

Dissonance

Definition of Dissonance

Dissonance is the use of impolite, harsh-sounding, and unusual words in poetry. In other words, it is a deliberate use of inharmonious words, phrases, or syllables intended to create harsh sounding effects. Dissonance is opposite of [assonance](#), and similar to [cacophony](#), which is also a use of inharmonious sounds. This unpleasant combination of consonants and vowels create an awkward sound, which makes the reading uncomfortable, and adds emotional depth to a situation or moment.

Use of Dissonance in Everyday Life and Music

Dissonant sounds also occur in everyday life. For instance, the sound of a crying baby and a screaming person are dissonant sounds. These sounds are annoying and alarming to the listeners. In music, dissonance might make listeners feel uncomfortable; however, it helps to create a sense of tension in musical compositions.

Examples of Dissonance in Literature

Example #1: *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* (by Robert Browning)

“Gr-r-r—there go, my heart’s abhorrence!
Water your damned flower-pots, do!
If hate killed men, Brother Lawrence,
God’s blood, would not mine kill you!
What? your myrtle-bush wants trimming?
Oh, that rose has prior claims —
‘St, there’s Vespers! Plena gratia
Ave, Virgo! Gr-r-r—you swine!”

Browning captures the attention of his readers by beginning and ending the above poem with a word “Gr-r-r.” While in the rest of the [stanza](#), he has employed dissonance.

Example #2: *The Dalliance of the Eagles* (by Walt Whitman)

“The clinching interlocking claws, a living, fierce, gyrating
wheel,
Four beating wings, two beaks, a swirling mass tight grappling,
In tumbling turning clustering loops, straight downward falling.”

Whitman has employed dissonance by describing eagles. He has combined assonance and mono and bi-syllabic words to create dissonance.

Example #3: *Wind* (by Ted Hughes)

“At noon I scaled along the house-side as far as
The coal-house door. Once I looked up –
Through the brunt wind that dented the balls of my eyes
The tent of the hills drummed and strained its guyrope...
The wind flung a magpie away and a black-
Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly.”

See how vowel sounds are so different in the following lines that they seem clashing with each another. These harsh sounds create disturbing effect that catches our attention.

Example #4: *Sunday Morning* (by Wallace Stevens)

“Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.”

This is a very good instance of dissonance, where harsh-toned words interrupt the smooth and rhythmical flow of the words and hence create disturbing and jarring effect.

Example #5: *Macbeth* (by William Shakespeare)

“Of all men else I have avoided thee.
But get thee back. My soul is too much charged
With blood of thine already.”

In the above lines, Shakespeare has used blank [verse](#) and variant vowel sounds to create unpleasant effects.

Example #6: *Carrion Comfort* (by Gerard Manely Hopkins)

“Not untwist — slack they may be — these last strands of man
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.
Scan...
With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones?”

Hopkins has used [alliteration](#) with high accented syllables and dissonance that echo [speaker](#)’s inner turmoil and noise and uncomfortable situations.

Example #7: *Princess Ida* (by Gilbert and Sullivan)

“Women of Adamant, fair neophytes—
Who thirst for such instruction as we give,
Attend, while I unfold a [parable](#).
The elephant is mightier than Man,
Yet Man subdues him. Why? The elephant
Is elephantine everywhere but here (tapping her forehead)...”

These lines have used abrupt and conversational [style](#). Also, the use of dissonance brings more abruptness in its style, causing shock and surprise to the readers

Function

The use of inharmonious sounds creates unpleasant effects and draws attention of the readers by creating interesting variations. It is found in poetry, plays, advertising, music and everyday life. Its purpose is to depict some sort of discomfort, making the readers or the [audience](#) to feel shock and surprise. It helps to describe the situations, which are emotionally turbulent and tumultuous. However, sometimes the poets use dissonance to create humorous effects too. They often use these sounds in an unexpected manner to discover the limits of the language.