Word Choice, Word Order, and Tone

I still feel that a poet has a duty to words, and that words can do wonderful things. And it's too bad to just let them lie there without doing anything with and for them.

— GWENDOLYN BROOKS

WORD CHOICE

Diction

Like all good writers, poets are keenly aware of diction, their choice of words. Poets, however, choose words especially carefully because the words in poems call attention to themselves. Characters, actions, settings, and symbols may appear in a poem, but in the foreground, before all else, is the poem's language. Also, poems are usually briefer than other forms of writing. A few inappropriate words in a 200-page novel (which would have about 100,000 words) create fewer problems than they would in a 100-word poem. Functioning in a compressed atmosphere, the words in a poem must convey meanings gracefully and economically. Readers therefore have to be alert to the ways in which those meanings are released.

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Although poetic language is often more intensely charged than ordinary speech, the words used in poetry are not necessarily different from everyday speech. Inexperienced readers may sometimes assume that language must be high-flown and out of date to be included in a poem: instead of reading about a boy "enjoying a swim," they expect to read about a boy "disporting with pliant arm o'er a glassy wave." During the eighteenth century this kind of poetic diction— the use of elevated language rather than ordinary language— was highly valued in English poetry, but since the nineteenth century poets have generally overridden the distinctions that were once made between words used in everyday speech and those used in poetry. Today all levels of diction can be found in poetry.

A poet, like any writer, has several levels of diction from which to choose; they range from formal to middle to informal. Formal diction consists of a dignified, impersonal, and elevated use of language. Notice, for example, the formality of Thomas Hardy's description of the sunken luxury liner Titanic in this stanza from "The Convergence of the Twain" (the entire poem appears on p. 818):

In a solitude of the sea
Deep from human vanity,
And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she.

There is nothing casual or relaxed about these lines. Hardy's use of "stilly," meaning "quietly" or "calmly," is purely literary; the word rarely, if ever, turns up in everyday English.

The language used in Sharon Olds's "Last Night" (p. 816) represents a less formal level of diction; the speaker uses a middle diction spoken by most educated people. Consider how Olds's speaker struggles the next day to comprehend her passion:

Love? It was more like dragonflies
in the sun, 100 degrees at noon,
the ends of their abdomens stuck together, I
close my eyes when I remember.

The words used to describe this encounter are common enough, yet it is precisely Olds's use of language that evokes the extraordinary nature of this couple's connection.

Informal diction is evident in Philip Larkin's "A Study of Reading Habits" (p. 757). The speaker's account of his early reading is presented colloquially, in a conversational manner that in this instance includes slang expressions not used by the culture at large:

When getting my nose in a book
Cured most things short of school,
It was worth ruining my eyes
To know I could still keep cool,
And deal out the old right hook
To dirty dogs twice my size.
This level of diction is clearly not that of Hardy's or Olds's speakers.

Poets may also draw on another form of informal diction, called dialect. Dialects are spoken by definable groups of people from a particular geographic region, economic group, or social class. New England dialects are often heard in Robert Frost's poems, for example. Gwendolyn Brooks uses a black dialect in "We Real Cool" (p. 827) to characterize a group of pool players. Another form of diction related to particular groups is jargon, a category of language defined by a trade or profession. Sociologists, photographers, carpenters, baseball players, and dentists, for example, all use words that are specific to their fields. Sally Croft offers an appetizing dish of cookbook jargon in "Home-Baked Bread" (p. 857).

Many levels of diction are available to poets. The variety of diction to be found in poetry is enormous, and that is how it should be. No language is foreign to poetry because it is possible to imagine any human voice as the speaker of a poem. When we say a poem is formal, informal, or somewhere in between, we are making a descriptive statement rather than an evaluative one. What matters in a poem is not only which words are used but how they are used.

**Denotations and Connotations**

One important way that the meaning of a word is communicated in a poem is through sound: snakes hiss, saws buzz. This and other matters related to sound are discussed in Chapter 27. Individual words also convey meanings through denotations and connotations. Denotations are the literal, dictionary meanings of a word. For example, *bird* denotes a feathered animal with wings (other denotations for the same word include a shuttlecock, an airplane, or an odd person), but in addition to its denotative meanings, *bird* also carries connotations—associations and implications that go beyond a word's literal meanings. Connotations derive from how the word has been used and the associations people make with it. Therefore, the connotations of *bird* might include fragility, vulnerability, altitude, the sky, or freedom, depending on the context in which the word is used. Consider also how different the connotations are for the following types of birds: hawk, dove, penguin, pigeon, chicken, peacock, duck, crow, turkey, gull, owl, goose, coot, and vulture. These words have long been used to refer to types of people as well as birds. They are rich in connotative meanings.

Connotations derive their resonance from a person's experiences with a word. Those experiences may not always be the same, especially when the people having them are in different times and places. Theater, for instance, was once associated with depravity, disease, and sin, whereas today the word usually evokes some sense of high culture and perhaps visions of elegant opulence. In several ethnic communities in the United States many people would find *squid* appetizing, but elsewhere the word is likely to produce negative connotations. Readers must recognize, then, that words
written in other times and places may have unexpected connotations. Annotations usually help in these matters, which is why it makes sense to pay attention to them when they are available.

Ordinarily, though, the language of poetry is accessible, even when the circumstances of the reader and the poet are different. Although connotative language may be used subtly, it mostly draws on associations experienced by many people. Poets rely on widely shared associations rather than the idiosyncratic response that an individual might have to a word. Someone who has received a severe burn from a fireplace accident may associate the word hearth with intense pain instead of home and family life, but that reader must not allow a personal experience to undermine the response the poet intends to evoke. Connotative meanings are usually public meanings.

Perhaps this can be seen most clearly in advertising, where language is also used primarily to convey moods and feelings rather than information. For instance, three decades of increasing interest in nutrition and general fitness have created a collective consciousness that advertisers have capitalized on successfully. Knowing that we want to be slender or lean or slim (not spare or scrawny and certainly not gaunt), advertisers have created a new word to describe beers, wines, sodas, cheeses, canned fruits, and other products that tend to overload what used to be called sweatclothes and sneakers. The word is lite. The assumed denotative meaning of lite is “low in calories,” but as close readers of ingredient labels know, some lites are heavier than regular prepared products. There can be no doubt about the connotative meaning of lite, however. Whatever is lite cannot hurt you; less is more. Even the word is lighter than light; there is no unnecessary droopy g or plump h. Lite is a brilliantly manufactured use of connotation.

Connotative meanings are valuable because they allow poets to be economical and suggestive simultaneously. In this way emotions and attitudes are carefully woven into the texture of the poem’s language. Read the following poem and pay close attention to the connotative meanings of its words.

**Randall Jarrell (1914–1965)**

**The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner**

From my mother’s sleep I fell into the State
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flack and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

The title of this poem establishes the setting and the speaker’s situation. Like the setting of a short story, the setting of a poem is important
when the time and place influence what happens. "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" is set in the midst of a war and, more specifically, in a ball turret—a Plexiglas sphere housing machine guns on the underside of a bomber. The speaker's situation obviously places him in extreme danger; indeed, his fate is announced in the title.

Although the poem is written in the first-person singular, its speaker is clearly not the poet. Jarrell uses a persona, a speaker created by the poet. In this poem the persona is a disembodied voice that makes the gunner's story all the more powerful. What is his story? A paraphrase might read something like this:

After I was born, I grew up to find myself at war, cramped into the turret of a bomber's belly some 31,000 feet above the ground. Below me were exploding shells from antiaircraft guns and attacking fighter planes. I was killed, but the bomber returned to base, where my remains were cleaned out of the turret so the next man could take my place.

This paraphrase is accurate, but its language is much less suggestive than the poem's. The first line of the poem has the speaker emerge from his "mother's sleep," the anesthetized sleep of her giving birth. The phrase also suggests the comfort, warmth, and security he knew as a child. This safety was left behind when he "fell," a verb that evokes the danger and involuntary movement associated with his subsequent "State" (fell also echoes, perhaps, the fall from innocence to experience related in the Bible).

Several dictionary definitions appear for the noun state; it can denote a territorial unit, the power and authority of a government, a person's social status, or a person's emotional or physical condition. The context provided by the rest of the poem makes clear that "State" has several denotative meanings here: because it is capitalized, it certainly refers to the violent world of a government at war, but it also refers to the gunner's vulnerable status as well as his physical and emotional condition. By having "State" carry more than one meaning, Jarrell has created an intentional ambiguity. Ambiguity allows for two or more simultaneous interpretations of a word, a phrase, an action, or a situation, all of which can be supported by the context of a work. Through his ambiguous use of "State," Jarrell connects the horrors of war not just to bombers and gunners but to the governments that control them.

Related to this ambiguity is the connotative meaning of "State" in the poem. The context demands that the word be read with a negative charge. The word is not used with patriotic pride but to suggest an anonymous, impersonal "State" that kills rather than nurtures the life in its "belly." The state's "belly" is a bomber, and the gunner is "hunched" like a fetus in the cramped turret, where, in contrast to the warmth of his mother's womb, everything is frozen, even the "wet fur" of his flight jacket (newborn infants have wet fur too). The gunner is not just 31,000 feet from the ground but "Six miles from earth." Six miles
has roughly the same denotative meaning as 31,000 feet, but Jarrell knew
that the connotative meaning of six miles makes the speaker's position
seem even more remote and frightening.

When the gunner is born into the violent world of war, he finds him-
self waking up to a "nightmare" that is all too real. The poem's final line is
grimly understated, but it hits the reader with the force of an exploding
shell: what the State-bomber-turret gives birth to is a gruesome death that
is merely one of an endless series. It may be tempting to reduce the theme
of this poem to the idea that "war is hell," but Jarrell's target is more spe-
cific. He implicates the "State," which routinely executes such violence, and
he does so without preaching or hysterical denunciations. Instead, his use
of language conveys his theme subtly and powerfully.

WORD ORDER

Meanings in poems are conveyed not only by denotations and connotations
but also by the poet's arrangement of words into phrases, clauses,
and sentences to achieve particular effects. The ordering of words into
meaningful verbal patterns is called syntax. A poet can manipulate the syn-
tax of a line to place emphasis on a word; this is especially apparent when
a poet varies normal word order. In Emily Dickinson's "A narrow Fellow
in the Grass" (p. 2), for example, the speaker says about the snake that
"His notice sudden is." Ordinarily, that would be expressed as "his notice is
sudden." By placing the verb is unexpectedly at the end of the line, Dickin-
on creates the sense of surprise we feel when we suddenly come upon a
snake. Dickinson's inversion of the standard word order also makes the
final sound of the line a hissing is.

TONE

Tone is the writer's attitude toward the subject, the mood created by all of
the elements in the poem. Writing, like speech, can be characterized as seri-
ous or light, sad or happy, private or public, angry or affectionate, bitter or
nostalgic, or by any other attitudes and feelings that human beings expe-
xience. In Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," the tone is clearly
serious; the voice in the poem even sounds dead. Listen again to the per-
sona's final words: "When I died they washed me out of the turret with a
hose." The brutal, restrained matter-of-factness of this line is effective be-
cause the reader is called on to supply the appropriate anger and despair — a
strategy that makes those emotions all the more convincing.

Consider how tone is used to convey meaning in the next poem, in-
spired by the poet's contemplation of mortality.