Class Notes

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Tom Haluska

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Professor Mize

Voice and Word Choice

Tone - attitude/feeling of the text (playful, sarcastic etc). More emotionally vested in poetry.

Voice – speaker of the poem, could be the poet or persona

Persona – fictitious character through which the poem is filtered. Not all poems are autobiographical in nature. Ex: the Duke in “My Last Duchess” is NOT Browning.

To describe the speakers Persona:

Identify who is speaking

Is the speaker the poet or a persona?

How are attitudes revealed? Overt or subtle implications?

Look for revealing traits in the characters behaviors or statements

Consider speakers relationship to the listener

Note discrepancies between speaker’s attitude and your reaction (irony)

Consider the overall tone of the poem

Denotations and Connotations

Diction – an artist’s choice of words

Poets must choose their words carefully because shape and size of the poem calls attention to the words themselves.

Think of poems as insulated, compressed, presentations of words.

Levels of Diction

Poetic Diction – elevated language rather than “ordinary” speech. Outdated today. Beautiful separated language.

Formal Diction – dignified, impersonal and elevated language used to create atmosphere of formality

Middle Diction – less formal, spoken by most educated people

Informal Diction – uses colloquialisms or everyday speech (slang) not necessarily used by culture at large. Presented in conversational manner.

Dialect – form of informal diction spoken by definable groups of people from particular geographic regions, economic or social classes.

Jargon – informal diction defined by trade or profession. Ex: military, doctors, teachers.

Denotation – the literal “dictionary meaning”. Even literal definitions allow for several possible interpretations.

Connotation – associations and implications that go beyond a words literal meaning. Derived from HOW the word is used. Draws on our shared experiences.

Ex: Bird: fragile, freedom. Consider connotations for “dove”, “hawk”, “chicken”, “vulture”.

We project ideas onto these animals using them to represent complex ideas. Often shared by large groups of people.

Useful to poets because they allow poets to be efficient and subtly suggestive.

Identifying and analyzing connotations is important to readers because it sheds light on larger possible meanings of the poem

Ambiguity – sometimes useful in connection to connotations. Allows for two or more simultaneous interpretations of a word.

Syntax – ordering of words into meaningful verbal patterns. Poets often manipulate syntax in order to place emphasis on particular words or phrases.