4.10: Word Choice, Tone, Voice and Style

Word Choice

Connotation vs. Denotation

When we read something, we first understand it at its most basic, literal level. This is called denotation. You can think of the denotation of a word as its dictionary definition. For instance, when you read the word “cow,” you think of a four-legged herbivorous mammal. However, every word carries a connotation as well as a denotation. A connotation is the
non-literal meaning we associate with words. To continue our example, “cow” might connotate farm life, the countryside, or a glass of fresh milk.

Examples

Here are a few more examples of connotations and their possible denotations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word(s)</th>
<th>Denotation</th>
<th>Connotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>First U.S. President</td>
<td>Never told a lie, cut down a cherry tree, wooden teeth, crossed the Delaware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>A flower</td>
<td>Love, affection, romance, sensuality, beauty, the color red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>A major U.S. city</td>
<td>Crowded, center of art and culture, night life, traffic, Statue of Liberty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>A color</td>
<td>Vegetation, fertility, growth, envy, money, life, springtime, prosperity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see, words have many connotations. Every person will find different connotations for a word, as connotation depends on a person's background, cultural setting, emotions, and subjective opinions. For instance, while the color green often represents prosperity to Western cultures, Eastern cultures associate the color red with wealth and good fortune. However, there are often a number of connotations that are widely accepted as connected to a word. People from all over the world, for example, associate snow with winter and heat waves with summer.

So, how do we apply this to reading? Well, when people read, certain words often stand out to them. This is usually because those words carry strong connotations for the reader. Thus, when you read, look for words whose meanings stand out, especially if they relate to a recurring theme in the text. As an example, read through the following excerpt from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." Some words that stand out have been italicized.

I looked upon the scene before me--upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain--upon the bleak walls--upon the **vacant eye-like** windows--upon a few **rank** sedges--and upon a few **white trunks of decayed trees**--with an **utter depression** of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the **reveller upon opium**--the **bitter lapse** into everyday life--the **hideous dropping off** of the veil.

When reading a passage like this, you might get a general impression that its mood is gloomy and depressing. Certain key words in the passage are what create that impression, and if we look at the italicized text, we can see a pattern. The narrator is describing a house, but "vacant eye-like windows" has a denotation of dark or empty windows, but it also brings up the connotation of corpses. "Rank" means overgrown, but it brings up connotations of abandonment and possible decay. Continue looking at the connotations behind each word, and see if you can detect any patterns. For instance, do the italicized words in this passage make you think of death, decline, and decay? Does the comparison to "the after-dream of the reveller upon opium" make you question the narrator's state of mind? By asking these kinds of questions, you're on your way to doing a close reading.

Tone

You will also want to keep an author's tone in mind as you read. Tone is the attitude writing can take towards its subject.
or audience. For instance, writing can be informal, formal, sarcastic, or playful. These are just a few examples of tone. When trying to figure out a story’s tone, ask yourself how the writing is actually put together. Does the author use diction, or the overall word choice, to convey a specific tone? For instance, is there any reason to say “joyful” instead of “happy” or “seething” instead of “angry”?

### Table

The following table provides examples of the same scene written in different tones. Pay special attention to the italicized words.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Joyful</th>
<th>Unhappy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The sound of their revelry rang throughout the town. The sun gleamed brightly on the parade, and colorful streamers floated through the air like dazzling rainbows.</td>
<td>The noise of the cacophony shrilled throughout the town. The sun glared harshly on the parade, and colorful streamers rained through the air like falling debris.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, ask yourself if the author use unusual syntax-- the order in which the sentence is put together grammatically? (Look at “money is the root of all evil” versus “the root of all evil is money.” Does each sentence imply something different to you?) Keeping tone, diction, and syntax in mind will help in your analysis of literature.

With that said, we should always look at every aspect of these elements, from the most basic to the most complex when we read. Thus, this chapter will begin by giving you a broad overview of character, plot, setting, and theme then provide some examples of how you can use these elements to illustrate some of the more complex ideas in a story.

### Narrative Voice

Two of the most fundamental choices that face the author of a fictional narrative is to decide who is to be the narrator and how the story is to be narrated. Along with tone, the authorial “voice” is one of the key distinguishing factors of a piece of writing and can range from aloof and distant to warm and personable.

### Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\)

Click to read the attached extract from the opening of Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey (1818). Who is the narrator? How would you characterize the narrative ‘voice’?

**Answer**

This is what is known as third-person narration. The voice does not belong to a particular character in the novel, and in the extract it does not assume the perspective of any of the characters, merely describing their physical appearance, social status and relationships, and, in Catherine’s case, her likes and dislikes, her accomplishments and pastimes. You will probably have noticed that this extract comprises a single, extremely long paragraph and is mostly concerned with describing the young Catherine Morland. This amount of detail at the start of the novel suggests to us that Catherine is likely to be the central character, and so it proves.

At first sight the narrative voice seems to be fairly neutral and undemonstrative, like that at the beginning of Orwell’s...
Nineteen Eighty-Four above. But a closer inspection reveals greater subtleties. Indeed, it appears that the narrative voice is doing everything in its power to undermine our possible interest, while also drawing our attention to the kinds of expectations and conventions that often attend the process of reading particular kinds of fiction. Everything about Catherine seems to militate against the possibility of her being an interesting central character. According to the narrator, she was no-one's idea of a heroine, and her social and family connections are of little assistance in this respect too. Austen is poking fun here at the idea of the tragic heroine. The narrator sounds almost disappointed at the fact that Catherine is not a motherless waif whose plight can tug at our heartstrings:

Her mother was a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and, what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. She had three sons before Catherine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as anybody might expect, she still lived on – lived to have six children more – to see them growing up around her, and to enjoy excellent health herself.

Neither does Catherine have the classical beauty of the novelistic heroine, her unprepossessing looks in themselves rendering her ‘unpropitious’ for such a role. Furthermore, she clearly lacks aptitude and enthusiasm for the kind of accomplishments which young girls of this time were expected to acquire.

The overriding tone of this extract could perhaps be best described as coolly detached and above all ironic. As you will discover from reading further in Austen, irony was invariably the main feature of her narrative voices. In the case of the opening to Northanger Abbey, would you agree that this ironic strategy of seeming to deflate our enthusiasm is in fact a subtle device to heighten the reader’s interest? If Catherine is such unlikely heroine material, what kind of narrative will it be that can feature her as its central character?

Style and language

What do we mean when we talk of a particular writer’s style? It might help us to think of style as a way of organising and expressing narrative unique to the writer, as distinctive and personal a characteristic as the writer’s handwriting or the prints on the fingers holding the pen. Just as no two sets of fingerprints are alike, so no two writers are alike. Writers write in a style that reflects their individual view of the world.

The word ‘style’ can generally be used to encompass the various literary devices that authors combine to convey their themes and the content of their narratives. Some of those devices, such as narrative perspectives and the representation of character have already been discussed, so I want to focus here on the language writers use and the effects of that language.

Exercise

Please read the attached extract from a short story, ‘Kew Gardens’ (1919), by Virginia Woolf. How would you characterise the descriptive language Woolf uses here and the way in which she presents the thoughts and speech of her characters?
Answer

The descriptive language of the first and final paragraphs is intensely detailed. Various human figures pass by and butterflies flit from flower-bed to flower-bed – a scene we can easily visualize. But Woolf’s use of terms such as ‘curiously irregular’ to describe the movement of the humans and ‘zig-zag’ to depict the flight of the butterflies suggests a sense of vagueness and randomness. The change of focus, from the general scene to the positioning and attitudes of a man, a woman – he ‘strolling carelessly’, she moving ‘with greater purpose’ alerts us to anticipate that they will be the subject of what is to follow. Would you agree that there is almost a filmic quality to this narrative description. When I read this I imagine a camera panning across a wide screen before closing in on the two characters. The final paragraph of the extract, which describes how the husband and wife and their children ‘diminished in size […] as the sunlight and shade swam over their backs in large trembling irregular patches’ seems to me to suggest a gradually dissolving image, such as we might see when a film deliberately loses focus. In spite of the plethora of detail and description, then, I feel there is nevertheless a somewhat impressionistic feel to Woolf's scene-setting.

Did you notice how a similar ‘blurring’ effect seems to result from the second paragraph’s shifts, first to the man’s internal consciousness, as we are given access to his thoughts, and then to direct speech right at the end of the paragraph: ‘Tell me, Eleanor, d’you ever think of the past?’ There is only a dash to denote this second shift; on a first reading we may not even notice that Woolf has moved from a depiction of thoughts to the representation of speech.

And what of the conversation between the man and woman? Does this strike you as a naturalistic representation of dialogue? Probably not, I would suggest. There is something artificial and heightened about the woman’s speech in particular:

‘Doesn’t one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees? Aren’t they one’s past, all that remains of it, those men and women, those ghosts lying under the trees … one’s happiness, one’s reality?’

We might think that no-one would really speak like this, or relate a memory of ‘the mother of all my kisses all my life’ in quite such a mannered fashion. Only with the brisk command to her children – ‘Come Caroline, come Hubert’ – does the woman’s speech appear naturalistic. I think it’s safe to assume that this is not merely bad writing on Woolf's part; she has chosen her language and her means of representing it for a reason. Indeed, it may seem as though the language itself, rather than the actual narrative, is the main focus of this piece of writing. Woolf was one of a number of authors in the early twentieth-century who sought new ways of writing, challenging the conventions of previous generations that gave a primacy to realistic and naturalistic representation and foregrounded narrative events; stories that had a beginning, middle and end, a strong sense of closure, and a fixed authorial point of view. The narrative, such as it is, of Woolf's story 'Kew Gardens’ is episodic rather than linear, and is a good early example of a style of writing that later came to be labeled 'Modernist' (James Joyce, whose opening to Portrait of the Artist we looked at earlier was another dominant figure in this movement). We could say, then, that ‘style’ seems to take precedence over subject-matter in writing such as this, and I hope you can see how Woolf's particular use of language contributes to this.
Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\))

Now look at another extract; the closing section of a much more recent work, a short story, ‘Gazebo’, by the American writer Raymond Carver. Think again about the questions I asked you to consider in Activity 7 before reading the Woolf extract. How does Carver’s style differ from that of Woolf?

**Answer**

The language is minimalist, pared down to the absolute basics, and heavily dialogue-led. We are given no indication of speech intonation; the only verb used to describe the dialogue is the verb ‘to go’, which gives us no clue as to how the words are spoken. This breeds a sense of uncertainty in the reader, I think, and as with Woolf's elevated tone and language this strategy is deliberate, I would suggest. Although the story is narrated in the first-person I get a strong impression that the narrator, Duane, does not fully understand the situation he is describing: ‘I pray for a sign from Holly. I pray for Holly to show me.’ Similarly, the sparseness of Carver's writing leaves the reader in a state of uncertainty. Although the dialogue is, I think you'll agree, much more colloquial and naturalistic than that of Woolf's characters, there seems to me to be a great deal left unsaid, and a sense that the two characters, while conversing, are not communicating. This is, I would argue, a direct consequence of Carver's choice of style and language.

**Contributors and Attributions**

- Adapted from Writing About Literature: The Basics by CK-12, license CC-BY-NC
- Adapted from the course, Approaching Prose Fiction from OpenLearn licensed under CC-BY-NC-SA