CHAPTER 4
POETIC DICTION

The English language is rich in synonyms, groups of words whose denotative meanings are roughly the same but whose connotations vary widely. Many words are identical in sound and often in spelling but different in meaning. The meaning of words have changed in the course of time and the poet may consciously select a word whose older meaning adds a dimension to his poem. There are of course, no rules that can be given to a reader for judging the poet's effectiveness and skill in the handling of words. All we can do is looking at particular works for examples of how a good poet manipulates words.

Words have properties, that is, they can be classified according to the work they are meant to do. Thus, we can apply to words such terms as denotative or connotative, general or specific, and abstract or concrete, archaic or new-coined, colloquial or formal, technical or common, literal or figurative. (Abrams, 1981, pp.140 - 141)

What is poetic diction?

Words can show us pictures, point out relationships, make comparisons, appeal to our senses. By choosing words carefully, the poet can control the way we see and feel. His or her choice of words for their meaning or their suggestiveness-are called diction. A poetic diction is the selected language used in a literary text to suit different kinds of verse judged according to its suitability and effectiveness.

Denotation and connotation

We can begin by distinguishing between the **denotation** of a word and its **connotation**. The **denotation** of a word is its direct, specific meaning, that is usually given by a dictionary. What does it mean? The **connotation** of a word depends upon our linguistic experience, our sophistication, the extent of our reading, and the use of the word: What does it suggest? Many words have more than one denotative meaning. Think of the meaning of the word **home!**. It has the same explicit denotative meaning as residence or even domicile, or a place where one lives. But by connotative meaning it suggest security, love, children, comfort, happiness, family, belonging, a shelter, a place of love, a goal and many other things.

Another example: the **'red'** denotes simply the familiar color; it connotes 'blood, 'revolution', 'danger,' and so on. Poets choose the best suited words, the most meaningful words for the ideas and feelings he wants to express for his own poetic contest, to contribute to the poem's meaning on both a denotational and especially a connotational level which is very important to the poet, for it is one of the means by which he can concentrate or enrich his meaning-say more in fewer words. (Peterson, 1970, p.90)

The word **'raw'** in the excerpt that follows denotes "not cooked." But raw connotes more than it literally means in this example:

A Bird come down the Walk……
He did not know I saw……
He bit an Angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw.

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

Source : (Doren, 1968, p.639)

Among other things, raw connotes redness, bleeding, cruelty, haste, and - on bird's part - insensitiveness and lack of refinement. The ‘word’ ‘**raw**’ may have different connotations for different people, depending on their various experiences with "rawness." In the same line, fellow connotes the casual insignificance of the angleworm as well as its "human" ability to feel pain.

The problem which faces the reader, especially in the reading of poetry, is the problem of old words and old meanings. Great literature is one of the few things that survive the time in which they were born, but in doing so it shows its age, by the language in which it uses. We know that language when it is used, not only within a generation but from generation to generation. We know, further, that a poet must select from the language of his own time. What may seem archaic to us, may have been contemporary for the poet. If we do not understand this point, we will misread many poems, as in “**Marvell's To His Coy Mistress**”

> My vegetable love should grow
> Vaster than empires and more slow.

Unless we, understand what the poet meant by 'vegetable', we may have some monstrous image of a lettuce or radish expanding. In Marvell 's day, vegetable referred to one of the three types of souls: rational, sensitive, and vegetable. The vegetable soul had as its properties the principle of life and death, and expansion and deterioration. The poet meant that this aspect of love will grow.

Examples of analyzed poetry:

Consider **John Milton's** 'famous sonnet, **'On His Blindness'**.

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,
"Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?"
I **fondly** ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait."

John Milton (1608-1674)

Source : (Schwartz, & Roby, 1969, pp.92-93)

The word **'fondly'** in line 8 as it is currently used may puzzle the reader as to why the poet puts his question in a loving or affectionate way. A dictionary with some attention to the history of the language informs us that the word's original meaning was **foolish** or **silly**. Now the character of the poet's question becomes clear to us. He is either foolish to ask the question, or he foolishly asks the question.

We are bound at times to assume modern meanings for words which are still in use but have changed their meanings with the passage of time. Thus, we as readers should be careful to determine the meaning of a given word in the context in which it is being used. Because language is a dynamic, living thing, we can expect to find that pronunciations will change, word forms will shift, and the conventions of writing such as spelling and punctuation will undergo alterations. Our major concern is that the very

meanings and qualities of words especially in their conventional uses and range, change with the passage of time.

Shakespeare gave greater freedom in the use of language to his poem. Modern readers expect that **happy** will be used only as an adjective. Yet with his freedom in the use of language, Shakespeare turned it into a verb in 'Sonnet 6' When he commented that usury, ordinarily forbidden in his day, will be used by those who are happy to use it.

> That use is not forbidden usury
> Which **happies** those that pay the willing loan.

Here are a few more examples: (Murphy, 1980, pp.75-76)

When the poet says

> The earth does like a snake renew
> Her winter weeds outworn…..

He is not referring to the growth of plants. The word 'weeds' must be taken in its, other and less usual meaning of 'clothing'.

Again in this line : from **Coleridge's, "Kubla Khan**,"

> "As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing…."

Here the earth was not being spoken of as a person wearing strong, thick pants and breathing away. The meaning of 'pants' in this line is not the garment but quick breathing in and out.

Another in this line;

> "The fiery duke is pricking fast across Saint Andre's plain……"

The word 'pricking' has nothing to do with using a pin or a needle but means 'galloping fast'.

Here is a picture of a country scene:

> ……boys that sit right merry in a ring
> Round fires upon a molehill toasting sloes,
> And crabs that froth and frizzle on the coals.

The 'sloes' are a kind of fruit, and if you think you knew the meaning of 'crabs' then you will have had a picture of boys feasting on fruit and shellfish. But if you had looked up 'crabs' you would have found that they too are a kind of fruit.

The phrase '……..the coral of his lip' may give the reader a picture of a person with rough hard lips because he was thinking of the 'coral' found in reefs in the sea. The 'coral' the poet had in mind was a sort of reddish stone that is used for jewellery.

When the poet expressed this wish :

"If women could be fair and yet not fond,"

he is not wishing that women could be beautiful (fair) and not loving (fond). He is wishing that women could be beautiful but not foolish, for 'fond' in the English of the seventeenth century meant ' foolish'.

Consider the following poems, paying special attention to the word choice of the poet.

There is No Frigate Like a Book

There is no Frigate like a Book
To take us Lands away,
Nor any Coursers like a Page
Of prancing Poetry……..
This traverse may the poorest take
Without oppress of Toll……
How frugal is the Chariot
That bears the Human soul.

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

Source : (Perrine, 1963, p.33)

The meaning of this poem is that books are a good way to travel and they don't cost very much money. The poet is considering the power of a book or of the poetry to carry us away, to let us escape from our immediate surroundings into the world of imagination. The book is compared to various means of transportation : a boat, a team of horses a chariot vehicle. The poet has been careful and skillful to choose different kinds of transportation that have romantic connotations. **Frigate** suggests exploration and adventure. She does not say "There is no ship like a book." She picked the word frigate because of its connotations. The denotative meaning of frigate is a type of sailing war ship used in the middle 1800's. So the word frigate connotes ideas like adventure, romance and excitement. **Coursers** similarly suggest beauty, spirit and speed. The denotative of courser is that it is a fast horse. But the connotations of the word are swiftness, gracefulness and beauty. Both of these words were picked for the connotations and not for their denotations. **Chariot** suggests speed and the ability to go through the air as well as on land. Many words can have the same denotation, but two words never have the same connotations. The poem would not be interesting or as beautiful as the poet had written :

There is no ship like a book
To take us land away,
Nor any horse like a page
Of prancing poetry

In the first line of the second stanza: "*This traverse may the poorest take*." would usually be written: "*The poorest may take this traverse*." Poets often change the normal word order of a sentence or use seldom used word orders if they feel it will improve their poem - they use poetic license.

Richard Cory

Whenever Richard Corry 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.

Edwin Arlington Robinson (1896-1935)

Source : (Perrine, 1963, p.39)

Richard Cory is the portrait of a man who to the townspeople had everything. He was well educated and rich, a gentleman in attire and bearing. Suddenly one calm summer night he shot himself dead. Robinson is saying that outward appearances do not reveal inner reality, that one seldom knows one's fellow man. He is also saying that people who may think they have little, may actually have much.

This poem is an example of situational irony : it deals with the contrast between the outer appearance and the inner reality of the man. The choice of diction emphasizes the further contrast between Richard Cory and the speaker of the poem. The connotations of the words used to describe Cory are those of royalty and splendor. For example, 'crown' used instead of 'head' ; 'favored' for 'looking' ; 'arrayed' for 'dressed'; 'imperially' ;

'glittered' ; 'king'; 'grace' instead of manners' ; ' in ' fine' for 'in short'. Even the name Richard Cory is aristocratic it echoes the name given to King Richard. The diction changes in the final stanza to words used for their simple denotation only : 'meat', 'bread', 'bullet', 'head'. The word 'light' in 'So on we worked, and waited for the 'Light'' most apparently means a time when things will be better, as in the expression 'the light at the end of the tunnel'. But another meaning of "light" is revelation. Light has traditionally symbolized knowledge and truth, and this meaning may be in the speaker's mind.

Richard Cory is thus contrasted in all his supposed happiness and good fortune with the speaker, a poor man, without any of Cory's benefits. Yet, despite having everything that is supposed to make life happy, Richard Cory shoots himself. The simple, surprising ending is ironic and forces the reader to reconsider his value system.

Conclusion

Poetic diction is a choice of words or diction used only in poetry, the language, denotative or connotative, selected to suit different kinds of verse. It is judged according to its suitability and effectiveness.

Poems for Practice:

Read the following poem and comment on its diction.

A. OZYMANDIAS

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:

And on the pedestal these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

Source : (Schwartz, & Roby, 1969, p.100)

B. The Ancient Mariner

The lines that follow are taken from a long poem in which one of the sailors shoots an albatross and thus brings a curse on the ship. These lines occur shortly after the sailor kills the bird as the ship enters the Pacific Ocean.

The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
The furrow followed free;
We were the first that ever burst
Into that silent sea.

Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,
'Twas sad as sad could be;
And we did speak only to break
The silence of the sea!

All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody Sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the Moon.

Day after day, day after day
We stuck, nor breath nor motion,
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere
Nor any drop to drink.

S.T.Coleridge

Source : (Alexander, 1967, pp.9-10)