Connotation and Mood in "The Bells" by Edgar Allan Poe

Grade Level: 7-9

Introduction

Mood is a crucial literary element that is heavily influenced by the personal and cultural connotations of emotionally charged words. While mood is also conveyed by several other elements present in poetry, like setting, voice, tone, and theme, diction is a particularly important element of poetry that may be analyzed in a close reading for mood. Poets often use this loaded language to influence the reader's emotion, contributing to the overall mood of the poem.

This lesson leverages EBSCO's Poetry & Short Story Reference Source database and may be adapted for middle or high school. It introduces students to the concept of connotation as opposed to denotation and asks them to reflect on their own experiences of emotionally charged language. It also asks students to examine the different moods present in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells" and identify the language used to create the moods.

Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1, 2, 4; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1, 3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.1-6 | NCTE 1, 3, 11, 12

- R.4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

- SL.3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

- L.3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

- L.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

- NCTE 3: Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

Essential Questions

- How does language impact emotion?
- How is mood created in a poem?
- What is the role of connotation in our understanding of language?

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Identify words with significant connotative meaning.
2. Determine suitable mood descriptors for poetry.
3. Explain how connotation and mood are related.

Materials

- Access to Poetry and Short Story Reference Source
- "The Bells" by Edgar Allan Poe

Procedure

Part I: Understanding Connotation

1. Begin lesson with a discussion of words with similar denotative but different connotative meanings (e.g., "childish" and "childlike"). Provide the denotative meaning of each word as found in the Oxford American College Dictionary available on Poetry & Short Story Reference Source.

2. Ask students to brainstorm associations they may have with the two words and then vote on whether they think the word is positive or negative. Provide intervention with concrete sentence examples to support ELLs (e.g., "crying about not getting a new toy was very childish" or "he stared at the fireworks with childlike wonder").

3. Use the Literary Glossary available on Poetry & Short Story Reference Source to provide students with a definition of connotation. Ensure that students understand the difference between denotation and connotation. Connect the concept of connotation to the positive or negative senses of the words that students considered previously.

4. Conduct a Think-Pair-Share in which students brainstorm a list of other words they think are heavily connotated either positively or negatively. Construct a classroom list of exemplary words and ask students to choose a word to describe the emotion generated by the connotation of each word.

5. Introduce and connect the concept of literary mood with students using the classroom list of connotated words and emotions. Provide students with a definition of mood using the Literary Glossary.

Part II: Mood

6. Provide students with a copy of "The Bells" by Edgar Allan Poe.

7. Read "The Bells" aloud to students, having them follow along and make margin annotations as you read. Ask them to highlight or circle words that seem to have particularly powerful connotative meaning. These words are often referred to as "emotionally charged words" or "loaded language."

8. Conduct a Reverse Jigsaw. Break students into groups of three and assign or allow each student to choose one of three sections of the poem to focus on (stanzas 1 & 2, stanza 3, or stanza 4). Each student in the group should have a unique section. Students should read through the poem together as a group with the "expert" on each section taking notes on the discussion of their section. All students should work together to annotate each section and brainstorm ideas, with the "expert" of a section functioning as an executive decision-maker during their portion. In this first section, students should:

   - Read through all sections of the poem together

   - Highlight or circle emotionally charged words

   - Make margin annotations of the associations they have with a given word

   - Determine a mood for each of the four sections of the poem (although stanzas 1 & 2 are grouped together with one expert, they should still be treated as separate stanzas with separate moods)

9. Group the "experts" of each section together to share the words that their original groups came up with. Have them take note of any similarities or differences within the group, and then work together to select the best word to describe the mood of their section. This may be one of the original words or an entirely new word if they so desire.

10. Bring the class together and have expert groups share out their final mood descriptors. Ask the following questions:

    - Were there disagreements in any of the groups? If so, how were they resolved?

    - How does Poe create the different moods within this poem?

Assessment

Formative Assessment

Conduct smaller evaluations that track progress towards final unit goal. Monitor group and class discussions for understanding and participation. Have students fill out a brief Exit Ticket that addresses the following questions:

1. What is the difference between denotation and connotation?

2. How do connotations create mood?

3. List three words from Poe's poem that are emotionally-charged.

Summative Assessment

Conduct a measurable evaluation of student achievement in the form of quizzes, discussions, and/or written responses depending on unit plan. Students may write an original poem about an object of their choosing that

demonstrates their understanding of mood and connotation. The poem should be 10-15 lines long and include at least 10 emotionally charged words. Students should include an explication page or glossary in which they identify the mood of their poem and explain how the 10 highlighted words contribute to that mood through personal and cultural connotations. The explanation of each word should be at least 2-3 sentences. Alternatively, students may write a 3-page analysis of poetic mood in a different poem. Some suggestions are:

- "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" by William Wordsworth
- "Give Me Thy Heart" by Adelaide Anne Procter
- "The Female Convict" by Letitia Elizabeth Landon
- "Perfect Woman" by William Wordsworth
- "The Lake of Gaube" by Algernon Charles Swinburne