to our language from French, Latin, or Greek and that many of these are long and abstract. But not all words of this sort are necessarily long, nor are they abstract and stiff. Many of our short words, for example, are French in origin, such as *class*, *face*, *fort*, *paint*, *bat*, *tend*, *gain*, *cap*, *trace*, *order*, and *very*. A college-level dictionary contains brief descriptions of word origins, or etymologies; as an exercise, you might trace the origins of a number of words in a poem.

Middle or Neutral Diction Stresses Simplicity

Middle or neutral diction maintains the correct language and word order of formal diction but avoids elaborate words and elevated tone, just as it avoids idioms, colloquialisms, contractions, slang, jargon, and fads of speech. For example, Emily

Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death" (Chapter 11) is almost entirely in middle diction.

Low or Informal Diction Is the Language of Common, Everyday Use

Low or informal diction is relaxed and un-self-conscious, the language of people buying groceries, gasoline, and pizza, and of people who may just be "hanging out." Poems using informal diction include common and simple words, idiomatic expressions, substandard expressions, foreign expressions, slang, "swearwords" or "cusswords," grammatical "errors," and contractions. Informal diction is seen in Hardy's "The Man He Killed" (Chapter 11), in which the speaker uses words and phrases like "many a nipperkin," "He thought he'd 'list," and "off-hand like."

Special Types of Diction

Depending on their subjects and purposes, poets (and writers of prose) may wish to introduce four special types of diction into their poems: *idiom*, *dialect*, *slang*, and *jargon*.

Idiom Refers to Unique Forms of Diction and Word Order

The word *idiom*, originally meaning "making one's own," refers to words, phrases, and expressions that are common and acceptable in a particular language, even though they might, upon analysis, seem peculiar or illogical. Standard English idioms are so ingrained into our thought that we do not notice them. Poems automatically reflect these idioms. Thus, for example, a poet may "think of" an idea, speak of "living in" a house, talk of "going out to play," or describe a woman "lovely as chandeliers." Poets hardly have choices about such idioms as long as they are using standard English. Real choice occurs when poets select idioms that are unusual or even ungrammatical, as in phrases like "had he and I but met" ("we was happy," and "except that You than He" (this last phrase is by Emily Dickinson). Idioms like these enable poets to achieve levels of ordinary and colloquial diction, depending on their purposes.

Dialect Refers to Regional and Group Usage and Pronunciation

Although we recognize English as a common language, in practice the language is made up of many habits of speech or *dialects* that are characteristic of many groups, regions, and nations. In addition to "general American," we can recognize many common dialects, such as Southern, Midwestern, New England, Brooklynese, American Black English, Yiddish English, and Texan, together with "upper" British, Cockney, Scottish, and Australian English. Dialect is concerned with whether we refer to a *paill* (general American) or a *bucket* (Southern); or sit down on a *sofa* (Eastern) or a *couch* (general American) or *davenport* (Midwestern); or drink *soda* (Eastern), *pop* (Midwestern), *soda pop* (a confused Midwesterner living in the East, or a confused Easterner living in the Midwest), or *tonic* (Bostonian). Burns's "Green Grow the Rashers, O" and Hardy's "The Ruined Maid" (Chapter 13) illustrate the poetic use of dialect.

Slang Refers to Informal and Substandard Vocabulary and Idiom

Much of the language that people use every day is *slang*. Usually, slang is impermanent, appearing among certain speakers and then vanishing. The use of the word *bad* to mean "good" illustrates how a new slang meaning can develop, and even stay for a time. This is not to say that slang is not persistent, for some of it is a significant part of our language. There is a continuous word stock of standard or "impolite" words, some of which are so-called "four-letter" words, which everyone knows but speaks only privately. There are also innumerable slang expressions. For example, we have many slang phrases describing dying, such as *kick the bucket*, *croak*, *be wasted*, *sleep with the fishes*, *buy the farm*, *be disappeared*, *be whacked*, and *be offed*. A nonnative speaker of English, unfamiliar with our slang, would have difficulty understanding that a person who "kicked the bucket," "bought the farm," "croaked," or "was offed" had actually died.

Even though slang is a permanent part of our language, it is usually confined to colloquial or conversational levels. (Interestingly, people with perfect command of standard English regularly use slang in private among their friends and acquaintances.) If slang is introduced into a standard context, therefore, it mars and jars, as in Cummings's "Buffalo Bill's Defunct" (Chapter 18), where the speaker refers to Buffalo Bill as a "blueeyed boy." Because the poem deals with the universality of death, the phrase, which usually refers to a young man on the make, or moving upward in his career, ironically underscores this intention.

Jargon Is the Special Language and Terminology of Groups

Particular groups develop *jargon*—specialized words and expressions that are usually employed by members of specific professions or trades, such as astronauts, doctors, lawyers, computer experts, plumbers, and football players. Without an initiation, people ordinarily cannot understand the special meanings. Although jargon at its worst befuddles rather than informs, it is significant when it becomes part of mainstream English or is used in literature. Poets may introduce jargon for special effects. For example, Paul Zimmer, in "The Day Zimmer Lost Religion" (Chapter 22), wryly uses the phrase "ready for Him now," a boxing expression that describes a fighter in top condition. Linda Pastan uses "gives me an A" and "I'm dropping out," both phrases from school life, to create comic effects in "Marks" (Chapter 22). Another poem employing jargon is Eberhart's "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment," which uses technical terms for firearms to establish the authenticity of the poem's references and therefore to reinforce the poem's judgments about warfare.

Syntax

Syntax refers to word order and sentence structure. Normal English word order is fixed in a *subject-verb-object* sequence. At the simplest level, we say, "A dog (subject) bites (verb) a man (object)." This order is so central to our communication that any change significantly affects meaning: "A dog bites a man" is not the same as "A man bites a dog."

DECORUM: THE MATCHING OF SUBJECT AND WORD

A vital literary concept is *decorum* ("beautiful," "appropriate"); that is, words and subjects should be in perfect accord—formal words for serious subjects, and informal words for low subjects and comedy. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, the nobles usually speak poetry and the "mechanicals" speak prose (Chapter 25). When the nobility are relaxed and in the forest however, they also speak prose. Decorum governs such choices of language.

In the eighteenth century, English writers aimed to make their language as dignified as ancient Latin, which was the international language of discourse. They therefore asserted that only formal diction was appropriate for poetry, common life and colloquial language were excluded, except in drama and popular ballads. These rules of decorum required standard and elevated language rather than common words and phrases. The development of scientific terminology during the eighteenth century also influenced language. In the scientific mode, poets of the time used descriptive phrases, like "lowing herd" for cattle (Thomas Gray) and "finny prey" for fish (Alexander Pope). In this vein, Thomas Gray observed the dependence of color on light in the line "And cheerful fields resume their green attire" from the "Sonnet on the Death of Richard West."

Pope, one of the greatest eighteenth-century poets, maintained these rules of decorum—and also made fun of them—in his mock-epic poem *The Rape of the Lock* (1714), and more fully in the mock-critical work *Peri Bathous, or The Art of Sinking in Poetry* (1715). In *The Rape of the Lock*, he refers to a scissor as a "glittering forx" (3.147). Similarly, in an earlier couplet he elevates the simple act of pouring coffee:

From silver spouts the grateful liquors glide,
While China's earth receives the smoking tide. (3.109-10)

After Wordsworth transformed poetic diction early in the nineteenth century, the topics and language of people of all classes, with a special stress on common folk, have become a feature of poetry. Poets have continued to follow rules of decorum, however, inasmuch as the use of colloquial diction and even slang is a necessary consequence of popular subject matter.

Much of the time, poets follow normal word order, as in "The Lamb," where Blake creates a simple, easy order in keeping with the poem's purpose of presenting a childlike praise of God. Many modern poets, such as Mark Strand, go outside their way to create ordinary, everyday syntax, on the theory that a poem's sentence structures should not get in the way of the reader's perceptions.

Yet, just as poets always explore the limits of ideas, so also do they sometimes explore the many possibilities of syntax, as in line 7 of Donne's "Batter My Heart": "Reason, Your viceroy in me, me should defend." In prose, this sentence would read "Reason, who is Your viceroy in me, should defend me." But note that Donne drops the "who is," and that he also puts the direct object "me" before and not after the verb. The resulting emphasis on the pronoun *me* is appropriate to the personal, divine relationship that is the topic of the sonnet. The alteration also meets the

demand of the poem's rhyme scheme. A set of particularly noteworthy syntactic variations occurs in Roethke's "Dolor." The poet uses an irregular and idiosyncratic combination of objects, phrases, and appositives to create ambiguity and uncertainty, underscoring the idea that school and office routines are aimless and depressing.

Some of the other means by which poets shape word order to create emphasis are an aspect of **rhetoric**. **Parallelism** is the most easily recognized rhetorical device. A simple form of parallelism is **repetition**, as with the question "who made thee?" in Blake's "The Lamb." Through the use of the same grammatical forms, though in different words, parallelism produces lines or portions of lines that impress our minds strongly, as in this passage from Robinson's "Richard Cory," in which there are four parallel past-tense verbs (italicized here).

So on we *worked*, and *waited* for the light,
And *went* without the meat, and *curst* the bread;

The final two lines of this poem demonstrate how parallelism may embody **antithesis**—a contrasting situation or idea that brings out surprise, shock, or climax:

And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and *put* a bullet through his head.

A major quality of parallelism is the packing of words (the *economy* and *compression* of poetry), for by using a parallel structure the poet makes a single word or phrase function a number of times, with no need for repetition. The opening verb phrase "have known" in Roethke's "Dolor," though used once, controls six parallel direct objects. At the end of Donne's "Batter My Heart," parallelism (along with antithesis) permits Donne to omit the italicized words added and bracketed in the last line here.

Except* You enthral* me, never shall be free,
Nor [*shall I*] ever [*be*] chaste, except You ravish me.

for I,
unless; enslave

Note also that parallelism and antithesis make possible the unique *abba* ordering of these two lines, with the pattern "enthrall" (verb), "free" (adjective), "chaste" (adjective), "ravish" (verb). This rhetorical pattern is called **antimetabole**, or chiasmus, and is a common pattern of creating emphasis.

Denotation and Connotation

To achieve the maximum impact, poets depend not just on the simplest, most essential meanings of words, but also on the suggestions and associations that words bring to us. For this reason, control over denotation and connotation (see also Chapter 6) is so important that it has been called the very soul of the poet's art.

Denotation Refers to Standard, Most Commonly Recognized Meanings

The ordinary dictionary meaning of a word—**denotation**—indicates conventional correspondences between words and objects or ideas. Although we might

expect denotation to be straightforward, most English words have multiple denotations. The noun *house*, for example, can refer to a *building*, a *family*, a *branch of Congress*, a *theater*, a *theater audience*, a *sorority* or *fraternity*, an *astrological classification*, or a *brothel*. Although context usually makes the denotation of *house* more specific, the various meanings confer a built-in ambiguity in this simple word.

Denotation presents problems because with the passing of time new meanings emerge and old ones are shed. In poems written in the eighteenth century and earlier, there are many words that have changed so completely that a modern dictionary is not much help. In Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" (Chapter 19), for example, the speaker asserts that his "vegetable love should grow / Vaster than empires, and more slow." At first reading, "vegetable" may seem to refer to something like a giant, loving turnip. When we turn to a current dictionary, we discover that *vegetable* is an adjective meaning "plantlike," but *plantlike love* does not get us much beyond *vegetable love*. A reference to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), however, tells us that *vegetable* was used as an adjective in the seventeenth century to mean "living or growing like a plant." Thus we find out that "vegetable love" means love that grows slowly but steadily larger.

Connotation Refers to a Word's Emotional, Psychological, Social, and Historical Overtones

The life of language, and the most difficult to control, is a result of connotation. Almost no word is without it. For instance, according to the dictionary, the words *childish* and *childlike* denote the state of being like a child. Nevertheless, they connote or imply different sets of characteristics. *Childish* suggests a person who is bratty, stubborn, immature, silly, and petulant, whereas *childlike* suggests that a person may be innocent, charming, and unaffected. These different meanings are based entirely on connotations, for the denotations make little distinction.

Connotation affects us in almost everything we hear and read. We constantly encounter the manipulation of connotation in advertising, for example, which could not exist without the controlled management of meaning. Such manipulation may be as simple as calling a *used car* a *pre-owned car* to avoid the negative connotations of *used*. On the other hand, the manipulation may be as sophisticated as the current use of the word *lite* or *light* to describe foods and drinks. In all such products, *lite* denotes "dietetic," "low-calorie," or even "weak." The distinction—and the selling point—is found in connotation. Imagine how difficult it would be to sell a drink called "dietetic beer" or "weak beer." *Light* and *lite*, however, carry none of the negative connotations and, instead, suggest products that are pleasant, sparkling, bright, and healthy.

Poets always try to make individual words carry as many appropriate and effective denotations and connotations as possible. Put another way, poets use *packed* or *loaded* words that carry a broad range of meaning and association. With this in mind, read the following poem by Robert Graves.

ROBERT GRAVES (1895–1985)

The Naked and the Nude (1957)

For me, the naked and the nude
 (By lexicographers⁹ construed
 As synonyms that should express
 The same deficiency of dress
 Or shelter) stand as wide apart
 As love from lies, or truth from art.
 Lovers without reproach will gaze
 On bodies naked and ablaze;
 The Hippocratic¹⁰ eye will see
 In nakedness, anatomy;
 And naked shines the Goddess when
 She mounts her lion among men.

The nude are bold, the nude are sly
 To hold each treasonable eye.
 While draping by a showman's trick
 Their dishabille¹¹ in rhetoric,
 They grin a mock-religious grin
 Of scorn at those of naked skin.

The naked, therefore, who compete
 Against the nude may know defeat;
 Yet when they both together tread
 The briary pastures of the dead,
 By Gorgons¹² with long whips pursued,
 How naked go the sometime nude!

⁹ Lexicographers: writers of dictionaries. ¹⁰ Hippocratic: medical; the adjective derives from Hippocrates (c. 460–377 BCE), the ancient Greek who is considered the "father of medicine." ¹¹ Dishabille: being carelessly or partly dressed. ¹² Gorgons: mythological female monsters with snakes for hair.

QUESTIONS

1. How does the speaker explain the denotations and connotations of "naked" and "nude" in the first stanza? What is indicated by the fact that the word *naked* is derived from Old English *naecod*, while *nude* comes from Latin *nudus*?
2. What examples of "the naked" and "the nude" do the second and third stanzas provide? What do the examples have in common?
3. How do the connotations of words like "sly," "draping," "dishabille," "rhetoric," and "grin" contribute to the poem's ideas about "the nude"?
4. What does "briary pastures of the dead" mean in line 22?

This poem explores the connotative distinctions between the title words, *naked* and *nude*, which share a common denotation. The title also suggests that the poem is about human customs; for if the speaker were considering the words alone, he would say "naked" and "nude" instead of "the naked and the nude." The speaker's use of *the* signifies a double focus on both language and human perspectives. In the first five lines, the poem establishes that the two key words should be "synonyms that should express / The same deficiency of

dress" (lines 3–4). By introducing elevated and complex words such as "lexicographers" and "construed," however, Graves implies that the connection between "the naked" and "the nude" is sophisticated and artificial.

In the rest of the poem, Graves develops this distinction, linking the word *naked* to virtues of love, truth, innocence, and honesty, while connecting *nude* to artifice, hypocrisy, and deceit. At the end, he visualizes a classical underworld in which all pretentiousness will disappear, and the nude will lose their sophistication and become merged with the naked. The implication is that artifice will vanish in the face of eternal reality. A thorough study of the words in the poem bears out the consistency of Graves's idea, not only about the two words in the title, but also about the accumulated layers of history, usage, and philosophy that weigh upon human life and thought.



Poems for Study

- William Blake The Lamb, 682
- Robert Burns Green Grow the Rashes, O, 683
- Lewis Carroll Jabberwocky, 684
- Hayden Carruth An Apology for Using the Word "Heart" in Too Many Poems, 685
- E. E. Cummings next to of course god america I, 686
- John Donne Holy Sonnet 14: Batter My Heart, Three-Personed God, 687
- Richard Eberhart The Fury of Aerial Bombardment, 688
- Bart Edelman Chemistry Experiment, 688
- Thomas Gray Sonnet on the Death of Richard West, 689
- Jane Hirshfield The Lives of the Heart, 690
- A. E. Housman Loveliest of Trees, the Cherry Now, 691
- Carolyn Kizer Night Sounds, 692
- Denise Levertov Of Being, 693
- Eugenio Montale English Horn (Corno Inglese), 693
- Judith Ortiz [Cofer]. Latin Women Pray, 694
- Henry Reed Naming of Parts, 695
- Edwin Arlington Robinson Richard Cory, 696
- Theodore Roethke Dolor, 697
- Kay Ryan Crib, 697
- Stephen Spender I Think Continually of Those Who Were Truly Great, 698
- Wallace Stevens Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock, 699
- Mark Strand Eating Poetry, 699
- William Wordsworth Daffodils (I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud), 700



WILLIAM BLAKE (1757–1827)

The Lamb (1789)

Little Lamb, who made thee?
 Dost thou know who made thee?
 Gave thee life & bid thee feed,
 By the stream & o'er the mead;
 Gave thee clothing of delight,
 Softest clothing woolly bright;

5

Gave thee such a tender voice,
 Making all the vales rejoice!
 Little Lamb who made thee?
 Dost thou know who made thee?
 Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
 Little Lamb I'll tell thee:
 He is called by thy name,
 For he calls himself a Lamb:
 He is meek & he is mild,
 He became a little child:
 He is child & thou a lamb,
 We are called by his name.
 Little Lamb God bless thee.
 Little Lamb God bless thee.

10

15

20

QUESTIONS

1. Who or what is the speaker in this poem? The listener? How are they related?
2. What is the effect of repetition in the poem?
3. How would you characterize the diction in this poem? High, middle, or low? Abstract or concrete? How is it consistent with the speaker?
4. What are the connotations of "softest," "bright," "tender," "meek," and "mild"? What do these words imply about the Creator?
5. Describe the characteristics of God imagined in this poem. Contrast the image here with the image of God in Donne's "Batter My Heart."

ROBERT BURNS (1759–1796)

Green Grow the Rashes, O (1787)

1

There's naught but care on ev'ry han',
 In every hour that passes, O;
 What signifies the life o' man
 An' 'twere na' for the lasses, O?
 Chorus:
 Green grow the rashes, O;
 Green grow the rashes, O;
 The sweetest hours that e'er I spend
 Are spent among the lasses, O!

hand
 of
 if it were not



rustles 5

2

The war'ly^o race may riches chase,
 An' riches still may fly them, O;
 An' tho' at last they catch them fast,
 Their hearts can ne'er enjoy them, O.
 Chorus.

worldly 10

3

But gie me a cannie^o hour at e'en,^o
 My arms about my dearie, O,
 An' war'ly cares an' war'ly men
 May a' gae tapsalteerie,^o O!
 Chorus.

15

4

For you sae douce^o ye sneer at this,
 Ye're naught but senseless asses, O;
 The wisest man the war' e'er^o saw,
 He dearly loved the lasses, O.
 Chorus.

20

5

Auld Nature swears the lovely dears
 Her noblest work she classes, O;
 Her prentice han^o she tried on man,
 An' then she made the lasses, O.
 Chorus.

QUESTIONS

1. Who is the speaker? What is he like? What is his highest value? How seriously do you take his pronouncements?
2. How does the speaker justify his feelings? How does he compare his interests with those of other people?
3. What is the speaker's explanation of the origins of men and women? How might this explanation have been received in 1787, the year of publication, when most people accepted literally the creation story as told in Genesis?

LEWIS CARROLL (1832–1898)

Jabberwocky (1871)

"Twas 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!"

5

^oThe poem "Jabberwocky," which appears in the first chapter of *Through the Looking Glass*, is full of nonsense words that Carroll made up with the sound (rather than the sense) in mind. Alice admits that the poem makes some sense even though she does not know the words: "It seems very pretty . . . but it's rather hard to understand! . . . Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are!"

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.

10

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

15

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.

20

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

25

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

QUESTIONS

1. Summarize in your own words the story that this poem tells.
2. Humphry Dumpty begins to explain or explicate this poem for Alice in Chapter 6 of *Through the Looking Glass*. He explains that "'brillig' means four o'clock in the afternoon—the time when you begin broiling things for dinner." He also explains that "'slithy' means 'lithe' and 'slimy.' 'Lithe' is the same as 'active.' You see it's like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed into one word." Go through the poem and determine what combinations of words are packed into these portmanteau words. *Brillig*, for example, might be seen as a combination of *broiling*, *brilliant*, and *light*.

HAYDEN CARRUTH (1921–2008)

An Apology for Using the Word "Heart"
 in Too Many Poems (1959)



5

What does it mean? Lord knows; least of all I.
 Faced with it, schoolboys are shy,
 And grow-ups speak it at moments of excess
 Which later seem more or less
 Unfeasible. It is equivocal, sentimental,
 Debatable, really a sort of lentil—
 Neither pea nor bean. Sometimes it's a muscle,
 Sometimes courage or at least hustle,
 Sometimes a core or center, but mostly it's
 A sound that slushily fits

10

The meters of popular songwriters without

Meaning anything. It is stout,
 Leonine, chicken, great, hot, warm, cold,
 Broken, whole, tender, bold,
 Stony, soft, green, blue, red, white,
 Faint, true, heavy, light,
 Open, down, shallow, etc. No wonder
 Our superiors thunder
 Against it. And yet in spite of a million abuses
 The word survives; its uses
 Are such that it remains virtually indispensable
 And, I think, defensible.

The Freudian terminology is awkward or worse,
 And suggests so many perverse
 Etiologies that it is useless; but “heart” covers
 The whole business, lovers
 To monks, i.e., the capacity to love in the fullest
 Sense. Not even the dullest
 Reader misapprehends it, although locating
 It is a matter awaiting
 Someone more ingenious than I. But given
 This definition, driven
 Though it is out of a poet’s necessity, isn’t
 The word needed at present
 As much as ever, if it is well written and said,
 With the heart and the head?

QUESTIONS

1. How much attention is given in this poem to the meanings of the word “heart”? How accurate are the definitions? Why does the poet title the poem “An Apology . . .”?
2. Would it be fair to describe some of the definitions as “flippant”? Why? How do we know that the poet is being serious?
3. Why does Carruth say, “Not even the dullest / Reader misapprehends it” [i.e., the word “heart”]? How true is this claim?



E. E. CUMMINGS (1894–1962)

next to of course god america i (1926)

“next to of course god america i
 love you land of the pilgrims’ and so forth oh
 say can you see by the dawn’s early my
 country ’tis of centuries come and go
 and are no more what of it we should worry
 in every language even deafanddumb
 thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry
 by jingo by gee by gosh by gum
 why talk of beauty what could be more beaut-
 iful than these heroic happy dead

who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
 they did not stop to think they died instead
 then shall the voice of liberty be mute?”

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water

QUESTIONS

1. What is the form of this poem? What is the rhyme scheme? What does Cummings achieve by not using capitalization and punctuation?
2. Who is the speaker? What characteristics and capacities does he show? How do you respond to him?
3. What ideas does the poem bring out? In what ways does the speaker parody the speakers that one is likely to hear on the Fourth of July throughout the United States? What is Cummings saying not only about the speakers but also about the crowds that listen to such speeches?



JOHN DONNE (1572–1631)

Holy Sonnet 14: Batter My Heart, Three-Personed God (1633)

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You
 As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
 That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend
 Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new.
 I, like an usurped^o town, to another due,
 Labor to admit You, but Oh, to no end;
 Reason, Your viceroy in me, me should defend,
 But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.
 Yet clearly I Love You, and would be loved fain,^o
 But am betrothed unto Your enemy.
 Divorce me, untie or break that knot again;
 Take me to You, imprison me, for I,
 Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,
 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

QUESTIONS

1. What kind of God is suggested by the words “batter,” “knock,” “overthrow,” and “break”? What does “three-personed God” mean?
2. With which person of God might the verbs “knock” and “break” be associated? The verbs “breathe” and “blow”? The verbs “shine” and “burn”?
3. What is the effect of the altered word order at the ends of lines 7 and 9?
4. Explain the words “enthrall” (line 13) and “ravish” (line 14) to resolve the apparent paradox or contradiction in the last two lines.



conquered

gladly

RICHARD EBERHART (1904–2005)**The Fury of Aerial Bombardment (1947)**

You would think the fury of aerial bombardment
 Would rouse God to relent; the infinite spaces
 Are still silent. He looks on shock-pried faces.
 History, even, does not know what is meant.

5 You would feel that after so many centuries
 God would give man to repent; yet he can kill
 As Cain could, but with multitudinous will,
 No farther advanced than in his ancient furies.

10 Was man made stupid to see his own stupidity?
 Is God by definition indifferent, beyond us all?
 Is the eternal truth man's fighting soul
 Wherein the Beast ravens in its own avidity?

15 Of Van Wattering I speak, and Averill,
 Names or a list, whose faces I do not recall
 But they are gone to early death, who late in school
 Distinguished the belt lever from the belt holding pawl.

QUESTIONS

1. Who or what is the speaker in this poem? What does the last stanza tell you about him? (Eberhart was a gunnery instructor during World War II.)
2. What type and level of diction predominates in lines 1–12? What observations about God are made in these lines? Compare the image of God presented here with the one found in Donne's "Batter My Heart, Three-Personed God" and Blake's "The Lamb." What similarities or differences do you find?
3. How does the level and type of diction change in the last stanza? What is the effect of these changes? How is jargon used here?
4. Compare this poem with Thomas Hardy's "Channel Firing" (p. 765). How are the ideas in the poems similar?

BART EDELMAN (b. 1951)**Chemistry Experiment (2001)**

5 We listened intently to the professor,
 Followed each one of her instructions,
 Read through the textbook twice,
 Wore lab coats and safety goggles,
 Mixed the perfect chemical combinations
 In the proper amounts and order.
 It was all progressing smoothly;
 We thought we were a complete success.
 And then the flash of light.

The loud, perplexing explosion,
 The black rope of smoke,
 Rising freely above our singed hair.
 Someone in another lab down the hallway
 Phoned the local fire department
 Which arrived lickety-split
 With the hazardous waste crew,
 And they assessed the accident,
 Deciding we were out of danger.
 It was the talk of the campus
 For many weeks afterwards.
 We, however, became so disillusioned
 That we immediately dropped the course
 And slowly retreated from each other.
 The very idea we could have done
 More damage than we actually did—
 Blown up ourselves and the building
 From the base of its foundation—
 Shook us, like nothing had before.
 And even now, years later,
 When anyone still asks about you,
 I get this sick feeling in my stomach
 And wonder what really happened
 To all that elementary matter.

QUESTIONS

1. What events are recounted in this poem? How may the narrative be placed into sections? Who is the listener or implied reader of the poem?
2. What level of language is contained here? Study lines 13–18. How does the diction change here? Why?
3. Why does the poem end as it does? What connection does this conclusion have with the previous parts of the poem? Why might this incident have caused the participants to have lost contact with each other?

THOMAS GRAY (1716–1771)**Sonnet on the Death of Richard West (1742; 1775)**

In vain to me the smiling mornings shine,
 And redd'ning Phoebus^o lifts his golden fire;
 The birds in vain their amorous descant^o join,
 Or cheerful fields resume their green attire.^o
 These ears, alas! for other notes repine;
 A different object do these eyes require.

love songs



^o Phoebus: Apollo, the Sun. God 4 resume their green attire: During the darkness of night, the "cheerful fields" have no color, but in the light of the morning sun they become green again.

My lonely anguish melts no heart but mine,
 And in my breast the imperfect joys expire.
 Yet morning smiles the busy race to cheer,
 And new-born pleasure brings to happier men;
 The fields to all their wonted tribute bear.^o

To warm their little loves the birds complain.^o
 I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,
 And weep the more because I weep in vain.

10

^o11 *The fields . . . bear*: The fields contribute their customary harvest to benefit all creation. 12 *complain*: sing love songs.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the poem's subject—the speaker or the dead friend? How effective is the poem as a lament or dirge?
2. Describe the poem's level of diction. Why does the speaker use phrases like "smiling mornings" (line 1), "redd'ning Phoebus" (2), "golden fire" (2), "resume their green attire" (4), and "notes" (5)? How common are these phrases? What is their effect?
3. Consider the syntax in lines 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, and 12. What is unusual about the word order in these lines? What is the effect of this word order?
4. In the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth printed this poem. He italicized lines 6–8 and 13 and 14 and wrote, "It will easily be perceived, that the only part of this Sonnet which is of any value is the lines printed in Italics; it is equally obvious that . . . the language of these lines does in no respect differ from that of prose." What does Wordsworth's criticism mean? To what degree is it justified?

JANE HIRSHFIELD (b. 1953)

The Lives of the Heart (1997)

Are ligneous,^o muscular, chemical.
 Wear birch-colored feathers,
 green tunnels of horse-tail reed.
 Wear calcified spirals, Fibonnacian spheres.^o
 Are edible; are glassy; are clay; blue schist.^o
 Can be burned as tallow, as coal,
 can be skinned for garnets, for shoes.
 Cast shadows or light;
 shuffle; snort; cry out in passion.
 Are salt, are bitter,
 wear sweet grass with their teeth.
 Step silently into blue needle-fall at dawn.
 Thrash in the net until hit.
 Rise up as cities, as serpentine magma, as maples,

5

10

^o1 *Ligneous*: woody, and therefore easily ignited. 4 *Fibonnacian spheres*: after Leonardo Fibonnaci (d. 1250), who described a sequence of numbers in which each new number is the sum of the previous two numbers. The pattern of numbers is found as a basic structure in many plants. 5 *schist*: a metamorphic, heavily layered rock.

hiss lava-red into the sea.
 Leave the strange kiss of their bodies
 in Burgess Shale. Can be found, can be lost
 can be carried, broken, sung.

Lie dormant until they are opened by ice,
 by drought. Go blind in the service of lace.
 Are starving, are sated, indifferent, curious, mad.
 Are stamped out in plastic, in tin.

Are stubborn, are careful, are slipshod,
 are strong on the blue backs of flies
 on the black backs of cows.

Wander the vacant whale-roads,^o the white thickets
 heavy with slaughter.

Wander the fragrant carpets of alpine flowers.

Not one is not held in the arms of the rest, to blossom.

Not one is not given to ecstasy's lions.

Not one does not grieve.

Each of them opens and closes, closes and opens
 the heavy gate—violent, serene, consenting, suffering it all.

^o26 *whale-roads*: a figurative phrase in Old English poetry referring to the sea.

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the attributes of the lives of the heart as brought out through the language of the first five lines.
2. Is there anywhere that lives of the heart are not to be found on earth? What is meant by lines such as "Not one is not given to ecstasy's lions" and "Go blind in the service of lace"?
3. How does the repetitiveness in this poem affect your perception of the lives of the heart? Explain the effect of the many repetitions of words and phrases like "are," "can be," "Not one," and the repetitions of verbs like "step," "thrash," "rise up," "hiss," "lie," "wander," and "opens and closes."
4. Do you find this poem easy or difficult? Why?
5. Contrast this poem with Carruth's "An Apology for Using the Word 'Heart' in Too Many Poems."

A. E. HOUSMAN (1859–1936)

Loveliest of Trees, the Cherry Now (1896)

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
 Is hung with bloom along the bough,
 and stands about the woodland ride^o
 Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
 Twenty will not come again,



path

And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodland I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.

10

QUESTIONS

1. How old is the speaker? How can you tell? Why does he assume he will live seventy years ("threescore years and ten")?
2. How would you describe the speaker's perception or sense of time? What is the effect of the words "only" (line 8) and "little" (line 10)?
3. What ideas about time, beauty, and life does this poem explore? What does it suggest about the way we should live?

CAROLYN KIZER (b. 1925)

Night Sounds (1984)

Imitated from the Chinese

The moonlight on my bed keeps me awake;
Living alone now, aware of the voices of evening,
A child weeping at nightmares, the faint love-cries of a woman,
Everything tinged by terror or nostalgia.

No heavy, impassive back to nudge with one foot
While coaxing, "Wake up and hold me,"
When the moon's creamy beauty is transformed
Into a map of impersonal desolation.

But, restless in this mock dawn of moonlight
That so chills the spirit, I alter our history:
You were never able to lie quite peacefully at my side,
Not the night through. Always withholding something.

Awake before morning, restless and uneasy,
Trying not to disturb me, you would leave my bed
While I lay there rigidly, feigning sleep.
Still—the night was nearly over, the light not as cold
As a full cup of moonlight.

And there were the lovely times when, to the skies' cold
You cried to me, *Yes!* Impaled me with affirmation.
Now when I call out in fear, not in love, there is no answer.
Nothing speaks in the dark but the distant voices,
A child with the moon in his face, a dog's hollow cadence.

20



QUESTIONS

1. To what degree may this poem be considered confessional? What is being confessed?
2. Who is the "you" of the poem? What has happened between the speaker and the "you"? With what contrasts does the speaker conclude the poem? How are these contrasts related to the relationship between the speaker and the "you"?
3. What situation and impressions are brought about by these words in the first stanza: "moonlight," "weeping," "nightmares," "tinged," "terror," "nostalgia"?
4. What is the effect of the participles in stanzas 1–4 ("living," "coaxing," "withholding," "trying," "feigning")?

DENISE LEVERTOV (1923–1997)

Of Being (1997)

I know this happiness
Is provisional:

the looming presences—
great suffering, great fear—
withdraw only
into peripheral vision:

but ineluctable this shimmering
of wind in the blue leaves:

this flood of stillness
widening the lake of sky:

this need to dance,
this need to kneel:

this mystery:

QUESTIONS

1. What is meant by "this happiness / Is provisional"?
2. What is it that withdraws (line 5)? How does the poet connect withdrawing with the poem's title?
3. What do the words "peripheral vision," "ineluctable," "blue leaves," "flood of stillness," and "lake of sky" contribute to your understanding of the "mystery" with which the poem closes? What is noteworthy about these words?
4. Why does the poet end the poem with a colon rather than a period?

EUGENIO MONTALE (1896–1981)

English Horn (Corno Inglese) (1916–1920)

Translated by Robert Zweig

The intent wind that plays tonight
—recalling a strong slashing of blades—
the instrument of dense trees and sweeps



5

10

the horizon of copper
 where streaks of light are stretching,
 like roaring kites in the sky
 (Moving clouds, clear kingdoms
 above! High Eldorados⁸
 partly shut doors!)
 and the angry sea, which scale by scale,
 changes color
 launches a twisted horn
 of spume towards land;
 The wind that is born and dies
 in the hour that slowly goes black—
 if only, tonight, it could play you too
 dissonant instrument,
 heart.

⁸ *Eldorados*: Eldorado was a mythical city of great wealth, believed in the sixteenth century to be in South America.

QUESTIONS

1. What does the wind do in this poem? Why do you think the speaker wishes the wind to "play" her heart?
2. What are the images of the earth? What are the images of the sky? How are they different?
3. What lines indicate that the speaker is either satisfied or dissatisfied with her life? What images help you to understand her feelings about herself?
4. What does the speaker mean by referring to Eldorados' doors as "partly shut"?
5. What is the meaning of the title, "English Horn (Corno Inglese)"?

JUDITH ORTIZ [COFER] (b. 1952)

Latin Women Pray (1987)

Latin women pray
 In incense sweet churches
 They pray in Spanish to an Anglo God
 With a Jewish heritage.
 And this great White Father
 Imperturbable in his marble pedestal
 Looks down upon his brown daughters
 Votive candles stiring like lust
 In his all seeing eyes
 Unmoved by their persistent prayers.

Yet year after year
 Before his image they kneel
 Margarita Josefina Maria and Isabel
 All fervently hoping
 That if not omnipotent
 At least he be bilingual

QUESTIONS

1. What is the situation described in this poem? Who are the women who pray? What do their names indicate about them? To what God do these women pray? Are they living in their native countries?
2. What words in the poem explain the contradiction implied by the speaker? What is conveyed by the term "Anglo" (line 3). What is conveyed by the terms "White Father" and "Jewish heritage" (lines 4 and 5).
3. What are votive candles? Why does the speaker state that they shine "like lust"? What does "lust" indicate in this context?
4. Describe the effect of the last line (16). In what way is the line comic? How does the line contrast with the previous part of the poem?

HENRY REED (1914–1986)

Naming of Parts (1946)

To-day we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
 We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning,
 We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day,
 To-day we have naming of parts. Japonica
 Glistens like coral in all of the neighboring gardens,
 And to-day we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
 is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
 When you are given your slings. And this is the piling swivel,
 Which in your case you have not got. The branches
 Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
 Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety-catch, which is always released
 With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
 See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy
 If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
 Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
 Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of this
 is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
 Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
 Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
 The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
 They call it easing the Spring.

They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy
 If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
 And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance,
 Which in our case we have not got; and the almond-blossom

Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and forwards,
For to-day we have naming of parts.

QUESTIONS

1. There may be two speakers in this poem, or one speaker repeating the words of another and adding his own thoughts. What two voices do you hear?
2. What is the setting? The situation? How do these affect the speaker?
3. How and why is jargon used in the poem? With what set of “parts” is the jargon initially associated? How does this change?
4. How are phrases like “easing the spring” (lines 22, 24, 25) and “point of balance” (27) used ambiguously? What is the effect of repetition?

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON (1869–1935)



Richard Cory (1897)

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.
And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
‘Good-morning,’ and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the effect of using “down town,” “pavement,” “meat,” and “bread” in connection with the people who admire Richard Cory?
2. What are the connotations and implications of the name “Richard Cory”? Of the word “gentleman”?
3. Why does the poet use “sole to crown” instead of “head to toe” and “imperially slim” instead of “very thin” to describe Cory?
4. What effect does repetition produce in this poem? Consider especially the six lines that begin with “And.”
5. What positive characteristic does Richard Cory possess (at least from the perspective of the speaker) besides wealth?

THEODORE ROETHKE (1908–1963)

Dolor (1943)

I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils,
Neat in their boxes, dolor of pad and paper-weight,
All the misery of manila folders and mucklage,
Desolation in immaculate public places,
Lonely reception room, lavatory, switchboard,
The unalterable pathos of basin and pitcher,
Ritual of multigraph, paper-clip, comma,
Endless duplication of lives and objects.
And I have seen dust from the walls of institutions,
Finer than flour, alive, more dangerous than silica,
Sit, almost invisible, through long afternoons of tedium,
Dropping a fine film on nails and delicate eyebrows,
Glazing the pale hair, the duplicate grey standard faces.

QUESTIONS

1. What does “dolor” mean? What words objectify the concept?
2. Why does “Dolor” not contain the fourteen lines usual in a sonnet?
3. What institutions, conditions, and places does the speaker associate with “dolor”? What do these have in common?
4. Describe the relationships of sentence structures and lines in “Dolor.”

KAY RYAN (b. 1945)

Crib (1997)

From the Greek for
avert or *plaited*
which quickly translated
to *basket*: Whence the verb
crib, which meant to *filch*
under cover of wicker
anything—some liquor,
a *cutlet*.

For we want to make off
with things that are not
our own. There is a pleasure
their brings, a vitality
to the home.

Cribbed objects or answers
keep their guilty shimmer
forever, have you noticed?
Yet religions downplay this.

Note, for instance, in our annual rehearsals of innocence,
the substitution of *manger* for *crib*—

as if we ever deserved that baby,
or thought we did.

QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the poet named this poem "Crib"? In what way is the word "crib" developed in the poem?
2. Why does the speaker bring out the idea of theft in the word "crib"? What is meant by the sentence "There is a pleasure / Theft brings"? Is this true? How is the idea of theft related to the entire poem?
3. What is meant by the "annual rehearsals of innocence." What is the connection between the rehearsals of innocence and the title, "Crib," of the poem?
4. Explain the idea of the final four lines of the poem. Should we consider this poem to be about the development of words, or about the nature of religious belief, or both?

STEPHEN SPENDER (1909–1995)

I Think Continually of Those Who Were Truly Great (1934)

I think continually of those who were truly great.
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history
Through corridors of light where the hours are suns,
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the spirit clothed from head to foot in song.
And who hoarded from the spring branches
The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms.

What is precious is never to forget
The delight of the blood drawn from ageless springs
Breaking through rocks in worlds before our earth;
Never to deny its pleasure in the simple morning light,
Nor its grave evening demand for love;
Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother
With noise and fog the flowering of the spirit.

QUESTIONS

1. How does this poem cause you to reconsider what is usually understood by the word "great"? What are the principal characteristics of people "who were truly great"?
2. Why does Spender use the words "were great" rather than "are great"? What difference, if any, does this distinction make to Spender's definition of greatness?
3. What is the meaning of phrases like "delight of the blood," "in worlds before our earth," "hours are suns," "still touched with fire"? What other phrases need similar thought and explanation?
4. How practical is the advice of the poem in the light of its definitions of "great" and "precious"? Why should the practicality or impracticality of these definitions probably not be considered in your judgment of the poem?

WALLACE STEVENS (1879–1955)

Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock (1923)

The houses are haunted
By white night-gowns.
None are green,
Or purple with green rings,
Or green with yellow rings,
Or yellow with blue rings.
None of them are strange,
With socks of lace
And beaded ceintures.^o
People are not going
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.
Only here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches tigers
In red weather.

QUESTIONS

1. Is the "Ten O'Clock" here morning or night? How can you tell?
2. What do "haunted" and "white night-gowns" suggest about the people who live in the houses? What do the negative images in lines 3–9 suggest?
3. To whom are these people contrasted in lines 12–15?
4. What are the connotations of "socks with lace" and "beaded ceintures"? With which character in the poem would you associate these things?
5. What is the effect of using words and images like "baboons," "periwinkles," "tigers," and "red weather" in lines 11–15? Who will dream of these things?
6. Explain the term "disillusionment" and explore its relation to the point that this poem makes about dreams, images, and imagination.

MARK STRAND (b. 1934)

Eating Poetry (1968)

It runs from the corners of my mouth.
There is no happiness like mine.
I have been eating poetry.

The librarian does not believe what she sees.
Her eyes are sad
and she walks with her hands in her dress.

The poems are gone.
The light is dim.
The dogs are on the basement stairs and coming up.

10 Their eyeballs roll,
their blond legs burn like brush.
The poor librarian begins to stamp her feet and weep.

She does not understand.
When I get on my knees and lick her hand,
She screams.

15

I am a new man.
I snarl at her and bark.
I romp with joy in the bookish dark.

QUESTIONS

1. In the first three lines, which words tell you the poem is not to be taken literally?
2. What is the serious topic of the poem? What words indicate its serious intent?
3. What is the comic topic? Which words tell you that the poem's action is comic?



WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770–1850)

Daffodils (I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud) (1807; 1804)

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.

5

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.

10

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:

15

^aWordsworth's note: "Written at Town-end, Grasmere. Daffodils grew and still grow on the margin of Ullswater, and probably may be seen to this day as beautiful in the month of March, nodding their golden heads beside the shimmering and foaming waves." Wordsworth also pointed out that lines 21 and 22, the "best lines," were by his wife, Mary.

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.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the occasion of the poem? Where was the speaker at the time he describes in the poem? What was he doing? What did he see?
2. What words does Wordsworth use to show the life and beauty of the flowers at the side of the lake? How successful are these word choices?
3. How important to the speaker is the memory of this experience?

WRITING ABOUT DICTION AND SYNTAX IN POETRY

Study your poem carefully, line by line, to gain a general sense of its meaning. Try to establish how diction and syntax may be connected to elements such as tone, character, and idea. As you develop your ideas, look for effective and consistent patterns of word choice, connotation, repetition, and syntactic patterns that help create and reinforce the conclusions you have drawn about the poem. Ask questions like these.

Questions for Discovering Ideas

- Who is the speaker? What is the speaker's profession or way of life? How does the speaker's background affect his or her power of observation? How does the background affect his or her level of speech?
- Who is the listener? How does the listener affect what the speaker says? What other characters are in the poem? How are their actions described? How accurate and fair do you think these descriptions are?
- Is the level of diction in the poem elevated, neutral, or informal; and how does this level affect your perception of the speaker, subject, and main idea or ideas?
- What patterns of diction or syntax do you discover in the poem? (*Example:* Consider words related to situation, action, setting, or particular characters.) How ordinary or unusual are these words? Which, if any, are unusual enough to warrant further examination?
- Does the poem contain many "loaded" or connotative words in connection with any single element, such as setting, speaker, or theme?

- Does the poem contain a large number of general and abstract or specific and concrete words? What is the effect of these choices?
- Does the poem contain dialect? Colloquialisms? Jargon? If so, how does this special diction shape your response to the poem?
- What is the nature of the poem's syntax? Is there any unusual word order? What seems to be the purpose or effect of syntactic variations?
- Has the poet used any striking patterns of sentence structure such as parallelism or repetition? If so, what is the effect?

Strategies for Organizing Ideas

When you narrow your examination to one or two specific areas of diction or syntax, you should list important words, phrases, and sentences. Begin grouping examples that work in similar ways or produce similar effects. Investigate the full range of meaning and effect that the examples produce. Eventually you may be able to develop the related examples as units or sections for your essay.

Your central idea should emerge from your investigation of the diction or syntax that you find most fruitful and interesting. Let the poem be your guide. Since diction and syntax contribute to the poem's impact and meaning, try to connect your thesis and examples to your other conclusions. If you are writing about Stevens's "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," for example, your central idea might assert that Stevens uses words describing colors (i.e., "white," "green," "purple," "yellow," "blue," "red") to contrast life's visual reality with the psychological "disillusionment" of the "houses," "People," and "old sailor." Such a formulation makes a clear connection of diction to meaning.

There are many different ways to organize your material. If you deal with only one aspect of diction, such as connotative words, you might treat these in the order in which they appear in the poem. When you deal with two or three different aspects of diction and syntax, however, you might devote a series of paragraphs to related examples of multiple denotation, then connotation, and finally jargon (assuming the presence of jargon in the poem). In such an instance, your organization would be controlled by the types of material under consideration rather than by the order in which the words occur.

Alternatively, you might deal with the impact of diction or syntax on a series of other elements, such as character, setting, or situation. Such an essay would focus on a single type of lexical or syntactic device (described earlier in this chapter) as it relates to these different elements in sequence. Thus, you might discuss the link between connotation and situation, character, and the basic situation of the poem. Whatever organization you select, keep in mind that each poem will suggest its own avenues of exploration and strategies of organization.

In your conclusion, summarize your ideas about the impact of the poem's diction or syntax. You might also consider the larger implications of your ideas in connection with the thoughts and emotions evoked by your reading.

Illustrative Student Essay

Although underlined sentences are not recommended by MLA style, they are used in this illustrative essay as teaching tools to emphasize the central idea, thesis sentence, and topic sentences.

Fitzpatrick 1

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English 1B

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Diction and Character in Robinson's "Richard Cory"¹

In "Richard Cory," Edwin Arlington Robinson dramatizes the idea that nothing can guarantee happiness. His example, and the central character in the poem, is Richard Cory, a man who apparently has everything: wealth, status, dignity, taste, and respect. Cory's suicide, however, reveals that these qualities did not make him happy. By creating a gulf between Cory and the people of the town who admire and envy him, Robinson sets us up for the surprising suicide described in the last two lines. The distinction is produced through the words that Robinson uses to demean the general populace and elevate the central character.* The speaker and his or her fellow townspeople are associated with words that indicate their ordinary existence, while Richard Cory is described in words of nobility and privilege.†

The poem focuses on Richard Cory as perceived by the townspeople, who wish that they "were in his place" (line 12). Robinson skillfully employs words about these common folk to suggest their poverty and low status. In the first line, for example, the speaker places himself or herself and these other people "down town." The phrase refers to a central business district, but here it also carries the negative connotation of the word "down." The word implies that Cory's journey to town seems to be a descent, and that the people constantly live in this "down" condition. A similar instance of connotative diction is "pavement" (2), which can mean "sidewalk," but can also mean "street" or

¹This poem appears on page 696.

*Central idea.

†Thesis sentence.

Fitzpatrick 2

“roadbed.” The net effect of the word “pavement” rather than “sidewalk” is to place the “people” even lower than Richard Cory—literally on the street.

[3] In contrast to these few words suggesting the people’s lowness, the poem contains many words that glowingly describe Cory’s high status. Many words and phrases suggest nobility or royalty. These implications begin with the title of the poem and the name “Richard Cory.” That the word “rich” is contained within “Richard” implies Cory’s wealth and privilege. It is also the name of a number of English kings, most notably Richard the Lion Hearted (“Richard Coeur de Lion”). The name “Cory” is equally connotative. It clearly suggests the “Coeur,” the heart, of the famous king, and it also reminds us of “core,” the central or innermost part of anything. The name thus points toward Cory’s singular position and significance. Through sound, “Cory” also suggests the English word “court”—that is, a place for kings and courtiers. The name “Richard Cory” thus begins an association through sound and implication that links the central character to kingship and elegance.

[4] There are other similar words in the poem’s first stanza. The speaker describes Richard Cory as “a gentleman from sole to crown” (3). “Gentleman” refers to a civilized and well-mannered individual, but it originally also meant a man of “high” or “noble” birth. The phrase “from sole to crown” is another way of saying “from head to toe,” but it connotes a great deal more. “Sole” means both “the bottom of a shoe or foot” and “alone” or “singular.” Thus, the word suggests Cory’s isolation and separation from the common folk. The word is also a pun (and homophone) on “soul,” implying that Cory’s gentility is inward as well as outward. The final touch is the word “crown.” In context, the term denotes the top of the head, but it also has connotations of aristocracy and royalty.

[5] The speaker also describes Cory as “clean favored” and “imperially slim” (4). The word “imperially,” like “crown,” makes an explicit connection between Cory and emperors. “Clean favored,” instead of the more common “good-looking,” connotes crisp and untouched features. More to the point, the term “favored” also means “preferred,” “elevated,” “honored,” and “privileged.” “Imperially slim,” instead of “thin,” is equally connotative of wealth and status.

Fitzpatrick 3

While both terms denote the same physical condition, *slim* suggests elegance, wealth, and choice, whereas “thin” suggests poverty and necessity.

[6] Although this type of diction is mostly in the first stanza, Robinson sustains the link between Cory and royalty by using similar terms in the rest of the poem. In stanza two, for example, he uses “quietly arrayed” and “glittered.” Both carry elevated and imperial connotations. “Arrayed” means “dressed,” but it is also a word in the King James Bible that suggests elegant and heavenly clothing (see Matthew 6:29; Acts 12:21; Revelation 7:13). “Quietly” also suggests solitude and introversion. “Glittered” complements “quietly”; it connotes richness of dress and manner, suggesting that the man himself is golden. In the third stanza, the deliberate cliché “richer than a king” again clearly links Richard Cory to royalty. The speaker also notes that Cory was “school’d in every grace” (10). The phrase means that Cory was trained in manners and social niceties, but “grace” connotes privilege and nobility (“Your Grace”) and also the idea of heavenly love and forgiveness (“God’s Grace”).

[7] It is clear, then, that Robinson uses the effects of connotation to lower the common folk and elevate the central character. The words linked to the speaker and the other townspeople have demeaning and negative implications. At the same time, the poet uses words and phrases about Cory that connote royalty and privilege. This careful manipulation of diction widens the gulf between Cory and the town. It also heightens our sense that Cory has aristocratic looks, manners, taste, and breeding. The network of associations built through this skillful diction makes the poem’s ending powerfully shocking, and reinforces the poem’s idea that appearance, wealth, and high status do not necessarily produce happiness.

Fitzpatrick 4

Work Cited

Robinson, Edwin Arlington. “Richard Cory.” *Literature: An Introduction to Reading and Writing*. Ed. Edgar V. Roberts and Robert Zweig. 10th ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2012. 696. Print.

Commentary on the Essay

This essay deals with Robinson's use of connotative words to elevate the central character and demean the townspeople. The opening paragraph makes a general assertion about the poem's theme, connects character to this assertion, and argues that Robinson controls diction to make his distinctions.

The body of the essay, in five paragraphs, deals with the effects of a number of examples of word choice. The examples of connotative words are arranged to reflect partly the characters they define and partly the order in which they appear in the poem. Thus, paragraph 2 discusses the common people and the speaker in connection with two highly connotative terms: *down town* and *parlement*.

The next four paragraphs (3–6) focus on Richard Cory and words or phrases that suggest royalty and privilege. The examples or diction examined here are taken up in the order in which they appear in the poem. Thus, paragraph 3 considers Cory's name, and the fourth explores the effects of *gentleman* and *sole to crown*. Paragraphs 5 and 6 continue this process, examining instances of diction that sustain the association between Cory and nobility. Taken together, the four paragraphs devoted to this central character illustrate Robinson's consistent manipulation of diction both to ennoble and isolate Cory.

The conclusion reasserts that Robinson's diction not only contributes to Cory's isolation but also adds to the impact of his mysterious suicide. In this way, the words and phrases examined in the essay are linked to the poem's exploration of ideas about the human condition.

Writing Topics About the Words of Poetry

Writing Paragraphs

1. In a paragraph compare any two words describing natural scenes in Gray's "Sonnet on the Death of Richard West" and Wordsworth's "Daffodils." Which poem seems more specific and direct in its depiction of nature?
2. In a paragraph compare and contrast Hirschfield's "The Lives of the Heart" and Carruth's "An Apology for Using the Word 'Heart' in Too Many Poems." What common idea about love do the poems share? What differences about love do you find?

Writing Essays

1. Using Eberhart's "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment" in this chapter, together with poems by Jarrell (Chapter 11) and Owen (Chapters 14, 16), study the words that these poets use to indicate the weapons and actions of warfare. In an essay, consider these questions: What shared details make the poems similar? What separate details make them different? How do the poets use word choices to make their points about war as action, tragedy, and horror?
2. Write an essay considering the sound qualities of the invented words in "Jabberwocky." Some obvious choices are "brillig," "frumious," "vorpal," and "manxome," but you are free to choose any or all of them. What is the relationship between the sound and apparent meaning of these words? What

effect do the surrounding normal words and normal word order have on the special words? How does Carroll succeed in creating a narrative "structure," even though the key words are, on the surface, nonsense? Argue that the poem would have had a very different meaning had Carroll not used invented words.

3. Write a brief essay discussing the use of connotation in Cummings's "next to of course god america i," Ortiz Cofer's "Latin Women Pray," Levertov's "Of Being," and "Roethke's "Dolor." What particularities of meaning do the poets introduce? How does their control of connotation contribute to the various ideas you discover in the poems?

Creative Writing Assignment

1. Write a short poem describing a violent crime and commenting on it. Then, assume that you are the "alleged perpetrator" of the crime, and write another poem on the same topic. Even though you describe the same situation, how do your words differ, and why have you made these different choices? Explain the other different word choices you have made. You might also discuss words that you considered using but rejected.

Library Assignment

1. Find a book or books in your library about the works of Gray, Roethke, Robinson, Wordsworth, or another poet represented in this chapter. How fully do these sources discuss the style of these poets? Write a brief report explaining how the writers of the book or books deal with poetic diction.

