

# MEANING OVER DEVICE

## Commonly Used Poetic Devices

- Form or Structure
  - Think about the shape of a poem and how that structure enhances the meaning of the poem.
  - A sonnet may indicate the tension between two things or an argument.
  - A free verse with little punctuation may warrant freely flowing ideas that run together, such as Sharon Olds' "The Race."
- Punctuation
  - Look for periods and mark where ideas begin and end. You can sometimes section a poem by using punctuation.
  - Fewer punctuation marks often allow the reader to move more quickly, intensifying speed and intensity.
  - Adding more punctuation, such as a midline caesura, forces a stop to consider what has been just stated.
- Figurative Language
  - Anything other than a literal translation is considered figurative and includes such things as metaphor, simile, imagery, personification, hyperbole, or oxymoron.
  - Figurative language intensifies the imagination and thus the meaning. It may romanticize an idea, add humor, or heighten the senses. Calling fall "a dripping faucet of color" is certainly a unique way of thinking about trees losing their leaves.
- Tone
  - This is the feeling evoked by word choice.
  - Tonal shift is where the feeling changes according to the shift in the poem.
  - Moving through a poem will often provide tonal shifts, indicating contrasting ideas and thus tension. Look for deeper meaning as you find the tonal shifts.
  - Begin a list of "tone words" to draw from and the subtle differences between them.
- Point of View
  - This device is often underrated but is important.
  - The speaker indicates the point of view, whether it's first, second, or third person.
  - You will often read poetry in the first person, but love sonnets written to a beloved are often in the 2nd person. These two make the poem more personal.

- Third person could be reliable or unreliable, depending on the credibility of the speaker. Poems written in third person creates distance between the speaker and the subject. These poems are sometimes less emotional.
- Look for whether the point of view changes and what that does to the purpose.
- Contrast
  - Finding opposing ideas, words, or structures - remember chiasmus? - will often bring you to the tension in the poem. Looking for contrast is one of the first things I do to find meaning in a poem.
  - You could have contrasting tone, contrasting diction, contrasting sensory images, which all point to highlighting an idea.
  - You may find juxtaposition in a poem, placing two things side by side to compare them. Remember, juxtaposition is really about highlighting one of these ideas.
- Details
  - Listing minute details in a poem often helps the poet create lists in your head. If it seems too much, it may be meant to be an overload, such as when a blind person lists things he or she can no longer see. It seems overwhelming for a reason.
  - Including details about objects, people, or places is a way for the poet to invite you into their thinking. It magnifies the image, so we don't forget. We see every facet of that person or place. We can't forget.
- Repetition
  - Repeating the same images, symbols, words, or phrases in a poem draws our attention to those lines.
  - Contrast the repeated images with contrasting ideas; we tend to dismiss the details over the image that is repeated with power and detail.
- Sound
  - Be careful of using sound as a poetic technique unless you see a pattern throughout the poem.
  - Light sounds, such as h, s, l, or m slide off the tongue and are meant to be lulling.
  - Heavy or harsh sounds, such as d, b, q, or k, trip off the tongue quickly but harshly and can denote violence or death.
  - Rhyme can be useful if you understand how it enhances meaning. Is it part of a sonnet form? Is it random? Does it draw your eye to the end of a line? Be sure to mention how it affects the meaning of the poem.