

Epstein 3

in the car and the postwar hustle and bustle they represent. The fast-paced future overtakes the tired symbol of the past in the poem. The pace slows as the wagon passengers get down to walk, but the reader recognizes that the grandfather's way has been lost to a world in which good manners are not required.

Epstein 4

Work Cited

Bishop, Elizabeth. "Manners." *Poetry: An Introduction*. Ed. Michael Meyer. 6th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010. 60. Print.

3

Word Choice, Word Order, and Tone



I still feel that a poet has a duty to words, and that words can do wonderful things. And it's too bad to just let them lie there without doing anything with and for them.


—GWENDOLYN BROOKS

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WORD CHOICE

Diction

Like all good writers, poets are keenly aware of *diction*, their choice of words. Poets, however, choose words especially carefully because the words in poems call attention to themselves. Characters, actions, settings, and symbols may appear in a poem, but in the foreground, before all else, is the poem's language. Also, poems are usually briefer than other forms of writing. A few inappropriate words in a 200-page novel (which would have about 100,000 words) create fewer problems than they would in a 100-word poem. Functioning in a compressed atmosphere, the words in a poem must convey meanings gracefully and economically. Readers therefore have to be alert to the ways in which those meanings are released.

 Explore the poetic elements in this chapter on *LiterActive* and at bedfordstmartins.com/rewritinglit.

Although poetic language is often more intensely charged than ordinary speech, the words used in poetry are not necessarily different from everyday speech. Inexperienced readers may sometimes assume that language must be high-flown and out of date to be included in a poem: instead of reading about a boy “enjoying a swim,” they expect to read about a boy “disporting with pliant arm o’er a glassy wave.” During the eighteenth century this kind of **poetic diction**—the use of elevated language rather than ordinary language—was highly valued in English poetry, but since the nineteenth century poets have generally overridden the distinctions that were once made between words used in everyday speech and those used in poetry. Today all levels of diction can be found in poetry.

A poet, like any writer, has several levels of diction from which to choose; they range from formal to middle to informal. **Formal diction** consists of a dignified, impersonal, and elevated use of language. Notice, for example, the formality of Thomas Hardy’s description of the sunken luxury liner *Titanic* in this stanza from “The Convergence of the Twain” (the entire poem appears on p. 86):

In a solitude of the sea
Deep from human vanity,
And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she.

There is nothing casual or relaxed about these lines. Hardy’s use of “stilly,” meaning “quietly” or “calmly,” is purely literary; the word rarely, if ever, turns up in everyday English.

The language used in Sharon Olds’s “Last Night” (p. 84) represents a less formal level of diction; the speaker uses a **middle diction** spoken by most educated people. Consider how Olds’s speaker struggles the next day to comprehend her passion:

Love? It was more like dragonflies
in the sun, 100 degrees at noon,
the ends of their abdomens stuck together, I
close my eyes when I remember.

The words used to describe this encounter are common enough, yet it is precisely Olds’s use of language that evokes the extraordinary nature of this couple’s connection.

Informal diction is evident in Philip Larkin’s “A Study of Reading Habits” (p. 33). The speaker’s account of his early reading is presented **colloquially**, in a conversational manner that in this instance includes slang expressions not used by the culture at large:

When getting my nose in a book
Cured most things short of school,
It was worth ruining my eyes
To know I could still keep cool,
And deal out the old right hook
To dirty dogs twice my size.

This level of diction is clearly not that of Hardy’s or Olds’s speakers.

Poets may also draw on another form of informal diction, called **dialect**. Dialects are spoken by definable groups of people from a particular geographic region, economic group, or social class. New England dialects are often heard in Robert Frost’s poems, for example. Gwendolyn Brooks uses a black dialect in “We Real Cool” (p. 96) to characterize a group of pool players. Another form of diction related to particular groups is **jargon**, a category of language defined by a trade or profession. Sociologists, photographers, carpenters, baseball players, and dentists, for example, all use words that are specific to their fields. Sally Croft offers an appetizing dish of cookbook jargon in “Home-Baked Bread” (p. 126).

Many levels of diction are available to poets. The variety of diction to be found in poetry is enormous, and that is how it should be. No language is foreign to poetry because it is possible to imagine any human voice as the speaker of a poem. When we say a poem is formal, informal, or somewhere in between, we are making a descriptive statement rather than an evaluative one. What matters in a poem is not only which words are used but how they are used.

Denotations and Connotations

One important way that the meaning of a word is communicated in a poem is through sound: snakes *hiss*, saws *buzz*. This and other matters related to sound are discussed in Chapter 7. Individual words also convey meanings through denotations and connotations. **Denotations** are the literal, dictionary meanings of a word. For example, *bird* denotes a feathered animal with wings (other denotations for the same word include a shuttlecock, an airplane, or an odd person), but in addition to its denotative meanings, *bird* also carries **connotations**—associations and implications that go beyond a word’s literal meanings. Connotations derive from how the word has been used and the associations people make with it. Therefore, the connotations of *bird* might include fragility, vulnerability, altitude, the sky, or freedom, depending on the context in which the word is used. Consider also how different the connotations are for the following types of birds: hawk, dove, penguin, pigeon, chicken, peacock, duck, crow, turkey, gull, owl, goose, coot, and vulture. These words have long been used to refer to types of people as well as birds. They are rich in connotative meanings.

Connotations derive their resonance from a person’s experiences with a word. Those experiences may not always be the same, especially when the people having them are in different times and places. *Theater*, for instance, was once associated with depravity, disease, and sin, whereas today the word usually evokes some sense of high culture and perhaps visions of elegant opulence. In several ethnic communities in the United States many people would find *squid* appetizing, but elsewhere the word is likely to produce negative connotations. Readers must recognize, then, that words

written in other times and places may have unexpected connotations. Annotations usually help in these matters, which is why it makes sense to pay attention to them when they are available.

Ordinarily, though, the language of poetry is accessible, even when the circumstances of the reader and the poet are different. Although connotative language may be used subtly, it mostly draws on associations experienced by many people. Poets rely on widely shared associations rather than the idiosyncratic response that an individual might have to a word. Someone who has received a severe burn from a fireplace accident may associate the word *hearth* with intense pain instead of home and family life, but that reader must not allow a personal experience to undermine the response the poet intends to evoke. Connotative meanings are usually public meanings.

Perhaps this can be seen most clearly in advertising, where language is also used primarily to convey moods and feelings rather than information. For instance, three decades of increasing interest in nutrition and general fitness have created a collective consciousness that advertisers have capitalized on successfully. Knowing that we want to be slender or lean or slim (not *spare* or *scrawny* and certainly not *gaunt*), advertisers have created a new word to describe beers, wines, sodas, cheeses, canned fruits, and other products that tend to overload what used to be called sweatclothes and sneakers. The word is *lite*. The assumed denotative meaning of *lite* is “low in calories,” but as close readers of ingredient labels know, some *lites* are heavier than regularly prepared products. There can be no doubt about the connotative meaning of *lite*, however. Whatever is *lite* cannot hurt you; less is more. Even the word is lighter than *light*; there is no unnecessary droopy *g* or plump *h*. *Lite* is a brilliantly manufactured use of connotation.

Connotative meanings are valuable because they allow poets to be economical and suggestive simultaneously. In this way emotions and attitudes are carefully woven into the texture of the poem’s language. Read the following poem and pay close attention to the connotative meanings of its words.

RANDALL JARRELL (1914–1965)

The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner

1945

From my mother’s sleep I fell into the State
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

The title of this poem establishes the setting and the speaker’s situation. Like the setting of a short story, the setting of a poem is important

when the time and place influence what happens. “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” is set in the midst of a war and, more specifically, in a ball turret—a Plexiglas sphere housing machine guns on the underside of a bomber. The speaker’s situation obviously places him in extreme danger; indeed, his fate is announced in the title.

Although the poem is written in the first-person singular, its speaker is clearly not the poet. Jarrell uses a *persona*, a speaker created by the poet. In this poem the persona is a disembodied voice that makes the gunner’s story all the more powerful. What is his story? A paraphrase might read something like this:

After I was born, I grew up to find myself at war, cramped into the turret of a bomber’s belly some 31,000 feet above the ground. Below me were exploding shells from antiaircraft guns and attacking fighter planes. I was killed, but the bomber returned to base, where my remains were cleaned out of the turret so the next man could take my place.

This paraphrase is accurate, but its language is much less suggestive than the poem’s. The first line of the poem has the speaker emerge from his “mother’s sleep,” the anesthetized sleep of her giving birth. The phrase also suggests the comfort, warmth, and security he knew as a child. This safety was left behind when he “fell,” a verb that evokes the danger and involuntary movement associated with his subsequent “State” (*fell* also echoes, perhaps, the fall from innocence to experience related in the Bible).

Several dictionary definitions appear for the noun *state*; it can denote a territorial unit, the power and authority of a government, a person’s social status, or a person’s emotional or physical condition. The context provided by the rest of the poem makes clear that “State” has several denotative meanings here: because it is capitalized, it certainly refers to the violent world of a government at war, but it also refers to the gunner’s vulnerable status as well as his physical and emotional condition. By having “State” carry more than one meaning, Jarrell has created an intentional ambiguity. *Ambiguity* allows for two or more simultaneous interpretations of a word, a phrase, an action, or a situation, all of which can be supported by the context of a work. Through his ambiguous use of “State,” Jarrell connects the horrors of war not just to bombers and gunners but to the governments that control them.

Related to this ambiguity is the connotative meaning of “State” in the poem. The context demands that the word be read with a negative charge. The word is not used with patriotic pride but to suggest an anonymous, impersonal “State” that kills rather than nurtures the life in its “belly.” The state’s “belly” is a bomber, and the gunner is “hunched” like a fetus in the cramped turret, where, in contrast to the warmth of his mother’s womb, everything is frozen, even the “wet fur” of his flight jacket (newborn infants have wet fur too). The gunner is not just 31,000 feet from the ground but “Six miles from earth.” *Six miles*

has roughly the same denotative meaning as 31,000 feet, but Jarrell knew that the connotative meaning of *six miles* makes the speaker's position seem even more remote and frightening.

When the gunner is born into the violent world of war, he finds himself waking up to a "nightmare" that is all too real. The poem's final line is grimly understated, but it hits the reader with the force of an exploding shell: what the State-bomber-turret gives birth to is a gruesome death that is merely one of an endless series. It may be tempting to reduce the theme of this poem to the idea that "war is hell," but Jarrell's target is more specific. He implicates the "State," which routinely executes such violence, and he does so without preaching or hysterical denunciations. Instead, his use of language conveys his theme subtly and powerfully.

WORD ORDER

Meanings in poems are conveyed not only by denotations and connotations but also by the poet's arrangement of words into phrases, clauses, and sentences to achieve particular effects. The ordering of words into meaningful verbal patterns is called *syntax*. A poet can manipulate the syntax of a line to place emphasis on a word; this is especially apparent when a poet varies normal word order. In Emily Dickinson's "A narrow Fellow in the Grass" (p. 2), for example, the speaker says about the snake that "His notice sudden is." Ordinarily, that would be expressed as "his notice is sudden." By placing the verb *is* unexpectedly at the end of the line, Dickinson creates the sense of surprise we feel when we suddenly come upon a snake. Dickinson's inversion of the standard word order also makes the final sound of the line a hissing *is*.

TONE

Tone is the writer's attitude toward the subject, the mood created by all of the elements in the poem. Writing, like speech, can be characterized as serious or light, sad or happy, private or public, angry or affectionate, bitter or nostalgic, or by any other attitudes and feelings that human beings experience. In Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," the tone is clearly serious; the voice in the poem even sounds dead. Listen again to the persona's final words: "When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose." The brutal, restrained matter-of-factness of this line is effective because the reader is called on to supply the appropriate anger and despair—a strategy that makes those emotions all the more convincing.

Consider how tone is used to convey meaning in the next poem, inspired by the poet's contemplation of mortality.

JUDITH ORTIZ COFER (b. 1952)

Common Ground

1987

Blood tells the story of your life
in heartbeats as you live it;
bones speak in the language
of death, and flesh thins
with age when up
through your pores rises
the stuff of your origin.

5

These days,
when I look into the mirror I see
my grandmother's stern lips
speaking in parentheses at the corners
of my mouth of pain and deprivation
I have never known. I recognize
my father's brows arching in disdain
over the objects of my vanity, my mother's
nervous hands smoothing lines
just appearing on my skin,
like arrows pointing downward
to our common ground.

10

15

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** How do you interpret the title? How did your idea of its meaning change as you read the poem?
2. What is the relationship between the first and second stanzas?
3. How does this poem make you feel? What is its tone? How do the diction and imagery create the tone?

COLETTE INEZ (b. 1931)

Back When All Was Continuous Chuckles

2004

after a line by Anselm Hollo°

Doris and I were helpless on the Beeline Bus
laughing at what was it? "What did the moron
who killed his mother and father eat
at the orphan's picnic?" "Crow?" Har-har.

Anselm Hollo: Finnish poet (b. 1934) who teaches creative writing in the United States.

The bus was grinding towards Hempstead,
past the cemetery whose stones Doris
and I found hilarious. Freaky ghouls and skeletons.
“What did the dead man say to the ghost?”

“I like the movie better than the book.”
Even “I don’t get it” was funny.
The war was on, rationing, sirens.
Silly billies, we poked each other’s arms
with balled fists, held hands and howled
at crabby ladies in funny hats, dusty feathers,
fake fruit. Doris’ mom wore this headgear
before she got the big C which no one said out loud.

In a shadowy room her skin seemed gray
as moon dust on Smith Street, as Doris’ house
where we tiptoed down the hall.
Sometimes we heard moans from the back room
and I helped wring out cloths while Doris
brought water in a glass held to her mother’s lips.
But soon we were flipping through joke books
and writhing on the floor, war news shut off
back when we pretended all was continuous chuckles,
and we rode the bus past Greenfield’s rise
where stones, trumpeting angels,
would bear names we later came to recognize.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Compare the difference between the title and its slightly revised version as it appears in line 25. How does that difference reveal the theme?
2. At what point does the tone of the poem shift from chuckles to something else?
3. What is the effect of the rhymes in lines 26 and 28? How do the rhymes serve to reinforce the poem’s theme?

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. Discuss the tone of this poem and that of Gwendolyn Brooks’s “We Real Cool” (p. 96).

The next work is a *dramatic monologue*, a type of poem in which a character—the speaker—addresses a silent audience in such a way as to reveal unintentionally some aspect of his or her temperament or personality. What tone is created by Machan’s use of a persona?

KATHARYN HOWD MACHAN (B. 1952)

Hazel Tells LaVerne

1976

last night
im cleanin out my
howard johnsons ladies room
when all of a sudden
up pops this frog
musta come from the sewer
swimmin aroun an tryin ta
climb up the sida the bowl
so i goes ta flushm down
but sohelpmegod he starts talkin
bout a golden ball
an how i can be a princess
me a princess
well my mouth drops
all the way to the floor
an he says
kiss me just kiss me
once on the nose
well i screams
ya little green pervert
an i hitsm with my mop
an has ta flush
the toilet down three times
me
a princess

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** What do you imagine the situation and setting are for this poem? Do you like this revision of the fairy tale “The Frog Prince”?
2. What creates the poem’s humor? How does Hazel’s use of language reveal her personality? Is her treatment of the frog consistent with her character?
3. Although it has no punctuation, this poem is easy to follow. How does the arrangement of the lines organize Hazel’s speech for clarity and emphasis?
4. What is the theme? Is it conveyed through denotative or connotative language?
5. **CREATIVE RESPONSE.** Write what you think might be LaVerne’s reply to Hazel. First, write LaVerne’s response as a series of ordinary sentences, and then try editing and organizing them into poetic lines.

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. Although Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” (p. 180) is a more complex poem than Machan’s, both use dramatic monologues to reveal character. How are the strategies in each poem similar?

A SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSE

Georges 1

Alex Georges
Professor Myerov
English 200
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Tone in Katharyn Howd Machan's "Hazel Tells LaVerne"

"Tone," Michael Meyer writes, "is the writer's attitude toward the subject, the mood created by all of the elements of the poem" (72) and is used to convey meaning and character. In her dramatic monologue, "Hazel Tells LaVerne," the poet Katharyn Howd Machan reveals through the persona of Hazel—a funny, tough-talking, no-nonsense cleaning lady—a satirical revision of "The Frog Prince" fairy tale. Hazel's attitude toward the possibility of a fairy-tale romance is evident in her response to the frog prince. She has no use for him or his offers "bout a golden ball / an how i can be a princess" (lines 11-12). If Hazel is viewed by the reader as a princess, it is clear from her words and tone that she is far from a traditional one.

Machan's word choice and humorous tone also reveal much about Hazel's personality and circumstances. Through the use of slang, alternate spellings, and the omission of punctuation, we learn a great deal about the character:

well i screams
ya little green pervert
an i hitsm with my mop
an has ta flush
the toilet down three times
me
a princess (19-25)

Listening to her speak, the reader understands that Hazel, a cleaner at Howard Johnson's, does not have an extensive education. She speaks in the colloquial, running words into one another and using phrases like "ya little green pervert" (20) and "i screams" (19). The lack of complete sentences,

Georges 2

capital letters, and punctuation adds to her informal tone. Hazel's speech defines her social status, brings out details of her personality, and gives the reader her view of herself. She is accustomed to the thankless daily grind of work and will not allow herself even a moment's fantasy of becoming a princess. It is a notion that she has to flush away—literally, has "ta flush . . . down three times." She tells LaVerne that the very idea of such fantasy is absurd to her, as she states in the final lines: "me / a princess" (24-25).

Georges 3

Works Cited

- Machan, Katharyn Howd. "Hazel Tells LaVerne." *Poetry: An Introduction*. Ed. Michael Meyer. 6th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010. 75. Print.
- Meyer, Michael, ed. *Poetry: An Introduction*. 6th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010. 72. Print.

MARTÍN ESPADA (b. 1957)

Latin Night at the Pawnshop

1987

Chelsea, Massachusetts
Christmas, 1987

The apparition of a salsa band
gleaming in the Liberty Loan
pawnshop window:

Golden trumpet,
silver trombone,
congas, maracas, tambourine,

all with price tags dangling
like the city morgue ticket
on a dead man's toe.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** What is "Latin" about this night at the pawnshop?
2. What kind of tone is created by the poet's word choice and by the poem's rhythm?
3. Does it matter that this apparition occurs on Christmas night? Why or why not?
4. What do you think is the central point of this poem?

How do the speaker's attitude and tone change during the course of this next poem?

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR (1872–1906)

To a Captious Critic

1903

Dear critic, who my lightness so deplores,
Would I might study to be prince of bores,
Right wisely would I rule that dull estate—
But, sir, I may not; till you abdicate.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** How do Dunbar's vocabulary and syntax signal the level of diction used in the poem?
2. Describe the speaker's tone. How does it characterize the speaker as well as the critic?
3. **CREATIVE RESPONSE.** Using "To a Captious Critic" as a model, try writing a four-line witty reply to someone in your own life—perhaps a roommate, coach, teacher, waiter, dentist, or anyone else who provokes a strong response in you.

DICTION AND TONE IN FOUR LOVE POEMS

The first three of these love poems share the same basic situation and theme: a male speaker addresses a female (in the first poem it is a type of female) urging that love should not be delayed because time is short. This theme is as familiar in poetry as it is in life. In Latin this tradition is known as *carpe diem*, "seize the day." Notice how the poets' diction helps create a distinctive tone in each poem, even though the subject matter and central ideas are similar (although not identical) in all three.

ROBERT HERRICK (1591–1634)

To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time

1648

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,
The higher he's a-getting,
The sooner will his race be run,
And nearer he's to setting.

That age is best which is the first,
When youth and blood are warmer;
But being spent, the worse, and worst
Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,
And while ye may, go marry;
For having lost but once your prime,
You may for ever tarry.



Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Would there be any change in meaning if the title of this poem were "To Young Women, to Make Much of Time"? Do you think the poem can apply to young men, too?
2. What do the virgins have in common with the flowers (lines 1–4) and the course of the day (5–8)?
3. How does the speaker develop his argument? What will happen to the virgins if they don't "marry"? Paraphrase the poem.
4. What is the tone of the speaker's advice?

The next poem was also written in the seventeenth century, but it includes some words that have changed in usage and meaning over the past three hundred years. The title of Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" requires some explanation. "Mistress" does not refer to a married man's illicit lover but to a woman who is loved and courted—a sweetheart. Marvell uses "coy" to describe a woman who is reserved and shy rather than coquettish or flirtatious. Often such shifts in meanings over time are explained in the notes that accompany reprintings of poems. You should keep in mind, however, that it is helpful to have a reasonably thick dictionary available when you are reading poetry. The most thorough is the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, which provides histories of words. The *OED* is a multivolume leviathan, but there are other useful unabridged dictionaries and desk dictionaries.

Explore contexts for Andrew Marvell and approaches to this poem on *LiterActive* and at bedfordstmartins.com/rewritinglit.

Knowing its original meaning can also enrich your understanding of why a contemporary poet chooses a particular word. Elizabeth Bishop begins "The Fish" (p. 31) this way: "I caught a tremendous fish." We know immediately in this context that "tremendous" means very large. In addition, given that the speaker clearly admires the fish in the lines that follow, we might even understand "tremendous" in the colloquial sense of wonderful and extraordinary. But a dictionary gives us some further relevant insights. Because, by the end of the poem, we see the speaker thoroughly moved as a result of the encounter with the fish ("everything / was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!"), the dictionary's additional information about the history of *tremendous* shows why it is the perfect adjective to introduce the fish. The word comes from the Latin *tremere* (to tremble) and therefore once meant "such as to make one tremble." That is precisely how the speaker is at the end of the poem: deeply affected and trembling. Knowing the origin of *tremendous* gives us the full heft of the poet's word choice.

Although some of the language in "To His Coy Mistress" requires annotations for the modern reader, this poem continues to serve as a powerful reminder that time is a formidable foe, even for lovers.

ANDREW MARVELL (1621-1678)

To His Coy Mistress

1681



Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Had we but world enough, and time,
 This coyness, lady, were no crime.
 We would sit down, and think which way
 To walk, and pass our long love's day.
 Thou by the Indian Ganges'° side
 Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
 Of Humber° would complain.° I would
 Love you ten years before the Flood,
 And you should, if you please, refuse
 Till the conversion of the Jews.
 My vegetable love should grow°
 Vaster than empires, and more slow;
 An hundred years should go to praise
 Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze,
 Two hundred to adore each breast,
 But thirty thousand to the rest:

5
write love songs
 10
 15

5 *Ganges*: A river in India sacred to the Hindus. 7 *Humber*: A river that flows through Marvell's native town, Hull. 11 *My vegetable love . . . grow*: A slow, unconscious growth.

An age at least to every part,
 And the last age should show your heart.
 For, lady, you deserve this state,
 Nor would I love at lower rate.

20

But at my back I always hear
 Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
 And yonder all before us lie
 Deserts of vast eternity.
 Thy beauty shall no more be found,
 Nor in thy marble vault shall sound
 My echoing song; then worms shall try
 That long preserved virginity,
 And your quaint honor turn to dust,
 And into ashes all my lust.

25

30

The grave's a fine and private place,
 But none, I think, do there embrace.
 Now, therefore, while the youthful hue
 Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
 And while thy willing soul transpires°
 At every pore with instant fires,
 Now let us sport us while we may,
 And now, like amorous birds of prey,
 Rather at once our time devour
 Than languish in his slow-chapped° power.
 Let us roll all our strength and all
 Our sweetness up into one ball,
 And tear our pleasures with rough strife
 Thorough° the iron gates of life.
 Thus, though we cannot make our sun
 Stand still, yet we will make him run.

breathes forth 35
slow-jawed 40
through 45

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Do you think this *carpe diem* poem is hopelessly dated, or does it speak to our contemporary concerns?
2. This poem is divided into a three-part argument. Briefly summarize each section: if (lines 1-20), but (21-32), therefore (33-46).
3. What is the speaker's tone in lines 1-20? How much time would he spend adoring his mistress? Is he sincere? How does he expect his mistress to respond to these lines?
4. How does the speaker's tone change beginning with line 21? What is his view of time in lines 21-32? What does this description do to the lush and leisurely sense of time in lines 1-20? How do you think his mistress would react to lines 21-32?
5. In the final lines of Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" (p. 79), the speaker urges the virgins to "go marry." What does Marvell's speaker urge in lines 33-46? How is the pace of these lines (notice the verbs) different from that of the first twenty lines of the poem?

6. This poem is sometimes read as a vigorous but simple celebration of flesh. Is there more to the theme than that?

The third in this series of *carpe diem* poems is a twenty-first-century work. The language of Ann Lauinger's "Marvell Noir" is more immediately accessible than that of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"; an ordinary dictionary will quickly identify any words unfamiliar to a reader. But the title might require a dictionary of biography for the reference to Marvell, as well as a dictionary of allusions to provide a succinct description that explains the reference to film noir. An **allusion** is a brief cultural reference to a person, a place, a thing, an event, or an idea in history or literature. Allusive words, like connotative words, are both suggestive and economical; poets use allusions to conjure up biblical authority, scenes from Shakespeare's plays, historic figures, wars, great love stories, and anything else that might serve to deepen and enrich their own work. The title of "Marvell Noir" makes two allusions that an ordinary dictionary may not explain, because it alludes to Marvell's most famous poem, "To His Coy Mistress," and to dark crime films (*noir* is "black" in French) of the 1940s that were often filmed in black and white featuring tough-talking, cynical heroes such as Humphrey Bogart and hardened, cold women like Joan Crawford. Lauinger assumes that her reader will understand the allusions.

Allusions imply reading and cultural experiences shared by the poet and reader. Literate audiences once had more in common than they do today because more people had similar economic, social, and educational backgrounds. But a judicious use of specialized dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference tools can help you decipher allusions that grow out of this body of experience. As you read more, you'll be able to make connections based on your own experiences with literature. In a sense, allusions make available what other human beings have deemed worth remembering, and that is certainly an economical way of supplementing and enhancing your own experience.

Lauinger's version of the *carpe diem* theme follows. What strikes you as particularly modern about it?

ANN LAUINGER

Marvell Noir

2005

Sweetheart, if we had the time,
A week in bed would be no crime.
I'd light your Camels, pour your Jack;
You'd do shiatsu on my back.
When you got up to scramble eggs,
I'd write a sonnet to your legs,

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And you could watch my stubble grow.
Yes, gorgeous, we'd take it slow.
I'd hear the whole sad tale again:
A roadhouse band; you can't trust men;
He set you up; you had to eat,
And bitter with the bittersweet
Was what they dished you; Ginger lied;
You weren't there when Sanchez died;
You didn't know the pearls were fake . . .
Aw, can it, sport! Make no mistake,
You're in it, doll, up to your eyeballs!
Tears? Please! You'll dilute our highballs,
And make that angel face a mess
For the nice Lieutenant. I confess
I'm nuts for you — but take the rap?
You must think I'm some other sap!
And, precious, I kind of wish I was.
Well, when they spring you, give a buzz;
Guess I'll get back to Archie's wife,
And you'll get twenty-five to life.
You'll have time then, more than enough,
To reminisce about the stuff
That dreams are made of, and the men
You suckered. Sadly, in the pen
Your kind of talent goes to waste.
But Irish bars are more my taste
Than iron ones: stripes ain't my style.
You're going down; I promise I'll
Come visit every other year.
Now kiss me, sweet — the squad car's here.

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CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** How does Lauinger's poem evoke Marvell's *carpe diem* poem (p. 80) and the tough-guy tone of a "noir" narrative, a crime story or thriller that is especially dark?
2. Discuss the ways in which time is a central presence in the poem.
3. Explain the allusion to dreams in lines 28–29.

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. Compare the speaker's voice in this poem with that of the speaker in "To His Coy Mistress" (p. 80). What significant similarities and differences do you find?

This fourth love poem is a twentieth-century work in which the speaker's voice is a woman's. How does it sound different from the way the men speak in the previous three poems?

Last Night

1996

The next day, I am almost afraid.
 Love? It was more like dragonflies
 in the sun, 100 degrees at noon,
 the ends of their abdomens stuck together, I
 close my eyes when I remember. I hardly
 knew myself, like something twisting and
 twisting out of a chrysalis,
 enormous, without language, all
 head, all shut eyes, and the humming
 like madness, the way they writhe away,
 and do not leave, back, back,
 away, back. Did I know you? No kiss,
 no tenderness — more like killing, death-grip
 holding to life, genitals
 like violent hands clasped tight
 barely moving, more like being closed
 in a great jaw and eaten, and the screaming
 I groan to remember it, and when we started
 to die, then I refuse to remember,
 the way a drunkard forgets. After,
 you held my hands extremely hard as my
 body moved in shudders like the ferry when its
 axle is loosed past engagement, you kept me
 sealed exactly against you, our hairlines
 wet as the arc of a gateway after
 a cloudburst, you secured me in your arms till I slept —
 that was love, and we woke in the morning
 clasped, fragrant, buoyant, that was
 the morning after love.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** How is your response to this poem affected by the fact that the speaker is female? Explain why this is or isn't a *carpe diem* poem.
2. Comment on the descriptive passages of "Last Night." Which images seem especially vivid to you? How do they contribute to the poem's meaning?
3. Explain how the poem's tone changes from beginning to end.

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SELECTIONS

1. How does the speaker's description of intimacy compare with Herrick's and Marvell's?
2. Compare the speaker's voice in Olds's poem with the voice you imagine for the coy mistress in Marvell's poem.

5. **CRITICAL THINKING:** Read the section "Critical Strategies for Reading" in Chapter 26, "Critical Strategies for Reading," and compare the themes in Olds's poem and Philip Larkin's "A Study of Reading Habits" (p. 33) the way you think a feminist critic might analyze them.

POEMS FOR FURTHER STUDY

BARBARA HAMBY (B. 1929)

Ode to American English

2004

I was sitting in Paris one day missing English, American, really,
 with its pill-popping Hungarian goulash of everything
 from Anglo-Saxon to Zulu, because British English
 is not the same, if the paperback dictionary I bought
 at Brentano's on the Avenue de l'Opéra is any indication,
 too cultured by half. Oh, the English know their delphiniums,
 but what about doowop, donuts, Dick Tracy, Tricky Dick?
 With their elegant Oxfordian accents, how could they
 understand my yearning for the hotrod, hotdog, hot flash
 vocabulary of the U.S. of A., the fragmented fandango
 of Dagwood's everyday flattening of Mr. Beasley on the sidewalk,
 fetuses floating on billboards, drive-by monster
 hip-hop stereotypes shaking the windows of my dining room
 like a 7.5 earthquake, Ebonics, Spanglish, "you know"
 used as a comma and period, the inability of 90% of the population
 to get the past perfect. *I have went, I have saw,*
I have taken Jesus into my heart, the battle cry of the Bible Belt,
 but no one uses the King James anymore, only plain-speak
 versions, in which Jesus, raising Lazarus from the dead, says,
 "Dude, wake up," and the L-man bolts up like a B-movie
 mummy. "Whoa, I was toasted." Yes, ma'am, I miss the mongrel
 plenitude of American English, its fall-guy, rat-terrier,
 dog-pound neologisms, the bomb of it all, the rushing River Jordan
 backwoods mutability of it, the low-rider, boom-box cruise of it,
 from New Joisey to Ha-wah-ya with its sly dog, malasada-scarfing
 beach blanket lingo to the ubiquitous Valley Girl's
like-like stuttering, shopaholic rant. I miss its quotidian beauty,
 its querulous back-biting righteous indignation, its preening
 rotgut flag-waving cowardice. *Suffering Succotash*, sputters
 Sylvester the Cat; *sine die*,^o say the pork-bellied legislators
 of the swamps and plains. I miss all those guys, their Tweety-bird
 resilience, their Doris Day optimism, the candid unguent
 of utter unhappiness on every channel, the midnight televangelist
 euphoric stew, the junk mail-voice mail vernacular.

30 *sine die*: Latin for "without a day"; indefinitely.

On every *boulevard* and *rue* I miss the Tarzan cry of Johnny
 Weismueller, Johnny Cash, Johnny B. Goode,
 and all the smart-talking, gum-snapping hard-girl dialogue,
 finger-popping x-rated street talk, sports babble,
 Cheetos, Cheerios, chili-dog diatribes. Yeah, I miss 'em all,
 sitting here on my sidewalk throne sipping champagne,
 verses lined up like hearses, metaphors juking, nouns zipping
 in my head like Corvettes on dexedrine, French verbs
 slitting my throat, yearning for James Dean to jump my curb.

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CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Consult the Glossary of Literary Terms (p. 745) for the definition of *ode*. How does this poem constitute an ode to American English?
2. Explain how the diction of this poem is vital to its meaning. What is it about American English that causes the speaker to admire it so much?
3. What kind of characterization of American life is presented by the varieties of English cataloged in the poem?

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SELECTIONS

1. Discuss the strategic use of American phrasing in this poem and in Florence Cassen Mayers's "All-American Sestina" (p. 256), and compare the tone of each poem.
2. Write an essay comparing the themes of Hamby's poem and Lydia Huntley Sigourney's "Indian Names" (p. 645). Compare how the diction of each poem controls its tone.

THOMAS HARDY (1840–1928)

The Convergence of the Twain

1912

*Lines on the Loss of the "Titanic"*⁵

I

In a solitude of the sea
 Deep from human vanity,
 And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she.

II

Steel chambers, late the pyres
 Of her salamandrine fires,⁵
 Cold currents thrid,⁵ and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

5
 thread

⁵*"Titanic"*: A luxurious ocean liner, reputed to be unsinkable, which sank after hitting an iceberg on its maiden voyage in 1912. Only a third of the 2,200 passengers survived.
⁵*salamandrine fires*: Salamanders were, according to legend, able to survive fire; hence the ship's fires burned even though under water.

III

Over the mirrors meant
 To glass the opulent
 The sea-worm crawls — grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

IV

Jewels in joy designed
 To ravish the sensuous mind
 Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind.

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V

Dim moon-eyed fishes near
 Gaze at the gilded gear
 And query: "What does this vaingloriousness down here?"

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VI

Well: while was fashioning
 This creature of cleaving wing,
 The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything

VII

Prepared a sinister mate
 For her — so gaily great —
 A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate.

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VIII

And as the smart ship grew
 In stature, grace, and hue,
 In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

IX

Alien they seemed to be:
 No mortal eye could see
 The intimate welding of their later history,

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X

Or sign that they were bent
 By paths coincident
 On being anon twin halves of one august event,

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XI

Till the Spinner of the Years
Said "Now!" And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Describe a contemporary disaster comparable to the sinking of the *Titanic*. How was your response to it similar to or different from the speaker's response to the fate of the *Titanic*?
2. How do the words used to describe the ship in this poem reveal the speaker's attitude toward the *Titanic*?
3. The diction of the poem suggests that the *Titanic* and the iceberg participate in something like an arranged marriage. What specific words imply this?
4. Who or what causes the disaster? Does the speaker assign responsibility?

DAVID R. SLAVITT (B. 1935)

Titanic 1983

Who does not love the *Titanic*?
If they sold passage tomorrow for that same crossing,
who would not buy?

To go down . . . We all go down, mostly
alone. But with crowds of people, friends, servants, 5
well fed, with music, with lights! Ah!

And the world, shocked, mourns, as it ought to do
and almost never does. There will be the books and movies
to remind our grandchildren who we were
and how we died, and give them a good cry. 10

Not so bad, after all. The cold
water is anesthetic and very quick.
The cries on all sides must be a comfort.

We all go: only a few, first-class.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** What, according to the speaker in this poem, is so compelling about the *Titanic*? Do you agree?
2. Discuss the speaker's tone. Is "Titanic" merely a sarcastic poem?
3. What is the effect of the poem's final line? What emotions does it elicit?

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. How does "Titanic" differ in its attitude toward opulence from "The Convergence of the Twain" (p. 86)?
2. Which poem, "Titanic" or "The Convergence of the Twain," is more emotionally satisfying to you? Explain why.
3. Compare the speakers' tones in "Titanic" and "The Convergence of the Twain."
4. **CRITICAL STRATEGIES.** Read the section on Marxist criticism (pp. 673-74) in Chapter 26, "Critical Strategies for Reading," and analyze the attitudes toward opulence that are manifested in the two poems.

PETER MEINKE (B. 1932)

(Untitled) 1991

this is a poem to my son Peter
whom I have hurt a thousand times
whose large and vulnerable eyes
have glazed in pain at my ragings
thin wrists and fingers hung 5
boneless in despair, pale freckled back
bent in defeat, pillow soaked
by my failure to understand.
I have scarred through weakness
and impatience your frail confidence forever 10
because when I needed to strike
you were there to be hurt and because
I thought you knew
you were beautiful and fair
your bright eyes and hair 15
but now I see that no one knows that
about himself, but must be told
and retold until it takes hold
because I think anything can be killed
after a while, especially beauty 20
so I write this for life, for love, for
you, my oldest son Peter, age 10,
going on 11.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** How would you characterize the speaker? The son is described physically but not the father. What sort of physical description do you think would reveal the father?
2. Why do you think the poem ends with "going on 11"? Would it have made any difference to the tone or meaning if the poem ended at line 22?
3. **CREATIVE RESPONSE.** Provide at least two titles for this untitled work and explain your rationale for each.

JOANNE DIAZ (b. 1972)

On My Father's Loss of Hearing 2006

*I'd like to see more poems treat the deaf
as being abled differently, not lost
or missing something, weakened, deficient.
—from a listserv for the deaf*

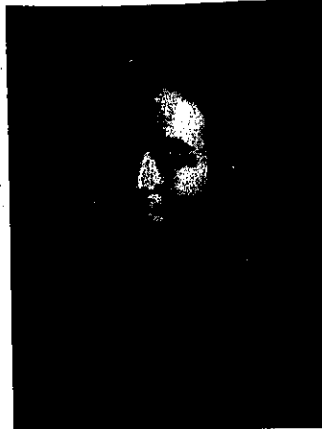
Abled differently — so vague compared
with deaf, obtuse but true to history,
from deave: to deafen, stun, amaze with noise.
Perhaps that's what we've done — amazed
him with

our sorrows and complaints, the stupid jabs,
the loneliness of boredom in the house,

our wants so foreign to his own. What else
is there but loss? He's lost the humor of
sarcastic jokes, the snarky dialogue
of British films eludes him, phone calls
cast him adrift in that cochlear maze
that thrums and bristles even now, when
it doesn't have to: an unnecessary kind
of elegance, the vestige of a sense

no longer obligated to transmit
the crack of thawing ice that fills the yard's
wide dip in winter, or the scrape of his
dull rake in spring, its prongs' vibration thrilled
by grass and peat moss. Imagine his desires
released like saffron pistils in the wind;
mark their trace against the cords of wood

he spent the summer splitting. See his quiet
flicker like a film, a Super-8
projected on the wall, and all of us
there, laughing on the porch without a sound.
No noisome cruelty, no baffled rage,
no aging children sullen in their lack.
Love hurts much less in this serenity.



Courtesy of Jason Reblando.

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CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Why does the speaker prefer the word *deaf* to the phrase “abled differently” as a means of describing her father? Which description do you prefer? Why?
2. Explain how sound and silence move through the poem from beginning to end.
3. Choose a single word from each stanza that strikes you as particularly effective, and explain why you think Diaz chose it over other possibilities.

4. What do you make of the poem's final line? How does it relate to the tone of the rest of the poem?

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. Discuss the relationship between love and pain in “On My Father's Loss of Hearing” and in the Meinke poem that precedes it.

SHARON OLDS (b. 1942)

Sex without Love

1984

How do they do it, the ones who make love
without love? Beautiful as dancers,
gliding over each other like ice skaters
over the ice, fingers hooked
inside each other's bodies, faces
red as steak, wine, wet as the
children at birth whose mothers are going to
give them away. How do they come to the
come to the come to the God come to the
still waters, and not love
the one who came there with them, light
rising slowly as steam off their joined
skin? These are the true religious,
the purists, the pros, the ones who will not
accept a false Messiah, love the
priest instead of the God. They do not
mistake the lover for their own pleasure,
they are like great runners: they know they are alone
with the road surface, the cold, the wind,
the fit of their shoes, their over-all cardio-
vascular health — just factors, like the partner
in the bed, and not the truth, which is the
single body alone in the universe
against its own best time.

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CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** What is the nature of the question asked by the speaker in the poem's first two lines? What is being asked here?
2. What is the effect of describing the lovers as athletes? How do these descriptions and phrases reveal the speaker's tone toward the lovers?
3. To what extent does the title suggest the central meaning of this poem? Try to compose some alternative titles that are equally descriptive.

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. How does the treatment of sex and love in this poem compare with that in Olds's “Last Night” (p. 84)?

MARY OLIVER (B. 1935)

Oxygen

2005

Everything needs it: bone, muscles, and even,
while it calls the earth its home, the soul.
So the merciful, noisy machine

stands in our house working away in its
lung-like voice. I hear it as I kneel
before the fire, stirring with a

stick of iron, letting the logs
lie more loosely. You, in the upstairs room,
are in your usual position, leaning on your

right shoulder which aches
all day. You are breathing
patiently; it is a

beautiful sound. It is
your life, which is so close
to my own that I would not know

where to drop the knife of
separation. And what does this have to do
with love, except

everything? Now the fire rises
and offers a dozen, singing, deep-red
roses of flame. Then it settles

to quietude, or maybe gratitude, as it feeds
as we all do, as we must, upon the invisible gift:
our purest, sweet necessity: the air.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Though this is a poem about someone who is seriously ill, its tone isn't sad. Why not?
2. What is the connection between the loved one's breathing and the fire? How does the speaker's choice of words to describe each connect them?
3. In what sense might this celebration of oxygen be considered a love poem?

CATHY SONG (B. 1955)

The Youngest Daughter

1983

The sky has been dark
for many years.
My skin has become as damp
and pale as rice paper

and feels the way
mother's used to before the drying sun
parched it out there in the fields.

Lately, when I touch myself,
my hands react as if
I had just touched something
hot enough to burn.
My skin, aspirin-colored,
tingles with migraine. Mother
has been massaging the left side of my face
especially in the evenings
when it flares up.

This morning
her breathing was graveled,
her voice gruff with affection
when I took her into the bath.
She was in good humor,
making jokes about her great breasts,
floating in the milky water
like two walruses,
flaccid and whiskered around the nipples.
I scrubbed them with a sour taste
in my mouth, thinking:
six children and an old man
have sucked from these brown nipples.

I was almost tender
when I came to the blue bruises
that freckle her body,
places where she has been injecting insulin
for thirty years, ever since
I can remember. I soaped her slowly,
she sighed deeply, her eyes closed.

In the afternoons
when she has rested,
she prepares our ritual of tea and rice,
garnished with a shred of gingered fish,
a slice of pickled turnip
a token for my white body.
We eat in the familiar silence.
She knows I am not to be trusted,
even now planning my escape.
As I toast to her health
with the tea she has poured,
a thousand cranes curtain the window,
fly up in a sudden breeze.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Though the speaker is the youngest daughter in the family, how old do you think she is based on the description of her in the poem? What, specifically, makes you think so?
2. How would you characterize the relationship between mother and daughter? How are lines 44–45 (“She knows I am not to be trusted, / even now planning my escape”) particularly revealing of the nature of the relationship?
3. Interpret the final four lines of the poem. Why do you think it ends with this image?

JOHN KEATS (1795–1821)

Ode on a Grecian Urn

1819

I

 Explore contexts for John Keats on LiterActive.

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
 Sylvan^o historian, who canst thus express
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
 What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?^o
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loath?
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

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II

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
 Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
 Though winning near the goal — yet, do not grieve;
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

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III

Oh, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;

And, happy melodist, unwearied,
 For ever piping songs for ever new;
 More happy love! more happy, happy love!
 For ever warm and still to be enjoyed,
 For ever panting, and for ever young;
 All breathing human passion far above,
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,
 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

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IV

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
 Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
 What little town by river or sea shore,
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
 And, little town, thy streets for evermore
 Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

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V

O Attic^o shape! Fair attitude! with brede^o
 Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
 With forest branches and the trodden weed;
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
 When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
 Beauty is truth, truth beauty — that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

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41 *Attic*: Possessing classic Athenian simplicity; *brede*: Design.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** What does the speaker's diction reveal about his attitude toward the urn in this ode? Does his view develop or change?
2. How is the happiness in stanza 3 related to the assertion in lines 11–12 that “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter”?
3. What is the difference between the world depicted on the urn and the speaker's world?
4. What do lines 49 and 50 suggest about the relation of art to life? Why is the urn described as a “Cold Pastoral” (line 45)?
5. Which world does the speaker seem to prefer, the urn's or his own?
6. Describe the overall tone of the poem.

Sylvan: Rustic. The urn is decorated with a forest scene. *Tempe, Arcady*: Beautiful rural valleys in Greece.

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SELECTIONS

1. Write an essay comparing the view of time in this ode with that in Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" (p. 80). Pay particular attention to the connotative language in each poem.
2. Compare the tone and attitude toward life in this ode with those in John Keats's "To Autumn" (p. 127).

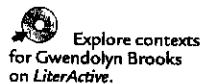
GWENDOLYN BROOKS (1917–2000)

We Real Cool

1960

The Pool Players.
Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** How does the speech of the pool players in this poem help to characterize them? What is the effect of the pronouns coming at the ends of the lines? How would the poem sound if the pronouns came at the beginnings of lines?
2. What is the author's attitude toward the players? Is there a change in tone in the last line?
3. How is the pool hall's name related to the rest of the poem and its theme?

JOAN MURRAY (B. 1945)

We Old Dudes

2006

We old dudes. We
White shoes. We
Golf ball. We
Eat mall. We
Soak teeth. We
Palm Beach; We
Vote red. We
Soon dead.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Consider the poem's humor. To what extent does it make a serious point?
2. What does the reference to Palm Beach tell you about these "old dudes"?
3. **CREATIVE RESPONSE.** Write a poem similar in style that characterizes your life as a student.

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. Compare the themes of "We Old Dudes" and Brooks's "We Real Cool." How do the two poems speak to each other?

ALICE JONES (B. 1949)

The Larynx

1993

Under the epiglottic flap
the long-ringed tube sinks
its shaft down to the bronchial
fork, divides from two
to four then infinite branches,
each ending finally in a clump
of transparent sacs knit
with small vessels into a mesh
that sponge-like soaks up breath
and gives it off with a push
from the diaphragm's muscular wall,
forces wind out of the lungs'
wide tree, up through this organ's
single pipe, through the puzzle
box of gristle, where resonant
plates of cartilage fold
into shield, horns, bows,
bound by odd half-spirals
of muscles that modulate air
as it rises through this empty place
at our core, where lip-like
folds stretch across the vestibule,
small and tough, they flutter,
bend like birds' wings finding
just the right angle to stay
airborne; here the cords arch
in the hollow of this ancient instrument,
curve and vibrate to make a song.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** What is the effect of having this poem written as one long sentence? How does the length of the sentence contribute to the poem's meaning?
2. Make a list of words and phrases from the poem that strike you as scientific, and compare those with a list of words that seem poetic. How do they compete or complement each other in terms of how they affect your reading?
3. Comment on the final three lines. How would your interpretation of this poem change if it ended before the semicolon in line 26?

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. Compare the diction and the ending in "The Larynx" with those of "The Foot" (p. 226), another poem by Jones.

LOUIS SIMPSON (B. 1923)

In the Suburbs

1963

There's no way out.
You were born to waste your life.
You were born to this middleclass life
As others before you
Were born to walk in procession
To the temple, singing.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Is the title of this poem especially significant? What images does it conjure up for you?
2. What does the repetition in lines 2–3 suggest?
3. Discuss the possible connotative meanings of lines 5 and 6. Who are the "others before you"?

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. Write an essay on suburban life based on this poem and John Ciardi's "Suburban" (p. 525).

HERBERT LOMAS (B. 1924)

The Fly's Poem about Emily

2008

Beelzebub° sent me:
I ate their meat.
I was the fly on
the dead poet's feet.

The Fly's Poem about Emily: See Emily Dickinson's poem "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—" (p. 335). 1 *Beelzebub:* An ancient name for a devil or demon; also called "Lord of the Flies."

I've a good tube
for the scents of food.
I love life
and find death good.

5

My little head
is as black as my tube,
but when she died
I buzzed and survived.

10

Later I ate her.
My buzz is no bell,
but I'm remembered on earth
as well as in hell,

15

and I was eating her sweat
when God received her.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Explain why you think it is essential (or not) to read Dickinson's poem in order to appreciate this poem.
2. Characterize the fly by the tone of its language. What kinds of emotions does the language produce in you?
3. Consider whether there is any humor in the poem. Or is it all grim?

CONNECTION TO ANOTHER SELECTION

1. How does this poem, read alongside Emily Dickinson's "I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—" (p. 335), create a kind of dialogue about the nature of death?

A NOTE ON READING TRANSLATIONS

Sometimes translation can inadvertently be a comic business. Consider, for example, the discovery made by John Steinbeck's wife, Elaine, when in a Yokohama bookstore she asked for a copy of her husband's famous novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and learned that it had been translated into Japanese as *Angry Raisins*. Close but no cigar (perhaps translated as: Nearby, yet no smoke). As amusing as that *Angry Raisins* title is, it teaches an important lesson about the significance of a poet's or a translator's choices when crafting a poem: a powerful piece moves us through diction and tone, both built word by careful word. Translations are frequently regarded as merely vehicular, a way to arrive at the original work. It is, of course, the original work—its spirit, style, and meaning—that most readers expect to find in a translation. Even so, it is important to understand that a translation is *by nature* different from the original—and that despite that difference, a fine translation can be an important part of the journey and become part of the literary landscape itself.

Reading a translation of a poem is not the same as reading the original, but neither is watching two different performances of *Hamlet*. The translator provides a reading of the poem in much the same way that a director shapes the play. Each interprets the text from a unique perspective.

Basically, there are two distinct approaches to translation: literal translations and adaptations. A literal translation sets out to create a word-for-word equivalent that is absolutely faithful to the original. As simple and direct as this method may sound, literal translations are nearly impossible over extended passages because of the structural differences between languages. Moreover, the meaning of a single word in one language may not exist in another language, or it may require a phrase, clause, or entire sentence to capture its implications. Adaptations of works offer broader, more open-ended approaches to translation. Unlike a literal translation, an adaptation moves beyond denotative meanings in an attempt to capture the spirit of a work so that its idioms, dialects, slang, and other conventions are re-created in the language of the translation.

The question we ask of an adaptation should not be "Is this exactly how the original reads?" Instead, we ask, "Is this an insightful, graceful rendering worth reading?" To translate poetry it is not enough to know the language of the original; it is also necessary that the translator be a poet. A translated poem is more than a collation of decisions based on dictionaries and grammars; it must also be poetry. However undefinable poetry may be, it is unmistakable in its intense use of language. Poems are not merely translated; they are savored.

Three Translations of a Poem by Sappho

Sappho, born about 630 B.C. and a native of the Greek island of Lesbos, is the author of a hymn to Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty in Greek myth. The three translations that follow suggest how widely translations can differ from one another. The first, by Henry T. Wharton, is intended to be a literal prose translation of the original Greek.

SAPPHO (CA. 630 B.C.—CA. 570 B.C.)

Immortal Aphrodite of the broidered throne

date unknown

TRANSLATED BY HENRY T. WHARTON (1885)

Immortal Aphrodite of the broidered throne,
daughter of Zeus, weaver of wiles, I pray thee
break not my spirit with anguish and distress, O
Queen. But come hither, if ever before thou



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didst hear my voice afar, and listen, and leaving thy father's golden house camest with chariot yoked, and fair fleet sparrows drew thee, flapping fast their wings around the dark earth, from heaven through mid sky. Quickly arrived they; and thou, blessed one, smiling with immortal countenance, didst ask What now is befallen me, and Why now I call, and What I in my mad heart most desire to see. "What Beauty now wouldst thou draw to love thee? Who wrongs thee, Sappho? For even if she flies she shall soon follow, and if she rejects gifts shall yet give, and if she loves not shall soon love, however loth." Come, I pray thee, now too, and release me from cruel cares; and all that my heart desires to accomplish, accomplish thou, and be thyself my ally.

Beautiful-throned, immortal Aphrodite

TRANSLATED BY THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON (1871)

Beautiful-throned, immortal Aphrodite,
Daughter of Zeus, beguiler, I implore thee,
Weigh me not down with weariness and anguish
O Thou most holy!

Come to me now, if ever thou in kindness
Harkenedst my words, — and often hast thou harkened —
Heeding, and coming from the mansions golden
Of thy great Father,

Yoking thy chariot, borne by the most lovely
Consecrated birds, with dusky-tinted pinions,
Waving swift wings from utmost heights of heaven
Through the mid-ether;

Swiftly they vanished, leaving thee, O goddess,
Smiling, with face immortal in its beauty,
Asking why I grieved, and why in utter longing
I had dared call thee;

Asking what I sought, thus hopeless in desiring,
Wildered in brain, and spreading nets of passion —
Alas, for whom? and saidst thou, "Who has harmed thee?"
"O my poor Sappho!

"Though now he flies, ere long he shall pursue thee;
"Fearing thy gifts, he too in turn shall bring them;
"Loveless to-day, to-morrow he shall woo thee,
"Though thou shouldst spurn him."

Thus seek me now, O holy Aphrodite!
Save me from anguish; give me all I ask for,
Gifts at thy hand; and thine shall be the glory,
Sacred protector!

Prayer to my lady of Paphos

TRANSLATED BY MARY BARNARD (1958)

Dapple-throned Aphrodite,
 eternal daughter of God,
 snare-knitter! Don't, I beg you,
 cow my heart with grief! Come,
 as once when you heard my far-
 off cry and, listening, stepped
 from your father's house to your
 gold car, to yoke the pair whose
 beautiful thick-feathered wings
 oaring down mid-air from heaven
 carried you to light swiftly
 on dark earth; then, blissful one,
 smiling your immortal smile
 you asked, What ailed me now that
 made me call you again? What
 was it that my distracted
 heart most wanted? "Whom has
 Persuasion to bring round now
 "to your love? Who, Sappho, is
 unfair to you? For, let her
 run, she will soon run after;
 "if she won't accept gifts, she
 will one day give them; and if
 she won't love you — she soon will
 "love, although unwillingly . . ."
 If ever — come now! Relieve
 this intolerable pain!
 What my heart most hopes will
 happen, make happen; you your-
 self join forces on my side!

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CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Try rewriting Wharton's prose version in contemporary language. How does your prose version differ in tone from Wharton's?
2. Explain which translation seems closest to Wharton's prose version.
3. Discuss the images and metaphors in Higginson's and Barnard's versions. Which version is more appealing to you? Explain why.
4. Explain which version seems to you to be the most contemporary in its use of language.

Two Translations of a Poem by Pablo Neruda

The following poem by the Chilean Nobel Prize-winner Pablo Neruda is in its original Spanish. By using a substantial Spanish/English dictionary, you might be able to translate it into English even if you are unfamiliar with Spanish. Following the poem are two translations that offer some subtle and intriguing differences in their approaches to the poem.



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PABLO NERUDA (1904-1973)

Verbo

1968

Voy a arrugar esta palabra,
 voy a torcerla,
 sí,
 es demasiado lisa,
 es como si un gran perro o un gran río
 le hubiera repasado lengua o agua
 durante muchos años.
 Quiero que en la palabra
 se vea la aspereza,
 la sal ferruginosa,
 la fuerza desdentada
 de la tierra,
 la sangre
 de los que hablaron y de los que no hablaron.
 Quiero ver la sed
 adentro de las sílabas:
 quiero tocar el fuego
 en el sonido:
 quiero sentir la oscuridad
 del grito. Quiero
 palabras ásperas
 como piedras vírgenes.

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Word

TRANSLATED BY BEN BELITT (1974)

I'm going to crumple this word,
to twist it,
yes,
it's too slick
like a big dog or a river
had been lapping it down with its tongue, or water
had worn it away with the years.

I want gravel
to show in the word,
the ferruginous salt,
the gap-toothed power
of the soil.
There must be a blood-letting
for talker and non-talker alike.

I want to see thirst
in the syllables,
touch fire
in the sound;
feel through the dark
for the scream. Let
my words be acrid
as virginal stone.

Word

TRANSLATED BY KRISTIN LINKLATER (1992)

I'm going to crumple this word,
I'm going to twist it,
yes,
it's too smooth,
it's as though a big dog or a big river
had been licking it over and over with tongue or water
for many years.


I want the word
to reveal the roughness,
the ferruginous salt,
the toothless strength
of the earth,
the blood
of those who talked and of those who did not talk.

I want to see the thirst
inside the syllables,

I want to touch the fire
in the sound:
I want to feel the darkness
of the scream. I want
rough words,
like virgin rocks.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Discuss whether or not the two translations convey the same essential themes.
2. What are the major differences that you see in diction, syntax, and tone between the translations?
3. Which translation do you think is the most effective? Explain why you prefer one translation over another.

 Research the poets in this chapter on LitLinks at bedfordstmartins.com/rewritinglit.