

The Elements of Poetry

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When we are reading a poem to locate its meaning, it is important to focus on the various elements that make up poetry.

Plot

Although it may not be as fully developed as a short story or play, many poems present a narrative for their readers to follow. Effective narratives are driven by **tension** or **conflict**. The **climax** of a plot is the moment in which such tensions are resolved.

In the example of “The Chimney Sweeper,” mentioned in the lectures, the plot focuses on two young boys sold into the profession of chimney sweeping at a young age. The poem’s story, the conflict it illustrates and resolves, offer readers one means of understanding the themes it dramatizes. In “The Chimney Sweeper” the conflict centers on the vast differences between the boy’s dream of angels and green fields and the reality of his profession. The resolution lies in the boy’s ability to use the dream to stay warm and hopeful despite the cold morning.

Speaker

The speaker of the poem is the individual who gives voice to it. You may be tempted to assume that the author and the speaker are the same person. Although poems may have autobiographical elements, remember that the author is often not the speaker. Again Blake’s poem provides us with a good example. The speaker of “The Chimney Sweeper” is a young boy who was sold into his profession by his father before he could even form words properly. You should always avoid conflating the author with the speaker of the poem. Let the speaker come to life in the poem, unconstrained by what you know about the author.

Word Choice

When reading a poem, we should understand that each word represents a deliberate choice on the part of the author. As a result, we need to make sure we understand the definition of each word used in a poem. However, we also need to pay attention to the **connotations**, or the deeper meanings, of the words we read. A simple example can be found in the different reactions created by the words wolf and lamb. On a literal level, the words reference two animals. However, as a culture we generally associate a host of negative ideas with the word wolf, while lambs generally have positive connotations. As careful readers of poetry, we should pay attention to these subtle qualities of words.

Returning to “The Chimney Sweeper” we can see that the words “white” and “black” are used repeatedly in the poem. We have the black of the soot and the coffin and the white of Tom’s hair and the boys in the dream. As readers, we know the color white often has positive connotations such as purity, while black, when it is connected to filth and death, has negative connotations. Paying attention to the contrast between white and black within the poem has the potential to help us understand the poem’s attitude toward the use of child labor in eighteenth-century England.

Use the *Oxford English Dictionary* to look up a word and review its multiple meanings and history (also called etymology).

Imagery

Images are any words or phrases that invoke our five senses of sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste. Specific images make a poem more real and concrete

By considering the imagery of a poem, the reader engages with it and begins to create an interpretation. Literary scholars often refer to the **image pattern** of a poem. In other words, the series of images a poem provides its reader with often work together to produce a certain idea or perspective.

The image pattern of "The Chimney Sweeper" is based on the contrast between the urban setting of London and the young boy's dream. London is filled with darkness, soot, the cold, and the sound of crying. Conversely, within the natural landscape of the boy's dream, we are given images of sunshine, water, warmth, and the sound of laughter.

Theme

Any work, from the most important to the most inconsequential, presents certain ideas, issues, or subjects for its readers to consider. These can range from the status of women in society to the value of humor in confronting sorrow, from the effects of poverty on the individual to the importance of faith. In literary studies we refer to these subjects as themes. The goal of literary analysis is to identify the themes in any given work (there may be many) and try to determine what the text is saying about them.

Themes in "The Chimney Sweeper" range from the cruelties of child labor to overcoming one's circumstances through diligence and confident expectation of divine deliverance.