Section 1
Line Arrangement and Appreciation

Introduction

This section examines the issue of line arrangement as a technique in English poetry and its effect on the meaning-making of the content of an English poem. It looks at two interrelated questions on the topic:

a)   What is the basic role of line arrangement as an artistic technique in English poetry?

b)   How does the line arrangement of an English poem affect our understanding and appreciation of the content of the poem?

For both the poet and his audience, line arrangement is an indispensable element in artistic creation. For the poet, it is through the line arrangement that he "visually" transfigures a written "text" into a "poem". Likewise, it is through the line arrangement that the audience visually recognizes a written "text" as a "poem". In other words, line arrangement plays a basic role to transfigure visually or pictorially a written English text into a particular art form categorized as "English poetry".

The transfiguring power of line arrangement in English poetry pertains to the concept of *genre*. Genre is originally a French word, which means "kind", "sort" or "type". It is often used to categorize different art forms. A genre often has a set of conventions and rules sometimes termed as "generic conventions". Generic conventions are not only closely tied to a particular art form, but also help to define what genre that art form is. Line arrangement is one of the important "generic conventions" that distinguish the "poetic genres" from "prose genres" in literature. For a written poem coming into being, the poet, no matter how conventional or adventurous he is, has to "visualize" his

emotions on paper through pictorial arrangement of lines in a recognizable pattern in relation to the white space created through the line arrangement. The "pictorial" form/ pattern achieved through line arrangement not only visually distinguishes a "poem" from a "prose", but also significantly influences the meaning making of the content of a poem. The case is especially true in modernist poetry.

In many cases, the effectiveness of a modernist poem derives from the placement of individual line or groups of lines on the page into an integral pictorial presentation of the poem. There are many examples by well-known modernist English poets such as W. C. Williams and e. e. cummings. It would be more interesting, however, to cite an example from a student.

Some years ago I asked my students attending the course "Appreciation of English Poetry" to write a short English poem during one of the sessions. One of the students in the class produced nothing but one line:

I stepped into the cinema alone.

As it would be an extremely rare case to have one line as a poem, I asked the whole class to rearrange the line into a "poem" of two lines. The following are some of the different versions the whole class worked out:

(1)   I stepped
       Into the cinema alone.

(2)   I stepped into
       The cinema alone.

(3)   I stepped into the cinema
       Alone.

(4)   I
       Stepped into the cinema alone.

The difference between the student's original line "I stepped into the cinema alone" and the different versions the whole class produced is, in fact, the result of using two different techniques of line arrangement in English poetry:

a) to arrange a line as a self-contained unit of sense

b) to use enjambment in line arrangement

Both of the techniques are commonly used in traditional and modernist English poems and they are often used simultaneously in a single poem. The technique of enjambment, as illustrated by those different versions produced by the whole class, is more useful in creating expectation and adding dynamic tension to a poem. As far as the pictorial effect of a poem is concerned, a poet often achieves his originality of a poem by applying three tools in his toolbox:

a) formal elements such as line, couplet, strophe, stanza and verse paragraph

b) linguistic units such as words, phrases and sentences

c) the white space and tension created by the dynamic combination of a) and b)

A modernist poet often uses the above tools in combination with other graphological devices such as capitalization and typographic design. Likewise, we can explore some other possibilities in the line arrangement of the student's line "I stepped into the cinema alone" by applying those tools and by using our imaginative power and creativity:

(5) I stepped

Into

The cinema alone

(6) i stepped into the

CINEMA

alone

(7) I stepped into the

Cinema

A-L-O-N-E

To sum up the above discussion, line arrangement as an artistic technique in English poetry plays its basic role to transfigure visually a written English "text" into a written English "poem". At the same time, it is an indispensable tool in the poet's toolbox for

the originality of a poem, as a poem's final composition is the integral and dynamic combination of its formal elements and linguistic sense units.

Up to this point, we have to consider the other question listed at the beginning of the section: How does the line arrangement of an English poem affect our understanding and appreciation of the content of the poem? To understand the question, we have to understand two interrelated concepts frequently discussed in the study of discourse analysis and semiotics: **selection** and **foregrounding**. Scollon and Scollon regard **selection** as one of the principles in discourse and argue that:

... the principle of **selection**: any action selects a subset of signs for the actor's attention. A person in taking action selects a pathway by foregrounding some subset of meanings and backgrounding others. Action is a form of selection, positioning the actor as a particular kind of person who selects among different meaning potentials a subset of pathways.

(Scollon, R & Scollon, S. W., 2003:23)

The principle of selection argued by Scollon and Scollon indicates that the composition of a poem, which is the integral combination of formal elements and linguistic sense units through the poet's **selection** of line arrangement, has the function of "foregrounding some subset of meanings and backgrounding others" (ibid.). The audience of a poem has to take the pictorial pattern of a poem into consideration in interpreting the content of the poem, as the pictorial pattern of the poem is semiotically significant in the meaning making of the poem. By selecting and arranging the poem in a particular pattern, the poet is **foregrounding** some subset of meanings. Thus, the above seven different versions derived from the student's line "I stepped into the cinema alone" semiotically foreground different meaning potentials. Take the Versions (1) and (2) for examples, the first line of Version (1) ends with "stepped" while that of Version (2) ends with "into". The tension derived from the line end in Version (1) is different from that of Version (2). In reading the first line of Version (1), we have a strong image conjured up by the action word "stepped" at the end of the line, which is performed by the speaker "I". In reading the first line of Version (2), however, our mental image conjured up by the action word "stepped" is further transformed by the directional preposition "into" at the end of the line.

The concepts of selection and foregrounding and the tension created by using enjambment are also pertinent to the concepts of **theme** and **rheme**, **pause** and **stress**. In English poetry, both the beginning and the end of a line have greater weight. Linguistically, when a line is arranged as a self-contained unit of sense, the beginning part of the line is often the **theme**, i.e. the part of the proposition that is being talked about while the ending part of the line is often the **rheme**, i.e. the predicate that gives information on the topic. When enjambment is used in line arrangement, the beginning

part of the following line(s), however, is/are still quasi-thematized, especially when capitalization is used, while the end of the line(s) would carry greater weight because of the slight **pause** enforced by the ending of the line(s), thus **stressed**. When one word takes up one line in a poem using enjambment, the tension of that word is extremely strong in the meaning making of the poem, as the word simultaneously receives thematization, pause, and stress. In other words, it is tremendously foregrounded through the poet's **selection** of line arrangement. This intrinsic relation is demonstrated by the difference in the tension created by the difference in the line arrangement between Version (3) and Version (4) worked out by the whole class. In Version (3), the impression of being "solitary", "single" and "unaccompanied" is foregrounded by the combination of the linguistic meaning of the word "alone" and its line arrangement as a single line to end the poem; while in Version (4), the speaker "I" is tremendously stressed and foregrounded by taking up a whole line at the very beginning of the poem. When we finish reading the second line of the poem, we realize both linguistically and visually how "solitary", "single" and "unaccompanied" the speaker "I" is in the first line, which is enforced by the fact that the capital letter "I" is pictorially the most "solitary" letter in English alphabet and it is actually "single" and "unaccompanied" by any other letter in the very first line of the poem.

The above discussion on the concepts of **selection** and **foregrounding**, **theme** and **rheme**, **pause** and **stress** functioning in the line arrangement of English poetry can help us to understand the intrinsic relation between the line arrangement of the Versions (5), (6) and (7) and the meaning making of the contents of those versions. Read them through again and pay attention to the changes in their line arrangements as well as graphological designs. If you can sense the tension created by the integral and dynamic combination of these two pictorial elements and the linguistic sense of the words in each version, you can move on to the following two parts of the section: Line Arrangement in Prose and Line Arrangement in Poetry.

Line Arrangement in Prose

Directions: Read the following two passages carefully and for each decide what kind of writing it is and what is its purpose.

Passage 1

Post Office

The queue's right out through the glass doors to the street: Thursday, Pension day. They built this post office too small. Of course, the previous one was smaller—a tiny prefab, next to the betting-shop, says the man who's just arrived; and the present one, at which we're queuing, was cherry-trees in front of a church. The church was where

the supermarket is: "My wife and I got married in that church", the man says. "We hold hands sometimes when we're standing waiting at the checkout—have a little moment together!" He laughs. The queue shuffles forward a step. Three members of it silently vow never to grow old in this suburb; one vows never to grow old at all. "I first met her over there", the man says, "on that corner where the bank is now. The other corner was Williams Brothers—remember Williams Brothers? They gave you tokens, tin money, like, for your dividend." The woman in front of him remembers. She nods, and swivels her loose lower denture, remembering Williams Brothers' metal tokens, and the marble slab on the cheese-counter, and the carved mahogany booth where you went to pay. The boy in front of her is chewing gum; his jaws rotate with the same motion as hers: to and fro, to and fro.

—Fleur Adcock

Passage 2

This is just to say I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast. Forgive me. They were delicious, so sweet and so cold.

—William Carlos Williams

Exercises

I. Vocabulary

Write down the definitions of the following words in the contexts of Passage 1 and Passage 2. Look them up in an English dictionary if necessary.

1. queue
2. pension
3. prefab
4. betting-shop
5. checkout
6. shuffle
7. token
8. dividend
9. denture
10. swivel
11. fro
12. icebox

II. Comprehension questions

1. Passage 1 is _____.

    A. a short short story

    B. a piece of prose writing

    C. a piece of news report

2. In Passage 1, "Thursday, Pension day" means _____.

    A. Thursday is a holiday for old people

    B. Thursday is the day for pensioners to send out their mails

    C. Thursday is the day for old people to get their pensions

3. In Passage 1, the reason why the man and his wife hold hands sometimes when they are waiting at the checkout is because they _____.

    A. are no longer young

    B. do not like being disturbed by other customers

    C. are standing on the spot of their wedding ceremony

4. Passage 1 gives its reader the impression that _____.

    A. life is fast

    B. life is slow

    C. life is both fast and slow

5. "This is just to say... " in Passage 2 is usually used in _____.

    A. an informal note

    B. an advertisement

    C. a radio talk

6. In Passage 2, the exchange of information is most likely between _____.

    A. two acquaintances

    B. wife and husband

    C. two strangers

Line Arrangement in Poetry

Directions: The following two poems are of the same words as you have read in Passage 1 and Passage 2 in Line Arrangement in Prose. Read them through twice and think:

a) Are they really written as poetry?

b) What effects do their line arrangements have on your reading?

Poem 1

POST OFFICE

The queue's right out through the glass doors
to the street: Thursday, Pension day.
They built this Post Office too small.
Of course, the previous one was smaller—
a tiny prefab, next to the betting-shop,
says the man who's just arrived;
and the present one, at which we're queuing,
was cherry-trees in front of a church.
The church was where the supermarket is:
"My wife and I got married in that church"
the man says. "We hold hands sometimes
when we're standing waiting at the checkout—
have a little moment together!" He laughs.
The queue shuffles forward a step.
Three members of it silently vow
never to grow old in this suburb;
one vows never to grow old at all.
"I first met her over there" the man says,
"on that corner where the bank is now.
The other corner was Williams Brothers—
remember Williams Brothers? They gave you tokens,
tin money, like, for your dividend."
The woman in front of him remembers.
She nods, and swivels her loose lower denture,
remembering Williams Brothers' metal tokens,
and the marble slab on the cheese-counter,
and the carved mahogany booth where you went to pay.
The boy in front of her is chewing gum;
his jaws rotate with the same motion
as hers: to and fro, to and fro.

—Fleur Adcock

Poem 2

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

—William Carlos Williams

Exercises

I. Questions on Poem 1

1. In your opinion, which is the original version, the passage in prose or the version in poetry? Give your reasons.

2. Read Passage 1 and Poem 1 at your normal speed, then consider how the different line arrangements affect your reading and understanding.

3. Most of the sentences in the poem *Post Office* run on to the next line(s). However, there are four sentences which are arranged within one line respectively. Write them down on the following four lines and discuss their function in the poem.

   Sentence 1: _____

   Sentence 2: _____

   Sentence 3: _____

   Sentence 4: _____

4. How does the capitalization of "Post Office" in Line 3 Poem I affect the meaning of the poem?

5. Read the last sentence but one in Passage 1 and that in Poem 1. Which sentence gives you clearer images? Why?

II. Questions on Poem 2

1. Read through Poem 2 once again and find out which is the first line that is syntactically a complete sentence.

2. In everyday communication, what will be expressed after saying "Forgive me" apologetically?

3. The word "saving" takes up one line in the poem. Comment how this special line arrangement affects the meaning of the word itself and the poem as a whole.

4. In what ways is an icebox useful in our everyday life? Americans are very keen on iced food. Does this additional knowledge help you to understand the poem better?

5. Compared with other two meals, what is special about breakfast? The word "breakfast" itself is a compound word; what do the two compounding words mean?

Consolidation 1

Directions: Rearrange the lines of the following poem in the form of a letter, then discuss in detail, or write a fuller analysis of the different effects they will make on your reading and interpretation.

LITTLE JOHNNY'S FINAL LETTER

Mother,

I won't be home this evening, so
don't worry; don't hurry to report me missing.
Don't drain the canals to find me,
I've decided to stay alive, don't
search the woods, I'm not hiding,
simply gone to get myself classified.
Don't leave my shreddies out,
I've done with security.
Don't circulate my photograph to society
I have disguised myself as a man

and am giving priority to obscurity.
It suits me fine;
I have taken off my short trousers
and put on long ones, and
now am going out into the city, so
don't worry; don't hurry to report me missing.
…

—Brian Patten

Consolidation 2

Directions: The following is a passage from *My First Job* by Robert Best. Rearrange the lines into two different poems, and then ask your partner to read through your poems and discuss with your partner his/her different interpretations of your two poems.

The School

The school was a dreary, gabled Victorian house of red brick and with big staring sash-windows. The front garden was a gravel square; four evergreen shrubs stood at each corner, where they struggled to survive the dust and fumes from a busy main road.

Version 1

_____

_____

_____

_____

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Version 2

_____

_____

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Section 2
Words and Meanings

Introduction

The previous section, Section 1, has examined the issue of line arrangement of a poem and its influence on the meaning making of the content of the poem. This section looks at the basic elements of the content of a poem, the words. It focuses on the following two fundamental questions:

a) Do words used in the discourse of English poetry differ from words used in other types of discourse?

b) How do words bring out the meanings of a poem in English poetry?

The first question whether or not words in English poetry differ from words in other types of discourse is a longstanding one and there has no unanimous answer to the question. Judging by the poems we have examined so far in Section 1, we could argue that words used in the discourse of English poetry are much the same sort of words that we find people using in other types of discourse. The expression "this is just to say…" in Williams' poem contains exactly the same words and sentence form that English speakers normally use to begin a casual note to friends or acquaintances. And the words and expressions used in Patten's *Little Johnny's Final Letter* are also commonly used in daily life, especially the contractions such as "won't", "don't" and "I've". They are frequently used in everyday colloquial English. However, it is believed that poetry is best words in best order and that "ordinary words undergo a sea change within the design of a poem" (Benton, 1992:66). In other words, words used in the design of a poem do differ from words used in other types of discourse.

Literary critics and language professionals have long noticed that this "sea change" of words within the design of a poem has the most direct effect on the meaning making of the poem. The comments by M. Benton in the following two selected passages illuminate the nature of the change of words in the design of a poem and its effect on the reader:

Passage 1

… while words carry their usual lexical definitions and familiar meanings with them into a poem, their appearance in this verbal form lends them unusual definition and unfamiliar meanings. The language of poetry is not that of ordinary discourse, even though the individual words may be the same. Ordinary words undergo a sea change within the design of a poem. From the standpoint of everyday usage, words are thus both "true" and "false"; or better, perhaps, words carry two sorts of truth, one that owes allegiance to the primary world we all inhabit, the other owing allegiance to the secondary world of imaginative artifice.

—Michael Benton, *Secondary Worlds*, pp. 66-67

Passage 2

On first encounter, a poem may be just a blur of words. The special use of language, the reader's sense that these words are the chosen few—no others will do—and the condensation of meaning implied lend an element of word-puzzle to many poems. The riddling quality of expression, the delight in pun and word-play, the often complicated syntax, the elliptical patterning of the language—all these familiar qualities may puzzle, delight or frustrate the reader of a poem.

—Michael Benton, *Secondary Worlds*, p. 67

As pointed out by Benton in the above two passages, the "riddling quality" or the "special use of language" of a poem is lexical as well as syntactical. The issue of the complicated syntax of English poetry will be partly covered in the next section. Here in this section we need to focus on the issue how words can carry "two sorts of truth" (ibid.) in the design of a poem.

According to Passage 1, the same sort of words can have different sort of "truth" depending on their alliance to two different worlds: "the primary world" and "the secondary world" (ibid.). To understand how the same sort of words can carry two sorts of "truth", we need to look at two different modes of language use.

In the primary world, language use is **referential**. We derive the value or truth of words by cross-referencing the lexical meaning of words with the primary world in which the words are used. In other words, the realization of lexical meaning is situational or contextual. H. G. Widdowson (1992) regards this function of language use in the primary world as **the referential mode** of language. This situatedness of truth values

of words in the primary world can be illustrated by the exercise of Consolidation 1 in Section 1, in which we have rearranged the lines of Brian Patten's poem *Little Johnny's Final Letter* into the conventional form of an English letter:

Mother,

I won't be home this evening, so don't worry; don't hurry to report me missing. Don't drain the canals to find me, I've decided to stay alive, don't search the woods, I'm not hiding, simply gone to get myself classified. Don't leave my shreddies out, I've done with security. Don't circulate my photograph to society I have disguised myself as a man and am giving priority to obscurity. It suits me fine; I have taken off my short trousers and put on long ones, and now am going out into the city, so don't worry; don't hurry to report me missing...

Johnny

There is a sea change in the meaning making of the same words that are used in Patten's poem, which belongs to "the secondary world", and that are used in the above letter, which would belong to "the primary world" if it was actually from Johnny to his mother.

Firstly, the participants involved in the meaning making of those words are different. In the case of the poem, the communication is between Brian Patten as the author and anyone who approaches the poem as the reader. In other words, any reader has the genuine right to access and interpret the meaning of those words used in the secondary world of imaginative artifice. In the case of the letter, the communication would be between Johnny, most probably in his early teens, and his mother. In other words, nobody except Johnny's mother would have the genuine right to access and interpret the meaning of those words used in the primary world.

Secondly, in the case of the letter, many words would have actual referential values in the primary world, and both Johnny and his mother would know what their references were. In other words, they have lucid or determined references. In the case of the poem, however, all those words, which have actual referential values in the letter, no longer have actual references in the primary world of the reader. They become indetermined references and they exist only in the secondary world of imaginative artifice. They just represent the meaning through the way in which they are used in the imaginative artifice. H. G. Widdowson regards this function of language use in the secondary world of imaginative artifice **as the representational mode** of language. And he argues that indeterminacy "is a necessary condition for representation, since it thereby provides for multiple meanings" (Widdowson, 1992: 187). The indeterminacy of the poem invites the reader to decipher or to puzzle out the indetermined references of the words as representations in the imaginary artifice.

Thirdly, relevant to the previous two points is that the significance of the poem is transferable and its interpretation is ideological while the significance of the letter is

fixed and its interpretation is situational or contextual. "Poetic texts are decontextualized representations of reality" (ibid.188). It is true to argue that the poetic text by Brian Patten must also have a contextual reality if we trace its composition in the life trajectory of Brian Patten, the poet. The significance of such a trace would be more biographically relevant to the life story of the author, less literarily relevant to the aesthetic experience of the reader. As far as the reader's aesthetic experience in reading the words of the poetic text is concerned, the text is decontextualized from its composition. The reader is free to interpret the meaning of the poetic text according to his own individual experience and his own viewpoint of the world, i.e. ideology. Thus, the significance of the poem exists in the reader's aesthetic experience of reading the poem and his understanding of the "truth" represented by the words and the pictorial pattern of the poetic text. In the case of the letter, the addressee, i.e. Johnny's mother, was not supposed to make free interpretation of the words in the letter, as Johnny had used them to make explicit reference to what he was talking about in the letter. Thus, the significance of the letter lies in getting across the intended or fixed message which Johnny wanted to send to his mother. Even if the letter was read as documentary evidence by researchers or as case evidence by lawyers, it was still not supposed to be interpreted freely.

Since the reader is free to interpret a poetic text which is decontexualized from its composition, we have to consider the other question listed at the beginning of the section: How do words bring out the meanings of a poem in English poetry? To understand the question we need to look at the component parts of an average word. The following passage selected from *Sound and Sense* by Laurence Perrine (1982) gives us some basic knowledge on the topic:

The average word has three component parts: sound, denotation, and connotation. It begins as a combination of tones and noises, uttered by the lips, tongue, and throat, for which the written word is a notation. But it differs from a musical tone or a noise in that it has a meaning attached to it. The basic part of this meaning is its **denotation** or denotations: that is, the dictionary meaning or meanings of the word. Beyond its denotations, a word may also have connotations. The **connotations** are what it suggests beyond what it expresses: its overtones of meaning. It acquires these connotations by its past history and associations, by the way and the circumstances in which it has been used. The word *home*, for instance, by denotation means only a place where one lives, but by connotation it suggests security, love, comfort, and family. The words "childlike" and "childish" both mean "characteristic of a child," but "childlike" suggests meekness, innocence, and wide-eyed wonder, while "childish" suggests pettiness, willfulness, and temper tantrums. If we name over a series of coins: *nickel*, *peso*, *lira*, *shilling*, *sen*, *doubloon*, the word "doubloon", to four out of five readers, will immediately suggest pirates,

though a dictionary definition includes nothing about pirates. Pirates are part of its connotation.

Connotation is very important in poetry, for it is one of the means by which the poet can concentrate or enrich meaning—say more in fewer words…

—Laurence Perrine, *Sound and Sense*, pp. 33-34

The threefold typology of the components of an average word in the above passage can facilitate us a starting point in understanding the issue how words bring out the meanings of a poem in English poetry. The component of sound will be discussed in Unit Two on the techniques of verse. In this section we will focus on the components of denotation and connotation of words.

The component of denotation of a word is, as defined by Perrine in Passage 3, the dictionary meaning or meanings of the word. In its strict sense, it is devoid of any emotion, attitude, or color. It is the shared knowledge of the word among the linguistic communities of that language. Although its meaning(s) may change in time and space, it is resistant to change. When we put together the denotations of the words used in a piece of discourse, what we get is the literal meaning of the discourse. Its truth pertains more directly to the first sort of truth as classified by Benton in Passage 1, which owes allegiance to the primary world we all inhabit. Thus, the denotative meaning of the sentence "I stepped into the cinema alone" is simple. It literally means that the first person speaker "I" walked unaccompanied into the theatre where people pay to watch films.

When we take into consideration the connotations of the words used in the sentence, its connotative meaning is much more complicated. The component of connotation of a word, as pointed out by Perrine in Passage 3, suggests beyond what it expresses. The connotative truth or value of a word used in a piece of discourse pertains to at least three factors: the past history and association of the word, the way and the circumstance in which the word is used or encoded by the initiator of the discourse, and the way and the circumstance in which the word is understood or decoded by the receiver of the discourse. In daily life communication, to get across the overtones or connotative meanings of words used in a piece of discourse, both the initiator and the receiver of a piece of discourse should have the shared knowledge of the way and the circumstance in which the words are encoded and decoded in the primary world. In other words, the interpretation of the overtones or the connotative meanings of words depends on the degree in which the information gap has been determined. The higher the degree, the clearer the interpretation.

In the secondary world of imaginary artifice, as pointed out earlier, there exists an indetermined information gap in discourse. As far as poetic discourse is concerned, this indeterminacy relates directly to the fact that a poet often says something (the denotative meaning) and means something else (the connotative meaning). Since the

poet and his audience often do not share time and space and the circumstance in which a poem is composed is often unknown to its audience, the audience of a poem has to understand the overtones of a poem according to the representations of the words in the design of the poem, the history and the associations of the words, the circumstance and the mood in which he reads the poem, and his former aesthetic as well as worldly experiences.

Thus, the denotative meanings of the seven different poetic versions of the sentence "I stepped into the cinema alone" discussed in Section 1 are the same. Their connotative meanings are, however, all different even when they are read by the same reader in the same circumstance. For example, the overtone of the lower case "i" in Version (6) is different from that of the upper case "I" in the other six versions. The lower case "i" at the very beginning of Version (6) gives the reader a strong sense of the diminished and lowered importance of the speaker in the poem. When the speaker stepped into the cinema, she/he simply lost her/his identity as "I" in capital. The same case is true with the word "CINEMA" with all its letters in upper case in Version (6). Its overtone is different from that in Versions (1)–(5) with all its letters in lower case, and that in Version (7) with C in upper case only. In Version (6), the word "CINEMA", with all its letters in upper case, gives the reader a strong impression that it is by no means simply a theatre where people pay to watch films. It has a much "greater" meaning in the poem. In reading the poem, a reader might be reminded that in history Shakespeare had compared the world to a stage and people to players on the stage. In the "CINEMA", however, the speaker is not even a player, and has no identity as "I" in capital letter, thus "i" in lower case at the very beginning of the poem.

To summarize the present discussion on the question we are considering: How do words bring out the meanings of a poem in English poetry? Words used in an English poem carry two different types of meanings: the denotative meaning and the connotative meaning. The denotative meaning is the first level of analysis in understanding a poem. It is sometimes called the literal meaning of a poem, i.e. the property of linguistic expressions printed on a page as a poem. The first level analysis of a poem is comparatively a simple task, as it mainly involves deciding the grammatical features and the dictionary definitions of the words used in the poem. The connotative meaning is the second level of analysis in understanding a poem. It is the associations, the implications, or the shared emotional attachment acquired through the representational use of the words in the design of a poem. The second level analysis of a poem is much more complicated than the first level analysis, as it involves puzzling out the riddling quality of expression, revealing the hidden meaning of words, and determining the indeterminacy of the poem. To understand the connotative meaning(s) of words in a poem, we need to consider:

- the prominence or the tension of the words created by the combination of formal elements and linguistic units of the poem

- the historical associations of the words

- the shared emotional associations of the words

- the embedded social values, attitudes and beliefs of the objects or concepts signified by the words

- our own personal values, attitudes and beliefs associated with the words which are derived from our personal experience, both aesthetic and worldly

Exercises

I. Vocabulary

Write down the definitions of the following words in the context of the Introduction. Look them up in an English dictionary if necessary.

1. lexical

2. verbal

3. discourse

4. allegiance

5. encounter

6. condensation

7. syntax

8. denotation

9. connotation

10. willfulness

11. tantrum

12. overtone

II. Comprehension questions

1. According to Passage 1, the definitions of words in a poem are _____.

   A. not related to that of usual lexical definitions

   B. totally different from that of usual lexical definitions

   C. not commonly used in everyday life

2. By "the language of poetry is not that of ordinary discourse" in Passage 1, the author means that _____.

   A. the language used in poetry is not the same language that we use in our daily life

   B. poetry uses different language systems

   C. the language of poetry is more useful compared with ordinary language

3. According to Passage 1, the meanings of words in a poem are related to _____.

   A. the primary word

   B. the word in people's imagination

   C. both the primary word and the word in people's imagination

4. In Passage 2 the sentence "On first encounter, a poem may be just a blur of words" means _____.

   A. when one reads a poem for the first time, he may fail to understand the meanings of the words used in the poem

   B. when one reads a poem for the first time, he may find that the words used in a poem are often illegible

   C. at the first glance of a poem, it is often difficult to recognize the words used in it

5. Find in Passage 2 the qualities of a poem that may puzzle, delight or frustrate the reader, then write them down.

   _____

   _____

   _____

6. Read Passage 3 through once again and find in the passage the definitions for the following three words.

   Sound: _____

   Denotation: _____

   Connotation: _____

7. According to Passage 3, a word gains its connotations by:

   A. _____

   B. _____

8. According to Passage 3, which part of an average word is more crucial to the reader's understanding of the poem?

   A. The sound.

   B. The denotation.

   C. The connotation.

9. The following are three possible explanations of the word "pink". Which explanation is the overtone of the word?

   A. Pale red.

   B. Perfect.

   C. Romantic.

10. Fill in the following table about the sounds, denotations and connotations of the words. Look them up in an English dictionary if necessary.

Words	Sounds	Denotations	Connotations
rose			
winter			
moon			
dust			
fire			

Selected Poems

Directions: Read the following two poems by Robert Frost twice at a slow speed, then finish the exercises listed after the poems.

Poem 1

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farm house near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

—Robert Frost

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

—Robert Frost

Exercises

I. Vocabulary

Explain the definitions of the following italic words in the context of the Selected Poems. Look them up in an English dictionary if necessary.

1. Whose *woods* these are I think I know.

2. He will not see me stopping here / To watch his woods *fill* up with snow.

3. My little horse must think it *queer*…

4. He gives his *harness* bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake.

5. The only other sound's the *sweep* / Of easy wind and *downy* flake.

6. The woods are lovely, dark and deep, / But I have *promises* to keep.

7. Two roads *diverged* in a yellow wood...

8. … / To where it bent in the *undergrowth*…

9. … / And having perhaps the better *claim*…

10. …it was grassy and wanted *wear*;

11. … / In leaves no step had *trodden* black.

12. I shall be telling this with a *sigh*…

II. Comprehension questions

1. The speaker in Poem 1 is _____.

    A. Robert Frost, the poet

    B. an imaginative traveler who is heading to his destination

    C. impersonal I

2. Read Poem 1 once again and write down the words that describe time, place and condition.

    Time: _____

    Place: _____

    Condition: _____

3. The speaker in Poem 1 stopped by the woods because _____.

    A. he is tired of travelling

    B. he is attracted by the view

    C. he has lost his way

4. Think over and write down at least three connotations the word "snow" often acquires from its common use. What connotations does "snow" acquire in Poem 1?

_____

_____

_____

5. One of the common overtones of "snow", "evening", "wind" and "flake" in Poem 1 is _____.

   A. cold weather

   B. bad weather

   C. deprivation of life

6. The speaker in Poem 2 is _____.

   A. a traveler who was walking in a wood

   B. Robert Frost, the poet

   C. a person who had a decision to make

7. From Poem 2, we could see that the speaker _____.

   A. regretted being unable to travel two roads simultaneously

   B. believed that the road not taken was much easier to travel

   C. believed that a decision made earlier in one's life would influence his later life

8. Write down both the denotations and the connotations of "wood" and "traveler".

Words	Denotations	Connotations
wood		
traveler		

9. The word "wood" in the two poems by Robert Frost is of _____.

   A. the same connotations

   B. different connotations

   C. both different and same connotations

10. In Poem 2, "two roads diverged" in the first stanza and that in the fourth stanza exist _____.

   A. in the same time and space

   B. in the same time span but different space

   C. in the different time and space

III. Topics for discussion

1. What kind of attitudes does the speaker in Poem 1 have towards the woods?

2. In Poem 1, does the word "promises" in Stanza 4 have any special meanings in the poem? Give your reasons.

3. Does the repetition of the last two lines in Poem 1 have any special function?

4. Robert Frost is well known for his deceptive simplicity in the history of modern English poetry. In Poem 2, as well as in Poem 1, he uses simple words. Do these simple words carry any profound meanings in the poems? Give your reasons.

5. Read Poem 2 through once more and pay attention to the changes of tenses. How do these changes influence the meaning of the poem?

6. Look at Stanza 1 of Poem 2, at arm's length if you like. What do you notice about its appearance? What is its shape? The writer decided to present the poem in this way. Are there any obvious reasons for his decision?

Consolidation

Directions: Poets always seek the most meaningful words, not necessary the most beautiful or noble-sounding words, for their own poetic context. The following is a short poem by Philip Larkin. Read it through slowly at least twice before you think about the questions following it.

Take One Home for the Kiddies

On shallow straw, in shadeless glass,
Huddled by empty bowls, they sleep:
No dark, no dam, no earth, no grass—
Mam, get us one of them to keep.

Living toys are something novel,
But it soon wears off somehow.
Fetch the shoebox, fetch the shovel—
Mam, we're playing funerals now.

—Philip Larkin

Questions

1. How many different voices can you hear from the poem? From whom?

2. Most critics believe that the primary concern of poetry is not with beauty, not with philosophical truth, not with persuasion, but with experience. What kind of experience does this poem focus on? Does the poem give you a better understanding of it?

3. Does the repetition of the negation particle "no" in Line 3 have any special function or is it done only to create a kind of refrain within the line?

4. What is/are the tone(s) of the poem—that is, the attitude(s) of the speaker(s) toward the situation?

5. How does the language used in the last line in each stanza differ from the language used in preceding lines? Why italics are used?