Diction

Authors choose their words carefully to convey precise meanings. We call these word choices the author's **diction.** A word can have more than one dictionary definition, or **denotation,** so when you analyze diction, you must consider all of a word's possible meanings. If the words have meanings or associations beyond the dictionary definitions, their **connotations,** you should ask how those relate to the meaning of the piece. Sometimes a word's connotations will reveal another layer of meaning; sometimes they will affect the tone, as in the case of **formal** or **informal diction,** which is sometimes called **slang,** or **colloquial,** language. Diction can also be **abstract** or **concrete.** Let's look at an example of diction from the third stanza of Housman's poem:

> Smart lad, to slip betimes away
> From fields where glory does not stay
> And early though the laurel grows
> It withers quicker than the rose.

In the third line, Housman plays with the multiple denotations of the word *laurel,* which is both a small evergreen tree, and an honor or accolade. Housman is using these multiple denotations to establish a paradox. Though the laurel that represents fame is evergreen, fame itself is fleeting, even more fleeting than the rosy bloom of youth.

Detail includes facts, observations, and incidents used to develop a subject and impart voice. Specific details refer to fewer things than general descriptions, thereby creating a precise mental picture. Detail brings life and color to description, focusing the reader's attention and bringing the reader into the scene. Because detail encourages readers to participate in the text, use of detail influences readers' views of the topic, the setting, the narrator, and the author. Detail shapes reader attitude by focusing attention: the more specific the detail, the greater the focus on the object described.

Detail makes an abstraction concrete, particular, and unmistakable, giving the abstraction form. For example, when Orwell describes an elephant attack, the attack comes alive through the elephant's specific violent actions. By directing readers' attention to particulars, detail connects abstraction to their lives: to specifics they can imagine, have participated in, or understand vicariously. Detail focuses description and prepares readers to join the action. As a result, readers can respond with conviction to the impact of the writer's voice.

Detail can also state by understatement, by a *lack* of detail. The absence of specific details, for example, may be in sharp contrast to the intensity of a character's pain. In this case, elaborate, descriptive detail could turn the pain into sentimentality. Good writers choose detail with care, selecting those details which add meaning and avoiding those that trivialize or detract.

Imagery

Imagery is the verbal expression of a sensory experience and can appeal to any of the five senses. Sometimes imagery depends on very concrete language—that is, descriptions of how things look, feel, sound, smell, or taste. In considering imagery, look carefully at how the sense impressions are created. Also pay attention to patterns of images that are repeated throughout a work. Often writers use figurative language to make their descriptions even more vivid. Look at this description from the Cather passage:

> Queer little red bugs came out and moved in slow squadrons around me. Their backs were polished vermilion, with black spots.

The imagery tells us that these are little red bugs with black spots, but consider what is added with the words "squadrons" and "vermilion," both figurative descriptions.

Syntax

Syntax is the arrangement of words into phrases, clauses, and sentences. When we read closely, we consider whether the sentences in a work are long or short, **simple** or **complex**. The sentence might also be **cumulative**, beginning with an independent clause and followed by subordinate clauses or phrases that add detail; or **periodic**, beginning with subordinate clauses or phrases that build toward the main clause. The word order can be the traditional subject-verb-object order or **inverted** (e.g., verb-subject-object or object-subject-verb). You might also look at syntactic patterns, such as several long sentences followed by a short sentence. Housman uses inversion in several places, perhaps to ensure the rhyme scheme but also to emphasize a point. When he writes, "And home we brought you shoulder-high" (l. 4), the shift in expected word order ("We brought you home") emphasizes "home," which is further emphasized by being repeated two lines later.

Tone and Mood

Tone reflects the speaker's attitude toward the subject of the work. Mood is the feeling the reader experiences as a result of the tone. Tone and mood provide the emotional coloring of a work and are created by the writer's stylistic choices. When you describe the tone and mood of a work, try to use at least two precise words, rather than words that are vague and general, such as *happy*, *sad*, or *different*. In describing the tone of the Cather passage, you might say that it is contented and joyful. What is most important is that you consider the style elements that went into creating the tone.

Now that you have some familiarity with the elements of style, you can use them as a starting point for close reading. Here are some questions you can ask of any text:

Diction

- Which of the important words (verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs) in the poem or passage are general and abstract, and which are specific and concrete?
- Are the important words formal, informal, colloquial, or slang?
- Are there words with strong connotations, words we might refer to as "loaded"?

Figurative Language

- Are some words not literal but figurative, creating figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, and personification?

Imagery

- Are the images—the parts of the passage we experience with our five senses—concrete, or do they depend on figurative language to come alive?

Syntax

- What is the order of the words in the sentences? Are they in the usual subject-verb-object order, or are they inverted?
- Which is more prevalent in the passage, nouns or verbs?
- What are the sentences like? Do their meanings build periodically or cumulatively?
- How do the sentences connect their words, phrases, and clauses?
- How is the poem or passage organized? Is it chronological? Does it move from concrete to abstract or vice versa? Or does it follow some other pattern?

Figurative Language

Language that is not literal is called figurative, as in a **figure of speech.** Sometimes this kind of language is called *metaphorical* because it explains or expands on an idea by comparing it to something else. The comparison can be explicit, as in the case of a **simile,** which makes a comparison using *like* or *as*; or it can be an implied comparison, as in the case of a **metaphor. Personification** is a figure of speech in which an object or animal is given human characteristics. An **analogy** is a figure of speech that usually helps explain something unfamiliar or complicated by comparing it to something familiar or simple.

When a metaphor is extended over several lines in a work, it's called an **extended metaphor.** Other forms of figurative language include **overstatement** (or **hyperbole**), **understatement, paradox** (a statement that seems contradictory but actually reveals a surprising truth), and **irony.** There are a few different types of **irony,** but **verbal irony** is the most common. It occurs when a speaker says one thing but really means something else, or when there is a noticeable incongruity between what is expected and what is said.