

LESSON 1: ANALYSING DICTION

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Module: *Text Analysis*

Level: *1st Year*

Groups: *1 2 3 4 5 6*

Lesson 1: *Analysing Diction*

Diction or Word Choice

Word choice is an important aspect of good writing. Being a rich language, English makes available a wide range of vocabulary to its users, who sometimes become confused as to which word to use in a particular **context**. The context may be formal, informal, academic, and so on, but it is not the only determinant. Professional writers are also aware that words in English **are not absolutely synonymous** and that some words are more **specific** than others. Thus, knowing a particular word's **connotations** helps them convey a specific meaning that they would not be able to convey using, say, another word, which may be close in meaning.

Today's lesson will show you how to analyse words along the **context** in which they occur. The focus is especially placed on notions such as **synonymy**, **specificity**, **connotation**, and **atmosphere**.

Some Examples

Read the following examples carefully:

- a. Poor lamb! They run them ragged at school.
- b. Hit me!
- c. He went about flaunting his bike.
- d. Rob was grinning from ear to ear.
- e. A Creature was fast approaching.

Commentary

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As a foreign learner of the language, one might get confused by example (a). What is the general **context** here? Is it about school, or is it about an animal? At a superficial level, a *lamb* is a young or a baby sheep, but understanding the word this way is confusing because the sentence does not make sense. In informal English, *lamb* is used to talk about a young child. Understanding the word this way helps us understand the overall meaning of the sentence and the context in which the word usually occurs. Hence, the nature of the word determines the situation or the context in which it is usually used. Using *lamb* to talk about a young child in, say, an academic context would not sound right.

How did the word *lamb* come to mean *young child*? In English, much like other languages, many animal words are used to describe human-beings. Take *fox*, for instance:

1. He's foxy.
2. He's a fox.

In our **collective consciousness** (imagination), a *fox* is associated with abstract ideas like cunning and deception. These associations, referred to as **connotations**, are then used to describe human-beings and their actions.

What connotations does *lamb* have? Sheep is usually associated with abstract ideas such as innocence and helplessness. In the famous cliché *a wolf in sheep's clothing*, the innocence of sheep is juxtaposed with the deception of the wolf to talk about a deceitful person. In a similar vein, a *lamb* and a *young child* are generally believed to be innocent creatures; this is why *lamb* came to mean what it means nowadays.

Example (b) poses no problem as such. One would instantly think the speaker wants to be struck. The meaning is one, but the context in which the speaker produces this utterance may vary: it might be that the speaker is challenging an opponent, or it might be that the speaker is asking to be hit in retaliation for hitting his opponent. Anyway, the context may differ, but the act of hitting is real. Now, let us imagine that Bob and Mike are debating a particular topic, and their debate becomes intense eventually:

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Bob: You've answered none of my questions. You're just another smart alec!

Mike: Oh yeah! I've given you loads of arguments, haven't I? You got more questions? Go on! Hit me!

Here, *hit* is used to ask somebody to ask a question or to say what they have to say. The context in which the verb occurs clarifies the meaning. '*Hit me!*', when it occurs in isolation, is **ambiguous** until further contextual details are provided.

The verbs *flaunt* and *grin* in sentences (c) and (d) are **specific** alternatives to *show* and *smile* respectively. Words in English can be **neutral** (general) or **specific**. This categorisation implies that, on a general principle, there are **no absolute synonyms** but words that are **close in meaning**. To express different ways of smiling, the verb *smile* usually requires an adverb or another phrase tagged on to it to render the meaning more accurate:

- a. He smiled.
- b. He smiled slyly.
- c. He smiled delightfully.
- d. He smiled in a silly way.

Grin, by contrast, is *smile* in **a certain way**: in this case, it is to *smile widely* because one is happy or delighted. *Grin*, then, is more specific than *smile*. Similarly, *flaunt* is more specific than *show* because it usually implies that the person showing something is a show-off. Notice the difference between the two examples below:

- a. He showed us his bike.
- b. He flaunted his bike.

Specificity applies not only to verbs but also to adjectives and nouns. In our last example, *creature* is too general because it does not paint a clear picture in the reader's mind. By *creature*, one might mean animal or human-being, which are more specific than *creature*. One might conjure up a sharper **image** using the words *man* or *woman*.

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In other words, the more specific the word is the more vivid the description becomes. So, *building* is more general than *house*, but *house* is less specific than *mansion*.

Mood or Atmosphere

Compare the two sentences:

- a. When the knock came, Sally walked to the door and opened it. She looked at the stranger for a few seconds, then said, “you’re too late. Horace left an hour ago.” Without another word, she closed the door.
- b. When the knock came, Sally **lept** to the door **and flung it open**. She **scowled at** the stranger for a few seconds, then **growled**, “you’re too late. Horace left an hour ago.” Without another word, she **slammed** the door.

Sentences (a) and (b) express more or less the same actions, but the actions in sentence (b) are more **specific** in the sense that the verbs in bold are more **emotionally-charged**. Apart from giving us a superficial account of what happened, sentence (a) does not really give us any clue regarding Sally’s state of mind. In other words, the verbs in (a) are **general** or **neutral**. However, (b) does a better job of revealing Sally’s feelings because more **specific** (emotionally-charged) verbs are used. By using *leap*, *fling*, *scowl*, *growl*, and *slam*, the writer is able to **show** (showing instead of **telling**) that Sally is angry. To use a more technical word, one might say that the **atmosphere** or the **mood** is that of anger, and that the writer has successfully captured this mood by using more specific words.

Now, let us see how **mood** or **atmosphere** is created in a passage. Think of a **war context**, for instance. What would the mood of the battlefield be like? It certainly would not be that of *serenity* and *lethargy*; instead, it would be that of **action** and **violence**. In order to capture such a mood, a professional writer would use more specific words that have specific connotations. Look at this example from a war novel:

A weapon came in his way from across the river, and he went back into his hole. In the darkness, it sent a white light like an acetylene torch, and its sound was terrible. Croft was holding himself together by the force of his

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will. He pressed the trigger of his gun and it moved under his hand. The tracers travelled into the jungle on the other side of the river.

Does the writer successfully capture the mood of the battlefield? Well, not really! As readers, we do not feel that we are really plunged into the violent atmosphere of the battle. In fact, this is a **modified version** of the **original passage**, which has a different feel:

A machine gun **lashed** at him from across the river, and he **ducked** into his hole. In the darkness, it **spat** a vindictive white light like an acetylene torch, and its sound was terrifying. Croft was holding himself together by the force of his will. He pressed the trigger of his gun and it **leaped** and **bucked** under his hand. The tracers **spewed** wildly into the jungle on the other side of the river.

The **original** passage captures the mood successfully. As readers, we feel that everything is **moving violently fast**. Look at the definitions provided by the Oxford Dictionary of the words in bold:

Lash	To move or to move sth quickly and violently from side to side
Duck	To move your head or body downwards to avoid being hit or seen
Spit	To make a noise and throw out fat, sparks, etc
Leap	To move or do sth suddenly and quickly
Buck	To move up and down suddenly or in a way that is not controlled
Spew	To flow out quickly, or to make sth flow out quickly, in large amounts

Let us analyse another passage from gothic literature. A gothic story is a romantic story set in frightening and mysterious settings. The **gothic context** must then call for a **different mood** than a war context. The opening passage of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Fall of the house of Usher* serves as a good example of gothic writing:

During the whole of a **dull, dark, and soundless** day in the **autumn** of the year, when the clouds hung **oppressively** low in the heavens, I had been passing alone,

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on horseback, through a singularly **dreary** tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the **melancholy** House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of **insufferable gloom** pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the **desolate** or **terrible**.

Here, on his way to the house of Usher, the narrator paints a **dark picture** of the place to create **an atmosphere of anticipation, fear, and depression**. Doing this in the opening of a story usually foreshadows (foreshadowing) its main events and the eventual lot (fate) of the characters. The setting (time and place) are carefully chosen. In our collective consciousness, *autumn* is associated with gloom and dejection. The day is *dull*, *dark*, and *soundless*. The path that the narrator takes is *singularly dreary*. The negative aura in which the whole place is bathed is further captured by the following words: *melancholy*, *gloom*, *stern*, *desolate*, and *terrible*.

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Lesson 1: On Liberal Thought

Connect

What associations does the word feminism evoke or trigger? Well, we can name a few: rebellion, freedom, liberty, emancipation, and perhaps unwillingness to adhere to a conventional moral code.

These ideas are liberal ideas. Early feminism in the 18th century was largely influenced by liberal philosophy, which put a premium on the **individual**.

Liberalism developed out of the **rationalist** worldview, which characterized the Enlightenment Era. Read on to find out how the rationalists changed people's perception of reality and ushered Western Europe into modernity.

The Middle Ages (The Dark Ages)



In the Dark Ages, the **Hobbesian** worldview dominated political discourse. Thomas Hobbes, an English philosopher, believed that the populace is not fit to make moral decisions and that decisions about what is right and what is wrong can only be made by a **central authority**, which the populace must accept and respect. This line of thought was reflected in the overall organization of political, social, cultural, and religious lives.

Monarchs possessed absolute power and were very intolerant of difference and opposition. Supported by **ecclesiastical authority**, they ruled by **Divine Right**. Rank and social status became an obsession for many, so anyone wishing to climb the social ladder had to beat many odds. Titled individuals as well as those associated with the court or the church had natural rights to **land ownership**. The majority of the populace, however, worked as serfs and lived in dire poverty.

The majority of the populace could not read or write, and thus they relied on the **clergy** or any other form of external authority to

Notes

Associations: Ideas or mental pictures.

Moral code: A set of moral principles

Put a premium on: Stress; emphasise; prioritise

Ushered into: How they took Western Europe from the Middle Ages to modernity (from an epoch to another)

Hobbesian: Related to Thomas Hobbes, an English philosopher who wrote about human nature, society, and politics. His ideas regarding government dominated the way people talked about politics at the time.

Monarch: King or queen

Ecclesiastical authority: Church authority

Divine Right: Monarchs, supported by the church, disseminated the idea that their right to rule came directly from God.

Climb the social ladder: Improve his/her status

Beat many odds: Overcome many obstacles

Clergy: Priests or ministers of the church

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interpret the Bible for them, increasing by so doing the power of the church. Too much power led to corruption. For example, the church forced people to pay for sacraments such as baptism and marriage.

Amidst the growing corruption of the monarchy and the church, a number of voices called for reform. The people associated with calls for cultural and political reform belonged to an era that came to be known as the **Enlightenment Age**.

Enlightenment philosophers such as René Descartes tried to **dismantle** the Hobbesian view by **disempowering** the central authority and empowering the individual. His dictum “*I think therefore I am*” is in the first person singular and stresses the independence of the individual. Enlightenment philosophers disseminated a mode of thinking called **Rationalism**.

The Rationalists believed that human-beings, contrary to animals, are rational beings capable of **moral judgement**. They put a premium on human autonomy, and stressed that individuals can act freely without pressure coming from society and political or religious institutions. With its glorification of the individual, Rationalism eventually gave rise to **Liberalism**, a political and moral philosophy, which seeks to promote moral, economic, and political freedom. Liberals call for a society in which individuals are allowed to fulfill themselves and pursue their self-interest. But what does all this mean in practice?

Liberals prioritise ‘**right**’ over ‘**good**’. Someone who exercises his/her rights operates within the **private sphere**, which is a sacred personal space for the liberals, while someone who pulls for the common good operates within the **public sphere**, a space shared by all the individuals belonging to a certain community. This distinction between ‘right’ and ‘good’ becomes problematic when it comes to the role that the state should play in the process of good governance.

The liberals disagreed over the role that the state should play with regard to the public sphere, giving rise to two strains of Liberalism: **classical** or **libertarian** liberals and **welfare** or **egalitarian** liberals. Both groups believe that that the state should protect individual rights that belong to the private sphere: the right to vote, the right to freedom of speech, the right to land ownership, and so on. With regard to the public sphere, classical liberals believe that the state should not regulate or interfere with the market, but should rather encourage **laissez-fair** policies and make sure equal opportunities exist for all in the process of **accumulation**. Welfare liberals,

NOTES

Reform: Change

Dismantle: Put an end to a system or organisation

Moral judgement: They can differentiate between right and wrong and what is good or bad for them.

Political or religious institutions: the monarchy and the church had absolute power, favouring a centralised form of government as was stated above.

Right: The right to freedom of speech, the right to vote, the right to land ownership, etc.

Good: Deeds that serve the community or public welfare.

Private Sphere: Matters that concern the individual and thus his/her rights.

Public Sphere: Matters that concern the community and thus one’s duties towards it.

Laissez-fair: Those who support laissez-fair policies think that the state should

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however, believe that individuals enter the market with glaring **disparities**. They hold that the state should intervene to provide free healthcare for the less fortunate classes, to provide school loans for the financially-disadvantaged students, to provide housing for the poor, and so on. In other words, the state should regulate the market so that entering it does not become a disadvantage for some portions of the population in the first place.

Why Liberalism and Feminism?

Early feminists realised that liberalism brought about many positive changes in terms of individual rights and personal freedom. The abolition of the monarchy and older modes of thinking and the creation of the modern state inspired by liberal ideals ushered in the age of modernity, an age where the individual is believed to be at the **centre** of the progress of humanity. However, they also realized that all the changes brought about by modernity benefited **men** rather than **women**. In other words, these changes did very little to bridge the gap between the sexes, but rather consolidated the system of **patriarchy**, which assigned, in their eyes, more stereotypical roles for males and females. So, early liberal feminists, called on women to **capitalise on** the ideals of liberalism to push for more individual rights for women like the right to vote (men, especially middle-class white males have already acquired this right), the right to education to become rational beings, and so on.

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Interfere with the market, but should instead encourage and help thrive private businesses.

Supporting private (notice again the premium put on the individual) businesses will eventually move forward the economy and benefit the populace and nation alike.

The process of accumulation: Within a liberal society, individuals are in constant competition, each one trying to fulfill themselves and their needs.

Disparities: Differences

Bridge the gap: Reduce the number of advantages that men had over women in all areas of life.

Capitalise on: They believed that the liberal societies brought about by modernity were not liberal enough and thus needed to be made truly liberal by drawing on the core principles of Liberalism.

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Lesson 2: The Historical Development of Feminism

Liberal Feminism in the 18th Century: Mary Wollstonecraft



Mary Wollstonecraft was among the early women who called for more woman rights in the 18th century. She published the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, in which she tries to explain the then predicament of women, and how they slowly began to play a less important role with the advent of modernity and the rise of the modern state. She says that in traditional societies almost all **productive work** was done in and around the family, that is in the private sphere, with women being at the **centre** of economic production. In traditional communities, she says, husband, wife and children all worked cooperatively on the family farm, so practically everyone contributed to producing the family sustenance, giving males no advantage over females in the process. The rise of industrialism, however, **decentred** the family, so women gradually ceased to be part of economic production.

With the rise of industrialism, many men, be them farmers or craftsmen, sold their labour to factories, which began to dot the urban landscape. With men becoming the main breadwinners, economic production shifted to the public sphere. This change, Wollstonecraft, argues left women trapped or caged like a bird stalking “with mock majesty from perch to perch.” Birds are caged for the onlooker’s gaze; women are likewise caged for the male gaze, becoming no more than objects of admiration.

During this period of radical political, social, and cultural change, schools and universities started to appear. More and more men had access to education, which presented them with an opportunity to become rational beings fit for the challenges posed by the modern

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Predicament: Difficult situation

Modernity: The era is characterised by the rise of the modern state amidst radical political, religious, cultural, and economic changes. In the domain of economy, in particular, the rise of industrialism saw many men abandon their traditional jobs and move into cities to work in factories.

Productive work: Producing one’s food, crops, and home-made products



world. Women, nonetheless, did not enjoy the same privileges and were thus thought incapable of rational thinking. According to Wollstonecraft, not only did men confine women to a stifling domestic space, but they also encouraged them to display certain traits like obedience, docility, shyness, servitude, and so on. These traits, she believes, are not **innate** but are rather the product of confinement.

Wollstonecraft also found fault with the views held by prominent Enlightenment philosophers like Jean Jacque Rousseau, who published a very important treatise on educational philosophy called *Emile*. Rousseau claims that rationality is **innate** in boys, and that it is their natural way. So, virtues such as **courage, fortitude, and justice** should be encouraged in boys, whereas girls should be encouraged to display virtues such as **docility, humility, patience, and servitude**. Emile, Rousseau's male prototype studies the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, while Sophie, his female prototype, should be encouraged to refine her skills in music, fiction, poetry, and homemaking. Wollstonecraft then believes that women should step out of the private sphere into the public sphere to enjoy the same opportunities of education and work as men.

Calls for the education of women continued well into the 19th century. Like Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor believed that educating women was just one step towards achieving gender equality. They believed that total equality could only be achieved if women became active participants in political and social life by gaining the right to vote.

Feminism in the 20th Century: Betty Friedan

In the 20th century, the feminist movement waned during the Great Depression and the Second World War only to surface again in the 1960s with more vociferous voices like that of Betty Friedan. She published her *Feminine Mystique* in 1963, a book which tried to answer why middle-class American women felt unhappy. She conducted a survey of her college classmates 15 years after their graduation. They were married with children, and some of them held jobs and were financially at ease. Most of the women surveyed said they were unhappy but did not know the root cause of their unhappiness. Friedan described the feeling of dissatisfaction that her former classmates experienced as "**the problem that has no name,**" the feminine mystique. She later on found out that more and more women all over America felt the same thing even among journalists, educationalists, lawyers, and doctors.

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Stifling: Suffocating

Innate: She argues that women are not born with these traits.

The Great Depression: A severe economic crisis that lasted from 1929 to the Second World War.

Friedan attributed this feeling of dissatisfaction and unhappiness to a number of reasons:

Women Magazines: women magazines such as the *Ladies' Home Journal* and *McCall's* spread stereotypical images of housewives contented with running their households using the latest technological gadgets. These magazines in particular featured articles such as "femininity begins at home" and "how to snare a male", and "really a man's world, politics" which, according to Friedan, helped consolidate the **stereotype** that women are only fit to survive in the private sphere after having won over the admiration of males, who are deemed more fit for the world of politics, which belongs to the public sphere.

The theory of Functionalism: the theory of Functionalism dominated social sciences at the time. It is based on the idea that each part of society contributes to the proper functioning of the whole. Friedan believes that functionalist **anthropologists** such as Margaret Mead, drawing on research conducted on other cultures, helped disseminate the view that a woman's function is confined to her **sexual** and **biological** roles as wives and mothers. Friedan criticized this view because it glorifies the **reproductive** ability of women.

Education: Friedan also claimed that courses provided at colleges and universities contributed to the feminine mystique. She argued that some courses delivered by "sex-directed educators" were gender-specific, insisting that women are more fit for "domestic sciences" than physics and chemistry.

Feminism up to his point tried to reform patriarchy within a liberal framework, insisting that women should enjoy the same rights as men as well as exercise a certain degree of autonomy by invading the world of work and compete with men in the process of accumulation. This liberal trend of feminism would, however, give in to a more radical trend in the decades to follow.

Radical Feminism

As we have seen so far, liberal feminism sought to reform the educational, the economic, and the political practices, which they believed had assigned a secondary status to women. They envisaged these changes within the framework of liberal philosophy, which, as we have seen, gives so much importance to individual rights and individual autonomy.

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Anthropologist: Someone who studies the human race

Disseminate: Spread

Reproductive ability: Feminists believe that in patriarchal societies the productive ability of women (their ability to contribute to economic production) is undermined while their reproductive ability (Giving birth and raising children) is glorified.

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The 1960s witnessed the emergence of radical protest groups like civil rights and anti-Vietnam movements. Aligning themselves with these groups, radical feminist groups and voices emerged. They did not seek to introduce liberal reforms as much as they sought to **revolutionise** the way people thought about the notions of **gender** and **family**. Prominent among these radical groups were the Redstockings, the Feminists, the New York Radical Feminists, and Marxist Feminists. Among the most influential and vociferous radical feminist voices were Kate Millett and Gayle Rubin.

Kate Millett: *Sexual Politics*

“The personal is political” became a rallying cry for the radical feminists after Kate Millett published *Sexual Politics* in 1970. The book analyses patriarchy, arguing that sex, rather than being a personal attribute, has in fact a **political dimension**. Since politics is about power relations, and since sex is political rather personal, sexual politics, for Millett, refers to male control over women. She argues that men control government, political office, medicine, education, the military, and so on, and therefore using these institutions they produce a body of knowledge to control how women should behave, how they should look, how much of access to public life they should have, and so on. Millett particularly criticizes the institution of family, which she labels as “**patriarchy’s chief institution**”, because it defines and sets the boundaries for **gender roles** and expectations. If, for example, a female displays masculine traits, men will hasten to censure her and coerce her into submission. This is because patriarchy views gender roles in terms of **binary oppositions**, where females are placed on the weaker side of the binary.

A similar argument is made by Gayle Rubin, who insists that difference between one’s sex and one’s gender should be made. One’s sex is determined by **biology**, while one’s gender, radical feminists insist, is **socially constructed**. Traits (like docility, obedience, subservience, shyness, and so on) that men expect women to display are not **inborn** but rather created by patriarchy to keep women subjugated. Radical feminists like Gayle Rubin called for the establishment of an **androgynous** society.

Feminism and Literature: Virginia Woolf

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Vociferous: Protesting or expressing your opinions loudly; outspoken

Binary oppositions: The system that structures human knowledge, in which we recognise one thing by contrasting it with its opposite: Man vs woman / knowledge vs ignorance / light vs darkness ,etc. One side of the binary is always preferred to the other side: knowledge is preferred to ignorance, light is preferred to darkness, and similarly, in patriarchal societies, man is preferred to woman.

Androgyny: Radical feminists strive to establish an androgynous order, in which males and females appear and behave in more or less the same way. In other words, it is an order in which all traditional demarcation lines between males and females are erased.

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Virginia Woolf struggled in a literary world and an academia dominated by men. She sought recognition but the male forces working against her overwhelmed her so much to the extent that in 1941 she attempted suicide by loading her pockets with stones and plunging into a river. She, in fact, emulated the scene in which her fictional character, Shakespeare's sister, in *A Room of One's Own*, commits suicide to escape a world dominated by masculine values.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf tries to make the point that women cannot achieve the level of genius that men have unless they have a **space** of their own, away from the prison of the private or domestic sphere. They cannot have a space of their own without economic means, money, which, in a patriarchal society, is concentrated in the hands of their male guardians. Woolf's claim is extremely important in that she situates the creative enterprise or the writing process within a socio-economic context. This materialist view of the arts is reminiscent of the Marxist claim that the arts shape and are shaped by the economic forces at work in a certain society. She concludes that the economic deprivation of women has inevitably led to their creative sterility.

In a *Room of One's Own*, Woolf gives example of Shakespeare's fictional sister, Judith, who wants to follow in the footsteps of her brother. Her efforts are met with derision from her father and jeering remarks from men in her community. Frustrated by her situation, she commits suicide. Her attempt to write from a female perspective is thwarted.

Woolf, like most feminists, believes that the throughout history the female experience has been written about largely from a male perspective, creating a contradictory account of the experience between reality and fiction. In literature, "women have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets," while in reality they are "locked up, beaten and flung about the room," Woolf regrets. What makes matters worse, she continues, is the fact that women have no female tradition to which they can cling and live up to.

Reading Like a Feminist

These are some steps some feminist critics take before reading a text:

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Derision: Scorn

Cling: Stick to

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1. By digging into literary history, they try to rediscover forgotten texts produced by women writers.
2. They examine the cultural context in which these texts were created.
3. They analyse the male/female power structure that makes women inferior.
4. They look for stereotypical representations of women and they try to shatter them.
5. They look into how gender and identity are portrayed.

Feminist critics also ask the following questions about texts:

1. Is the author male or female?
2. Is the text narrated by a male or a female?
3. How do male characters view female characters?
4. How do male characters treat female characters?
5. How do the female characters act toward the male characters?
6. Who wields social and political power?
7. Is feminine imagery used? To what effect?

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Lesson 3: Reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Locked Inside*

In the previous lessons, we discussed the development and the premises of feminist thought. In this lesson, we will see how it is like to read a text like a feminist. We will read Charlotte Perkins Gilman's poem *Locked Inside*, in which she tries to highlight the situation of the women of her time. We will especially look at the way her choice of words is closely connected to the main themes of her poems.

In lesson 1 and 2, we looked at the way early feminists drew on liberal philosophy to improve the status of women. Liberal feminists advocated equal education, equal work opportunities, the right to vote, and many more liberal reforms. Gilman fits into this category of feminists. She was a prolific writer, who is nowadays well-known for *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *women and economics*, and a collection of poems touching on feminist themes.

A Poet's Skill: Diction

One of the skills in the poet's skillset is the ability to use the right word. A poet's choice of words is often referred to as **diction**. Word choice is important because words that often appear synonymous do not usually create the same effect when used in a certain context. Some words are **neutral**, others are **emotionally-charged**. Look at the following examples:

- He *showed* us his new bike.
- He *flaunted* his new bike.

Show and *flaunt* are close in meaning, but they are not absolutely synonymous. *Flaunt* is to 'show' in a specific way. The verb is emotionally-charged because it implies that the person referred to seeks to *impress*. *Show* does not imply anything: it is neutral. When reading literature in general and poetry in particular, one should look at the writer's choice of words to interpret the text properly. Here's another example:

- When the knock came, Sally *walked* to the door and *opened* it. She *looked* at the stranger for a few seconds, then *said* "you're too late. Horace left an hour ago." Without another word, she *closed* the door.

Good writing consists more of **showing** and less of **telling**. Here, the writer is just telling his/her readers what happened. Writing of

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this kind is superficial because it does not reveal anything about the characters. Now, here's a modified version of the example:

- When the knock came, Sally *lept* to the door and *flung* it open. She *scowled* at the stranger for a few seconds, then *growled*, "You're too late. Horace left an hour ago." Without another word, she *slammed* the door.

Changing some words alters the **general feeling** of the passage. *Leap* implies a sense of urgency, impatience, and immediate movement, a sense which is reinforced by the *flinging* of the door. *Look*, *say*, and *close* are **neutral**; *scowl*, *growl*, and *slam* are **specific** because they give us an idea about Sally's **state of mind** and her **attitude** towards the person she's addressing. She is far from being happy seeing him or her. Diction creates an **atmosphere** or **mood**, the general feeling of the text or the passage. In the modified example we have just seen, we can feel tension, anger, and conflict in the air.

Close Reading: *Locked Inside*

She **beats** upon her bolted door,
With **faint** weak hands;
Drearly walks the **narrow** floor;
Sullenly sits, **blank** walls before;
Despairing stands.

Life calls her, Duty, Pleasure, Gain—
Her dreams respond;
But the blank daylights **wax** and **wane**,
Dull peace, sharp agony, slow pain—
No hope beyond.

Till she comes a **thought**! She lifts her head,
The world **grows wide**!
A voice—as if clear words were said—
"Your door, O long imprisoned,
Is locked inside!"

Locked Inside as the title suggests is about **space**. The feminists differentiate between two spheres, or two spaces, the private sphere and the public sphere. They often argue that women are entrapped within the confines of the private sphere, and are thus tied to the domestic roles which it entails. In *Locked Inside*, Gilman explores the two spaces, **choosing** her words **carefully** in a bid to awaken her fellow women to the limited opportunities made available by the private sphere and the endless opportunities made available by the public sphere.

The poem contains four stanzas. The first stanza is about confinement and isolation. The second stanza is about hope and despair, a promising future and a dismal present. The last stanza is about awakening and empowerment.

Gilman picks her words carefully to make us explore the main themes of her poem. If she used *knock* instead of *beat*, she would fail to capture the desperateness that women feel when confined to their private spaces (spheres). *Beat* is a more emotionally-charged word that implies repeated strenuous effort. The bolted door represents the barriers that women set up to self-entrap themselves as the title suggests (*Locked INSIDE*). As a result of this confinement, women feel *faint* and *weak* with no vision for the future as implied by the *blank walls* surrounding them. *Blank* is connected with the boring emptiness of the private sphere, which is a *narrow floor*, or rather, a narrow space, leading nowhere but to despair.

In the second stanza, the protagonist seems to be well aware of the self-fulfilling experiences of life lying beyond the private sphere: there's duty to be fulfilled towards humanity, pleasure to be derived from life, and gain to be sought from a true vocation. Yet, this awareness waxes like blank daylight, amounting to *dreams*, before it eventually wanes and gives in to "dull peace, sharp agony, slow pain."

During Gilman's time, women were believed incapable of rational thinking, which, in René Descartes' oft-quoted dictum 'I think therefore I am,' sought to empower the individual. According to Mary Wollstonecraft, the idea that women are irrational beings was consolidated by the discourse of the Enlightenment philosophers. She particularly took to task Rousseau's treatise on educational philosophy, *Emile*, in which he claims that rationality is the natural way of boys, not girls. Corollary to this line of reasoning was the

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idea that boys are fit for some roles, for which women are not. The result was the quasi-total exclusion of women from the public sphere. In the last stanza, Gilman seems to equate the protagonist's awakening with a "thought" that crosses her mind. The mere act of thinking makes her world grow "wide", widening by so doing her prospects. Alas, Gilman's protagonist has yet to realise that she's responsible for unlocking the "bolted door" if she is to walk out of her "narrow floor" into the wide world, into the public sphere.

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Lesson 3: Analysing Simile and Metaphor

Introduction

In everyday English, we use expressions like 'silent as the grave,' 'time is money,' 'sharp as a tack,' 'you're a gem,' and many others. These expressions have gained too wide a currency over time that perhaps we no longer think of them as **tropes** or **figures of speech**. They might have lost some of their appeal in that the images they conjure up have become **trite**. Linguists often refer to these overused tropes as **clichés**, but the point is we use figures of speech regularly, especially simile and metaphor. In this lesson, we will look into how simile and metaphor work and how to analyse them.

Metaphor as Concept



We often talk about life in terms of journeys, about arguments in terms of war, about theories in terms of buildings, about anger in terms of heat, and so on. Consider these examples:

He was **boiling** with rage.
She has a **hot** temper.

One would easily understand that here we are talking about anger in terms of heat. One way to couch the **conceptual metaphor**, or master metaphor, so to speak, is as follows: Anger is heat. In a conceptual metaphor, we try to understand one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain. The first conceptual domain here is *anger*, often referred to as **the target domain**, and the second conceptual domain is *heat*, often referred to as **the source domain**.

As human-beings, we tend to draw on our daily experiences to understand certain concepts. In our example above, we are trying to understand anger, a more abstract concept, in terms of our day-to-day more practical experience with heat. To understand further how conceptual metaphors work, let us turn our attention to some common examples.

An argument is war

Your claims are **undefensible**.
He **attacked every weak point** in my argument.
His criticisms were **right on target**.
I **demolished** his argument.
I've never **won** an argument with him.
You disagree? Okay, **shoot!**
If you use that **strategy**, he'll **wipe you out**.
He **shot down** all of my arguments.

In the examples above, we have drawn on the domain of war to understand the way we argue with each other. Much like in a war, we come up with strategies, we defend our line, we attack, we destroy and demolish our opponent's arguments, and so on. In other words, we have drawn on our understanding of an actual battlefield to understand a verbal battlefield, as it were.

Theories are buildings

Is that the *foundation* for your theory?
The theory needs more *support*.
We need to *construct a strong* argument for that.
We need to *buttress* the theory with *solid* arguments.
The theory will *stand or fall* on the *strength* of that argument.
So far we have *put together* only the *framework* of the theory.

Ideas are food

All this paper has in it are *raw* facts, *half-baked* ideas, and *warmed-over* theories.
There are too many facts here for me to *digest* them all.
I just can't *swallow* that claim.
Let me *stew* over that for a while.
That's *food* for thought.
She *devoured* the book.
Let's let that idea *simmer on the back burner* for a while.

Literal Versus Figurative Language

In all the examples above, language can be said to have been used figuratively. One cannot literally 'devour a book,' 'swallow a claim,' or 'shoot down an argument.' A **literal meaning** of word is usually the primary meaning listed in a dictionary. A **figurative meaning** of a word, by contrast, takes the word out of its usual context. The primary meaning of the word *head* is part of the body containing the eyes, the nose, and the ears. By virtue of its importance to the human body, we usually take the word out of its usual context to talk about the most important person in an organisation, a school, a department, and so on.

Similes and metaphors are **tropes**. A trope is a word or a phrase used out of its usual context to conjure up mental images or create certain effects. Tropes usually fall within the domain of rhetoric, which refers to speech or writing that is intended to influence an audience. Writers and poets also use tropes such as simile and metaphor to create fresh images and make us perceive the common in uncommon terms.

Simile

Simile is a way of comparing one thing to another using words like *like* or *as*. In other words, if you use a simile, you invite your reader to see the similarities between A and B. Similes can be identified easily:

O, my love's *like* a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June:
O, my love's *like* the melody

That's sweetly played in tune.

The similes above are trite, but let us analyse them, anyway. First, the poet wants his readers to see his beloved in terms of a red rose. As readers, we instantly think about the properties associated with a rose, namely *scent*, *beauty*, *freshness*, and so on. These properties are then transported from the usual context in which they occur to another context, creating by so doing an unusual comparison. It is as if the poet said my "love's like a red rose in its *scent*, *beauty*, and *freshness*." Similarly, instead of saying "my love speaks charmingly," the poet uses a simile. *Sweetness*, *pleasantness*, *harmony* might be some of the properties we usually associate with a melody.

Metaphor

Metaphor is a way of saying one thing is another. Your friend has done you a huge favour to which you reply by praising him/her: "You're a gem; you're a godsend." You have just used two metaphors here. The idea of transport applies to metaphors as well. The most important quality of a gem is its *preciousness*, which is here invoked to talk about how precious your friend's help has been. Godsend, originally applied in a religious context, is associated with divine intervention. Here, it is used to talk about the *timeliness* of your friend's favour.

Vehicle, Tenor, and Ground

Armstrong Richards, a literary critic, proposed a model by which we can analyse metaphors and similes. He calls the target domain of the metaphor **tenor**, he calls the source domain **vehicle**, and he calls the common properties between the two domains **ground**. In her description of the ferocity of nature, Emily Dickinson wrote:

The Clouds their Backs together laid
The North began to push
The Forests galloped till they fell
The Lightning played like mice

The forests are the *tenor*, galloped (horses gallop) is the *vehicle*, and the properties associated with the way horses gallop are the *ground*. These properties might include *ferocity*, *pace*, *strength*, and *wildness*. The metaphor conjures up an image of trees tossing wildly, probably no more rooted to the ground than horses are. The simile is no less interesting. Dickinson likens the way lightening plays to mice probably because mice play and move about quietly. This quality about mice finds justification in the popular cliché 'quiet as a mouse.' Lightening is soundless, quiet as a mouse, so to speak. Through original images, Dickinson thus allows us to think about storms differently.

Metaphors are more difficult to identify than similes. Easily identifiable metaphors are referred to as **explicit metaphors**, while metaphors that are somehow difficult to identify are referred to as **embedded metaphors**.

Explicit Metaphor Versus Embedded Metaphor

An explicit metaphor is couched in the following formula: A is B. In other words, both the tenor and the vehicle are **clearly stated**. Embedded metaphors are far less predictable in that the tenor or the vehicle are **not clearly stated**. Consider the following examples:

You're a pain in the neck.
He's the apple of her eye.
You're a brick.

The children made pigs of themselves.

My angel of a father said he'd help.

These are all examples of explicit metaphor. Let us analyse one example here: *you're a brick*. The metaphor takes the basic formula A is B, so *you* is the tenor, *brick* is the vehicle, and *reliability* is the ground. A brick is probably the most important building unit. You cannot have a reliable structure without using bricks. The quality of reliability associated with bricks is transported to and applied (figuratively) in a context other than the one in which it is originally applied.

An embedded metaphor violates the basic formula:

The actor was pixieing around on stage.

Here, the tenor of the metaphor is *actor* (a noun), but the vehicle is not clearly stated. The basic formula, as stated above, functions as follows: A (noun) is B (noun). Here, we have a verb that substitutes the **unstated vehicle**. This example reminds us of Dickinson's example: *the forests galloped till they fell*. She could have said: *the forests (noun) are horses (noun)*, which would then have been an explicit metaphor. In an embedded metaphor a verb (gallop) associated with the vehicle (horses) is often used. To return to our example, we could have said: the actor was a pixie on stage. What qualities associated with pixies and pixieing (the writer coined the verb) can we think of? *Graceful movement* and *magic* spring to mind first. The writer could have said the actor moved gracefully and magically on stage instead of conjuring up those images (qualities and attributes) by means of the word *pixie*.

2 Types of Metaphor

The Extended Metaphor

An extended metaphor is a metaphor in which comparison works at more than one level. It is especially used in poetry:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

Here, T.S. Eliot wants his readers to see that fog and cats move and act in the same way, creating by so doing an original and fresh comparison. *Fog* is the tenor and *rub, lick, linger, slip, leap, curl*, and so on, are verbs associated with the behaviour of the vehicle: cat.

Anthropomorphic Metaphors and Personification

Anthropomorphism and personification are similar. Personification refers to attributing human traits and characteristics to inanimate objects or abstract ideas, while Anthropomorphism refers to attributing human traits and characteristics to animals. We use personification everyday: in speech, in writing, in poetry, and so on. The following examples illustrate how an economist may talk about inflation:

Inflation *has pinned us to the wall*.
Our biggest *enemy* right now *is* inflation.
The dollar *has been destroyed* by inflation.
Inflation *has robbed* me of my savings.
Inflation *has outwitted* the best economic minds in the country.
Inflation *has given birth* to a money-minded generation.

The writer has attributed human traits and characteristics to the abstract concept of inflation. Inflation can now be viewed as a villainous character that attacks, threatens, destroys, robs, and employs cunning and wit. Viewed as a ruthless adversary, inflation can become our number one enemy, leading the government to declare war on it.

Lewis Carroll uses personification in *The Walrus and the Carpenter*:

The moon was shining sulkily,
Because she thought the sun
Had got no business to be there
After the day was done –
“It’s very rude of him,” she said,
“To come and spoil the fun.”

Carroll creates beautiful imagery to describe the *competitiveness* between the moon and the sun, both believed to be objects of admiration and contemplation. The competition for admirers is at its utmost at sunset, a time that announces the appearance of the moon, but also a time that sees the sun flaunt its regal splendour. By sulking, a human expression, the moon is loath to express itself fully (*shining sulkily*) in the face of the sun, which refuses yet to leave room for it (the moon). The sun perceives of the unwelcome intrusion a rude behaviour that “*spoils the fun*.” There is no better way to capture the rivalry between the moon and the sun than expressing their behaviour using human traits and attributes.