

## Unit 4

### Connotation in Literature

When we turn to imaginative writing--poetry, drama, fiction, etc.--the writer's intention is to offer his readers a vivid experience. He tries to portray a person or a scene that he himself has either actually witnessed or imagined, and to present it with as much color and credibility and meaningfulness as he can, so as to make the readers feel the same way he does. He may also wish to communicate an intellectual idea to the readers. Whatever his precise intention as an observer and interpreter of life may be, one of the chief means that the writer uses to make us share his feelings and experiences with him is the skillful use of word-connotations. On the part of the readers, instead of being on guard against prejudices or propaganda, they must be completely receptive to the subtleties of language. They must let themselves be swayed by language as the author desires.

One of the joys we get from reading poetry comes from the manner by which the poet fills our mind with a rapid series of impressions, which he may select and control in order to produce a single powerful effect. Often a single line or two may contain a wealth of suggestiveness. In the *Iliad*, the Greeks and the Trojans were engaged in a great war, the Trojan War, for the sake of the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen, the wife of Menelaus of Sparta. The following lines by Christopher Marlowe (*Dr. Faustus*, V, i.) contain all the emotional values implicit in the story of a beautiful woman for whose love the whole civilization was almost destroyed.

*Was this the face that launched a thousand ships ,  
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?*

The phrase *the* face that *launched* a thousand ships connotes that this is not just an ordinary face, but a face of a woman that has caused countless number of men to fight and die for her sake.

The following are some lines from William Wordsworth's Sonnet Composed *by* the Sea Side *near Calais*, August, 1802.

It is a beauteous evening, calm and free,  
The holy time is quiet as a Nun  
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun  
Is sinking down in its tranquillity;

Wordsworth produces the impression of quietness and serenity by the conscious selection of words which connote these qualities. When he says "quiet as a Nun," the readers can see in their mind the picture of a nun in a convent, especially that of a Carmelite nun who is bound to the vow of silence and therefore is "quiet." The other words used in this sonnet such as "calm" and "**tranquillity**" also connote quietness and serenity.

Not only poets make use of word-connotations. The writer of imaginative prose uses them just as often for the same reasons. A brief excerpt from Van Wyck Brooks's *The Flowering of New England* (1936, p.30) shows how the writer evokes the image of a particular time and place in history:

The Cambridge flowers had a moral meaning, as good New England flowers ought to have; but they had a poetical meaning that was even more apparent. So did the sounds one heard on summer evenings, the bells of the cows ambling home at twilight, the lullaby of the crickets in early autumn, the hymns of the frogs, in spring, in some neighboring swamp, not

to speak of the creaking of the winter wood-sleds, dragging their loads of walnut over the complaining snow.

The words "bells," "lullaby," "hymns," "creaking" all appeal to the sense of hearing: they are sounds that bring to mind memories of New England countryside. The reader can picture life in rural New England all through the year: in summer the cows walked slowly home in the evening after they had been grazing in some pastures nearby, the bells around their necks clanking; in autumn the chirping of the crickets sounded like a lullaby putting one to sleep; in spring the croaking of the frogs sounded like hymns sung in church; and in winter the wood-sleds were creaking because of the load of walnut they were carrying, and the snow was "complaining" because the heavy sleds were going over it. Just by using the word "complaining" the writer succeeds in giving human quality to the snow, in other words, "personifying" it.

Certain novelists and playwrights give their characters names that help the reader decide what sort of people they are: for example, Count *Smorltork*'s name suggests that he is a person who likes to chitchat about common everyday things since it is obvious that the name stands for *small talk*. Mrs. *Slipslop* should be a woman who is very untidy or careless since this is what the word *slipslop* means. Lord Frederic *Verisopht* must be very *sophisticated*, that is, highly knowledgeable and refined. Molly *Brazen*'s name suggests that she is definitely not a lady since *brazen* has a derogatory connotation meaning "open and without shame." Since the word *languish* means "become weaker or fail to make progress," Lydia *Languish* is likely to be the kind of girl who is weak and does not succeed in life. The word *Mammon* is usually used in a derogatory way to refer to wealth regarded as a god. If someone is said to "worship Mammon," it means that he values money highly. An *epicure* is a person who takes pleasure in food

and drink of high quality. Thus, Sir *Epicure Mammon* must be a rich aristocrat who enjoys eating good food and drinking good wine. By giving his characters names like these, a writer can make the readers see the picture of these characters vividly even before they learn more details about them.

Connotation in imaginative literature is important because if only denotation is used the emotional qualities, supplied by words of rich and colorful associations, will be gone. Look at the following lines from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, Act 2.

My soul is an enchanted Boat,  
Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float  
Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing;  
And thine doth like an angel sit  
Beside the helm conducting it,  
Whilst all the winds with melody are ringing.

The emotional qualities that the reader receives are supplied by words of rich and colorful associations. The reader can picture the two lovers whose souls are united in a harmonious atmosphere of heavenly music. Both metaphors and similes are used to show comparisons. One lover's soul "is an enchanted boat" while the other's "is like an angel." The same lines, when paraphrased by using only denotative words, look like this:

My inner self resembles a marine craft under a spell,  
Which, like a dormant member of the subfamily Cygninae of  
ducks, is suspended

On the light-reflecting grayish undulations of your agreeable  
vocalism;

And yours is seated like a supernatural being

Next to the steering apparatus guiding it,

While all the air currents reverberate with a pleasant  
successions of sounds.

It is obvious that the paraphrase has lost all the beauty of language that the original lines convey. It is no longer poetry or even an artistic piece of writing, just words strung together mechanically. This can show you how important connotation is for imaginative writing.

One thing that must be remembered is that connotations are not static; they change with the passage of time. We have seen that some words acquire certain connotations through influential writers and attitudes of society towards the ideas that they represent. These connotations do not last permanently because few writers remain influential indefinitely and no social attitude does not go through some modification. For example, the word "*Communist*" which used to have a very negative connotation about fifty years ago now has a milder connotation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Back then, there used to be anti-Communist posters in Thailand that stated "When Communism sets in, Religion is gone." Communism was equated with evil. If anyone was said to be a Communist, he would be alienated and looked upon with distrust, or even put in jail. Nowadays, Communism is only one system of government just like Democracy or Socialism. In some countries where there is more political tolerance, anyone can declare openly that he is a Communist and still be accepted in society. Suppose a word with an established denotation acquires a new connotation which in time becomes as firmly established as the denotation itself, then the original denotation is forgotten and the dominant

connotation becomes the new denotation. In other words, change in connotation becomes change in actual meaning. The meanings of thousands of words have completely changed by a series of shifts in connotation. Thus, a modern reader may have difficulties reading a piece of older literature because some of the words used meant completely different things from what they mean today. In the essay "Of Studies" Francis Bacon wrote that

Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability. Their chief use for delight is in privateness and retiring; for ornament, is in discourse; and for ability, is in the judgment and disposition of business. For expert men can execute, and perhaps judge of the particulars, one by one; but the general counsels, and the plots and marshalling of affairs come best from those that are learned.

The general meaning of these lines is not too difficult to understand because many of the words Bacon used retain the denotations they had in his time. Anyhow, it still reads like a late 16th century essay. To make it sound more like Modern English, instead of the word *delight* which is too strong, we can substitute "pleasure." To us, *ornament* no longer means "social advantage" like it did in Bacon's time; and *ability* stands for the modern "practical profit" or "usefulness." We rarely use the word *privateness* these days, but taken together with *retiring* it means "our personal, or home, life." The modern meaning of *discourse* is "talk by one person"; to Bacon it meant what "conversation" means to us. *Judgment* and *disposition* can be modernized as "conduct." In Bacon's time *expert* suggested "accomplished, competent"; now the use of this word is restricted to suggest skill in certain techniques. If only a few lines of Bacon can

cause such a difficulty for the modern reader, imagine how much more confused he would be by the works of writers who used more complicated and archaic words than Bacon.

### Exercise 1

What does each of the following titles suggest to you about the dominant feeling or tone of the book to which it refers?

The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter

Remembrance of Things Past

Death Be Not Proud

Gone With the Wind

Paradise Lost

Paradise Regained

The Grapes of Wrath

All's Well That Ends Well

Much Ado About Nothing

All Is Quiet on the Western Front

### Exercise 2

Say which of the following words have an association in meaning (for example, fire--passion).

old	gently	confession	silence
passion	cold	dreaming	apart
separate	fire	chastity	time
shadows	touching		

### Exercise 3

Read the following poem which contains all the words in Exercise 2 and answer the questions below.

#### One Flesh

Lying apart now, each in a separate bed,                    1  
He with a book, keeping the light on late,  
She like a girl dreaming of childhood,  
All men elsewhere--it is as if they wait  
Some new event: the book he holds unread,                    5  
Her eyes fixed on the shadows overhead.

Tossed up like *flotsam* from a former passion,  
How cool they lie. They hardly ever touch,  
Or if they do it is like a confession  
Of having little feeling--or too much.                    10  
Chastity faces them, a destination  
For which their whole lives were a preparation.

Strangely apart, yet strangely close together,  
Silence between them like a thread to hold  
And not wind in. And time itself's a feather                    15  
Touching them gently. Do they know they're old,  
These two who are my father and my mother  
Whose fire from which I came, has now grown cold?

*flotsam* : pieces or goods from a wrecked ship floating in the sea



1. What is the poem about?

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2. In line 4, what does the phrase 'All men elsewhere' suggest?

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3. Who does 'they' refer to in the same line?

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4. If 'Chastity'(line 11) seems to be their destination, how would the relationship between the husband and wife be in the future?

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5. What is the meaning of line 13?

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6. What is the meaning of line 18?

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7. Is this poem about old age or loneliness?

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8. What is the connotation of the word 'silence' in line 14?

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9. What is the feeling of the narrator toward the relationship between his/her parents?

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10. What is the tone of this poem?

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11. In the poem, which image most suggests 'useless waste'?

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12. Find contrasts used in the poem and tell what effect they have?

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13. In comparing 'time' with a 'feather touching them lightly' what is the narrator implying?

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