

Denotation

Definition of Denotation

Denotation is generally defined as literal or dictionary meanings of a word in [contrast](#) to its connotative or associated meanings.

Let us try to understand this term with the help of an example. If you search for the meaning of the word “dove” in a dictionary, you will see that its meaning is “a type of pigeon, a wild and domesticated bird having a heavy body and short legs.” In literature, however, you frequently see “dove” used to mean a [symbol](#) of peace.

Denotation and Connotation

In literary works, we find it a common practice with writers to deviate from the dictionary meanings of words to create fresher ideas and images. Such deviations from the literal meanings are referred to as “[figurative language](#),” or “[literary devices](#),” e.g. metaphors, similes, personifications, hyperboles, understatements, paradoxes, and puns. Even in our daily conversation, we diverge from the dictionary meanings of words, preferring connotative or associated meanings of words in order to accurately convey our message.

Below is a list of some common deviations from denotative meanings of words that we experience in our day-to-day life:

Dog – suggests shamelessness or an ugly face.

Dove – suggests peace or gentility.

Home – suggests family, comfort, and security.

Politician – suggests negative [connotation](#) of wickedness and insincerity

Pushy – suggests someone is loud-mouthed and irritating.

Mom and Dad – when used instead of “mother and father” suggest loving parents.

Short Examples of Denotation

She recognized the lovely aroma of her mother's cooking. (Smell)

Vegetables are an inexpensive (Cheap)

Hanna's interest in interior decoration has turned into her leisure pursuit. (Hobby)

Aunt Jolly lives in a hut deep down in the forest. (Cabin)

I stopped for brunch at a diner situated in the bay area. (Café)

His parents are conservationists. (Environmentalists)

My old computer has died. (Venerable)

In a stealthy and quiet way, Bob entered into his lawyer's chambers. (Cautious)

The son was somewhat intimidated by father's assertive (Confident)

Ben is an adventurous (Courageous)

Emily moved around the shore and stopped to take rest. (Relax)

The man is flocking together young sheep. (Lambs)

Harry has a pet and keeps it in a cage. (tamed animal)

Sara forgot her sweater at home and is cold during her walk. (Chilly)

John returns to his home (Family)

Denotation Examples in Literature

Example #1: *Mending Wall* (By Robert Frost)

"And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each."

In the above lines, the word "wall" is used to suggest a physical boundary, which is its denotative meaning, but it also implies the idea of an emotional barrier.

Example #2: *A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal* (By William Wordsworth)

"A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears —
She seemed a thing that could not feel

The touch of earthly years.
No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course
With rocks, and stones, and trees."

Wordsworth makes a contrast between a living girl and a dead girl in the first and second stanzas respectively. We are familiar with the meanings of the words used in the last line of the second [stanza](#): rock, stone, and tree. However, the poet uses them connotatively, where "rock" and "stone" imply cold and inanimate objects, and the tree suggests dirt and thus the burial of that dead girl.

Example #3: *As you Like It* (By William Shakespeare)

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts, ..."

Shakespeare moves away from the denotative meanings of words in the above lines, in order to give a symbolic sense to a few words. The phrase "a stage" symbolizes the world, the word "players" suggests human beings, and the word "parts" implies different stages of their lives.

Example #4: *Wild Asters* (By Sara Teasdale)

"In the spring, I asked the daisies
If his words were true,
And the clever, clear-eyed daisies
Always knew.
Now the fields are brown and barren,
Bitter autumn blows,
And of all the stupid asters
Not one knows."

Sara Teasdale develops a number of striking symbols by deviating from the denotative meanings of the words. In the above lines, “spring” and “daisies” are symbols of youth. “Brown and barren” is a symbol of [transition](#) from youth to old age. Finally, “bitter autumn” symbolizes death.

Example #5: *Richard Cory* (By E. A. Robinson)

“And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked ...
“Good-morning,” and he glittered when he walked.
And he was rich — yes, richer than a king ...
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.”

Here, the poet uses denotative language to emphasize the personality of Richard Cory, who was wealthy, indeed he was “richer than a king.” He was well-educated, and a perfect celebrity – everyone in the town wished to be like him. He shines brightly in his speech and mannerisms, nevertheless, he kills himself in the end.

Example #6: *Nicomachean Ethics* (By Aristotle)

“[C]ontemplation is both the highest form of activity (since the intellect is the highest thing in us, and the objects that it apprehends are the highest things that can be known), and also it is the most continuous, because we are more capable of continuous contemplation than we are of any practical activity.”

In these lines, Aristotle explains the literal function of contemplation in the human mind. Also, he explains that contemplation is a human activity that is done continuously. He uses phrases and words that directly describe contemplation.

Example #7: *Fire and Ice* (By Robert Frost)

“Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice ...
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice ...”

In the above lines, the poet has used a number of denotative meanings of words. Here, “some say” denotes a group of people, and “I know” represents personal experience. Then “end,” “fire,” “perish,” and “destruction” denote destruction and death.

Example #8: *Moby Dick* (By Herman Melville)

“What the white whale was to Ahab, has been hinted; what, at times, he was to me, as yet remains unsaid. [Aside](#) from those more obvious considerations touching Moby Dick...It was the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled me.”

Ishmael opens the above example by referencing the white whale, calling him “Moby Dick.” Also, he specifies and refers to the white color of the whale, and using it in its literal meaning.

Function of Denotation

Readers are familiar with denotations of words but denotations are generally restricted meanings. Writers, therefore, deviate from the denotative meanings of words to create fresh ideas and images that add deeper levels of meanings to common and ordinary words. Readers find it convenient to grasp the connotative meanings of words because of the fact that they are familiar to their literal meanings.