Words

Because poetry is a compressed method of expression, every word the poet chooses is important. To understand what a poem is saying, you must understand what every word means. The dictionary meaning of a word is called the *denotation*. Many words also have more subtle undertones to their meanings. These shades of meaning are called the *connotation* of the word. Consider the word “aroma.” Its dictionary meaning is “scent,” but beneath the meaning is a positive *connotation*. When we hear the word “aroma,” we think of something that is pleasant to smell. The word “odor” also means “scent,” but we get a much different, generally negative feeling when we hear the word “odor.”

The word choice itself is called *diction*. The poet may choose sophisticated diction or use a more homespun verbiage depending on what he or she is trying to say.

Exercise III:

In poetry, you will find that general words are rarely used. Poets choose specific words that have more precise denotations and particular connotations. In the following exercise, you are given a neutral word. Find two other words that are more precise, one that has a *positive connotation*, and a second that has a *negative connotation*. You may use a thesaurus if you like.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Positive Connotation</th>
<th>Negative Connotation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. chase</td>
<td>____________________</td>
<td>____________________</td>
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<td>2. unusual</td>
<td>____________________</td>
<td>____________________</td>
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<td>3. honor (verb)</td>
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<td>4. trusting</td>
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Exercise IV:

Now, find “Richard Cory,” by Edward Arlington Robinson (BLP, 82). Read it aloud. Circle and define the words you don’t understand. Then read “Still Here,” by Langston Hughes (GAP, 78).

1. Define these terms as they are used in the context of the poems. Write the definitions in your books somewhere on the same page as the poems.
   a. imperially—
   b. arrayed—
   c. in fine—

2. What impression did the poet want to give us about Richard Cory? What words did he use to convey this idea? Now list alternate words he could have used, words that would have meant the same thing, but would not have held the same connotation. Notice how the poet’s careful use of words—his diction—help give us a clearer image of Richard Cory.
3. What impression did the poet want to give us in “Still Here?” Contrast the diction with that in “Richard Cory.”

4. What kind of life did Richard Cory live? What did the townspeople think of him? What was the poet trying to tell us about life?

5. Read Matthew 6:19–21. Does “Richard Cory” reflect a biblical understanding of life?

6. What kind of life did the subject of “Still Here” live? What was the result of this type of life? What was the poet trying to tell us about life?

7. Does “Still Here” reflect a Biblical understanding of life? Using a concordance or another topical reference volume, support your response with passages from scripture.
Writing Activity:

8. Look around the room where you are sitting. Select an object within your view or a person from literature. Write two descriptive sentences about this item or person, one with positive connotations, the second with negative connotations. Do not directly state whether you like or dislike the item or whether it is attractive or ugly—let your descriptive words and their connotations tell your reader your opinion.
Sounds

Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds. Alliteration may be initial (at the beginning of words) or internal (in the middle of words). This device directs our attention to the alliterated words and the ideas or feelings that the poet is trying to convey. Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds within words. Like alliteration, it may be internal or initial. A third type of sound device is onomatopoeia (ON uh MAT uh PEE uh), in which words resemble the sounds they are portraying. The words crash, boom, smash, or clip-clop are examples of onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeic words are also common in comic strips.

Exercise V:
Circle the alliterated sounds in the following lines of poetry:

1. The sun was warm, but the wind was chill.
2. Grieve and they turn and go.
3. I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable.
4. The watchful night-wind as it went
5. Between the dark and the daylight
6. What I was walling in or walling out
7. Her hardest hue to hold.
8. Miniver mourned the ripe renown
9. Only the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle
10. But ah, my foes and oh, my friends
Circle the examples of *assonance* in the following lines of poetry:

11. Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
12. Here he lies where he longed to be
13. But still he fluttered pulses when he said
14. I took the one less traveled by
15. The muscular one and bid him whip
16. anyone lived in a pretty how town
17. Old age should burn and rave at close of day
18. Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace.
19. One, two! One, two! And through and through
20. To shut her up in a sepulcher

Think of *onomatopoeic* verbs to represent the following phrases:

21. Make the soft, low cry of a dove: ______________
22. Strike a surface sharply: ______________
23. Burst a balloon: ______________
24. Make a sharp sibilant sound: ______________
25. Strike a liquid substance: ______________
26. Sound a short blast on a horn: _________
27. Strike lightly: ______________
28. Cry shrilly or piercingly as an owl: ______________
Exercise VI:

Match the words with their definitions

1. _____ vales a. high spirited
2. _____ host b. musing or thoughtful
3. _____ jocund c. multitude
4. _____ pensive d. valley, dale

5. How many stanzas are in this poem? How many lines per stanza?

6. What, in your opinion, is the most powerful or most memorable instance of alliteration?

7. Give three examples of assonance.

8. What is the subject of this poem? How is it typical of Romantic poetry?


Rhyme

We say that words *rhyme* when their ending, or terminal sounds are the same. When this correspondence of words is exact, like “match” and “catch,” we say it is a *true rhyme*. If the sounds are close, but not exact, we say there is a *slant rhyme* (like “loom” and “moon”).

To find the rhyme scheme of a poem, read the first line and mark it as “a.” Read the second line. If it rhymes with the first line, denote it also as “a.” If it doesn’t rhyme with the first line, mark it as “b.” Continue through the poem in this way, using a new letter when you find a new ending sound. Some poems will have a comprehensive rhyming scheme that must be marked as a whole, using new letters throughout the whole poem; others will have a rhyme scheme that is contained within each stanza. If the scheme seems to repeat itself in each stanza, you may reuse the same letters in each stanza. However, the poem must be read entirely and analyzed before you can definitely determine the rhyme scheme.

For example, find “Requiem,” by Robert Louis Stevenson (GSP, 34). Read the poem aloud to better hear the rhyme. The first three lines all rhyme, so mark them each as “a.” The last line of the first stanza ends with the word “will,” which does not rhyme with “sky, lie, and die.” Mark the fourth line as “b.” The second stanza’s first three lines rhyme with each other; the last rhymes with the last line of the first stanza. Mark this stanza as “cccb.” You should now have, marked in your book, “aaab cccb.” This is the rhyme scheme. (Before you leave this poem, notice the alliterated “h” and “s” sounds in the italicized lines.)

When lines always end with punctuation marks that cause you to pause in your reading, the rhyme can become heavy and nursery rhymish. Enjambment, discussed previously, mutes the rhyme to draw attention away from it. Find “To Lucasta, Going to the Wars,” by Richard Lovelace (GSP, 7). (The poet’s name is pronounced “love-less.”) Read it aloud and remember to pause only briefly at the end of each unpunctuated line. Now read it again and pause as though each line had a period at the end of it. Can you hear that the rhyme is much more pronounced when you pause for a longer period? Which reading was more pleasing to your ear?
Exercise VII:
Read “To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time,” by Robert Herrick (GSP, 4).

1. What is the rhyme scheme?

2. The theme of a poem is the poem’s main idea or subject. You might view it as the conclusion or solution to the ideas or questions presented in a poem. The central theme of “To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time” seems to be “Live for today; tomorrow is uncertain.” This theme is so prevalent in literature, prose, poetry, and drama, that it has its own name: carpe diem (CAR-pay DEE-um), Latin for “seize the day.” What are your thoughts about this philosophy?

3. Read Matthew 6:26–34, Ephesians 5:15–17, and James 4:13–17. How do these passages compare or contrast to the theme of “To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time”?

Exercise VIII:
Read “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” by Robert Frost (GAP, 50) aloud, remembering to soften the rhyme by pausing only briefly at the ends of unpunctuated lines.

1. What is the rhyme scheme of this poem? (Hint: do not restart letter designations with each stanza.)
2. How does the rhyme scheme unify the stanzas?

3. There is much alliteration in this poem. Can you find the line where an initial consonant sound appears three times?

4. What consonant sound appears in every line? What is the effect of the repetition of this sound, called a *sibilant* sound? Why might Frost have used this sound?

5. What two choices is the poet facing? When the poem ends, do you know which choice he made?

6. How does the theme of “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” compare or contrast with the theme of “The Road Not Taken,” also by Robert Frost?
7. How does the theme of “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” compare or contrast with the theme of “To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time”?

Writing Activity:
8. Select three of the following sets of words to write your own couplets (two rhyming lines that express a complete thought).

- plea, me
- thrown, stone
- stood, wood
- cleaver, believer
- exegetical, hypothetical (find the definitions)
- pocket knife, Duncan Phyfe (know who he is)