

Analyzing Word Choice

Theme: *Surprise Endings*

Have you ever heard someone say “It’s the little things that matter”? In everyday life, little things can make you happy, sad, annoyed, or excited. In literature and poetry, the little things that matter are words, chosen carefully by the author.

Words affect meaning and establish the **tone**, or the attitude of the author. Word choice also is important because it can create the **mood**, or atmosphere, in a story or poem.

Read the poem below, paying close attention to poet’s choice of action verbs and descriptive words.

Murky Monday. Lockers slam,
Doorways clog and hallways jam.
Sweetest Ruby smiles so wide—
She can’t see me shyly hide . . .
Wondrous Monday. Lockers shine.
Ruby smiled at me in line.

Circle words in each line that help you understand the author’s tone.

Read the chart below to help you analyze the poet’s word choices in each line.

Lines	Words with Positive Meaning	Words with Negative Meaning
1–2		murky, slam, clog, jam
3–4	sweetest, smiles	shyly, hide
5–6	wondrous, shine, smiled	

Just as movie directors pay attention to the smallest details when setting up each scene, authors pay attention to each word when they create poems and stories. In this poem, the poet uses words to change the tone and to show how the speaker’s feelings change after Ruby smiles.

Analyzing an author’s choice of words will help you more fully understand a text’s meaning, mood, and tone.



Read this story about a girl named Carmen who is awakened by a strange sound.

Genre: Mystery

A Fright in the Night *by Tasha Gilden*

Carmen squinted through the thin curtains on her window, seeking the source of the sound that had awakened her. Unable to focus through the fabric, she pinched the hem with two fingertips and pulled the curtain aside slowly. She held her breath and her whole body completely still—but there was nothing.

I know I heard something; I thought it was the wind out in the old oak tree. But the tree was still and Carmen's chest pounded a little and her palms went sweaty because something had made a noise, and it wasn't the tree.

Carmen settled back into her blankets but stayed upright and scanned her room. The moonlight created an eerie glow on her bookshelves, and the rainbow mobile cast shadows more snakelike than serene.

(continued)

Explore how to response to this prompt: *"Describe the mood of this part of the story. Identify specific words that help to produce this mood."*

First, identify words that the author uses to describe the character and the setting. Circle these words in the passage. Then, tell what kind of feeling each word is intended to express.

Words the Author Uses	Feelings the Words Convey
squinted	uncertainty

Now, use the information in the chart to write a short paragraph. First, describe the mood of the story so far. Then, explain how the author's words help to create that mood.



Close Reading

Find and **underline** some words and phrases in this part of the story that convey the mood.

Hint

Which phrase helps you understand the story's surprise ending?

Continue reading about Carmen. Use the Close Reading and the Hint to help you answer the question.

(continued from page 138)

Carmen swallowed the lump in her throat when she heard the sounds again—*rustle, rustle, thump*—coming clearly now from the opposite side of the room. She pulled her toes in tight, as if that could prevent something from grabbing them. Her mouth opened as she prepared to yell, because there just shouldn't be anything rustling in her room in the night. And then—*rustle, rustle, scratch*—Carmen's cat finished pushing its way out of the bottom drawer of her dresser!

Carmen's near-yell turned into a laugh. "Dandy-Lion, you must have been more scared than I was!"

Circle the correct answer.

Which group of words from the story best reflects the change in mood?

- A** "swallowed the lump in her throat"
- B** "near-yell turned into a laugh"
- C** "pushing its way out"
- D** "more scared than I was"



Show Your Thinking

Look at the answer that you chose above. Explain why you think it is the correct answer.



With a partner, list phrases from the story that you think are the strongest in creating a menacing mood.



Read the poem. Use the Study Buddy and the Close Reading to guide your reading.

Genre: Narrative Poem



I know poets choose words carefully. I'm going to pay close attention to descriptive words and how they make me feel about the boys in the poem.

Close Reading

What kind of boy was Jim? **Circle** words in stanzas 3 and 4 that describe him.

Reread stanzas 1 and 2, paying close attention to the words the speaker uses to describe Bill. **Underline** words that describe Bill's traits.

Those Two Boys *by Franklin P. Adams*

- 1 When Bill was a lad he was terribly bad.
He worried his parents a lot;
He'd lie and he'd swear and pull little girls' hair;
His boyhood was naught¹ but a blot.
- 2 At play and in school he would fracture each rule—
In mischief from autumn to spring;
And the villagers knew when to manhood he grew
He would never amount to a thing.
- 3 When Jim was a child he was not very wild;
He was known as a good little boy;
He was honest and bright and the teacher's delight—
To his mother and father a joy.
- 4 All the neighbors were sure that his virtue'd endure,
That his life would be free of a spot;
They were certain that Jim had a great head on him
And that Jim would amount to a lot.
- 5 And Jim grew to manhood and honor and fame
And bears a good name;
While Bill is shut up in a dark prison cell—
You never can tell.

¹ **naught:** nothing



Hints

What kinds of actions are described in stanza 1?

Which words create the most positive feelings?

Look carefully at your marked-up text in the first three stanzas. What words and phrases did you circle? What did you underline?

Use the Hints on this page to help you answer the questions.

- 1 Why did the author use the word *blot*, which can mean “a dark stain,” in line 4?
 - A It suggests that Bill’s behavior was always bad.
 - B It shows that Bill’s misdeeds were accidental.
 - C It illustrates that Bill’s mischief was truly criminal.
 - D It shows that Bill’s bad acts marked him for life.
- 2 Which words from the poem best help you understand Jim?
 - A child, good, boy
 - B honest, bright, delight
 - C mother, father, neighbors
 - D wild, free, spot
- 3 Explain how the poet’s choice of words helps create a judgmental tone. Cite examples from the text to support your explanation.



Read the story. Then answer the questions that follow.

from “The Eyes Have It”

by Philip K. Dick

1 It was quite by accident I discovered this incredible invasion of Earth by life-forms from another planet. As yet, I haven’t done anything about it; I can’t think of anything to do. . . .

2 I was sitting in my easy-chair, idly turning the pages of a paperbacked book someone had left on the bus, when I came across the reference that first put me on the trail. For a moment I didn’t respond. It took some time for the full import to sink in. After I’d comprehended, it seemed odd I hadn’t noticed it right away.

3 The reference was clearly to a nonhuman species of incredible properties, not indigenous to Earth. A species, I hasten to point out, customarily masquerading as ordinary human beings. Their disguise, however, became transparent in the face of the following observations by the author. It was at once obvious the author knew everything. Knew everything—and was taking it in his stride. The line (and I tremble remembering it even now) read:

4 . . . *his eyes slowly roved about the room.*

5 Vague chills assailed me. I tried to picture the eyes. Did they roll like dimes? The passage indicated not; they seemed to move through the air, not over the surface. Rather rapidly, apparently. No one in the story was surprised. That’s what tipped me off. No sign of amazement at such an outrageous thing. . . .

6 The eyes had clearly come apart from the rest of him and were on their own. My heart pounded and my breath choked in my windpipe. I had stumbled on an accidental mention of a totally unfamiliar race. Obviously non-Terrestrial. Yet, to the characters in the book, it was perfectly natural—which suggested they belonged to the same species.

7 And the author? A slow suspicion burned in my mind. The author was taking it rather *too easily* in his stride. Evidently, he felt this was quite a usual thing. He made absolutely no attempt to conceal this knowledge. The story continued:

8 . . . *presently his eyes fastened on Julia.*

9 Julia, being a lady, had at least the breeding to feel indignant. She is described as blushing and knitting her brows angrily. At this, I sighed with relief. They weren’t *all* non-Terrestrials. The narrative continues:

10 . . . *slowly, calmly, his eyes examined every inch of her.*

11 Great Scott! But here the girl turned and stomped off and the matter ended. I lay back in my chair gasping with horror. . . .

12 Trembling, I read the next revealing passage:

13 . . . *he put his arm around Julia. Presently she asked him if he would remove his arm. He immediately did so, with a smile.*



14 It's not said what was done with the arm after the fellow had removed it. Maybe it was left standing upright in the corner. Maybe it was thrown away. I don't care. In any case, the full meaning was there, staring me right in the face.

15 Here was a race of creatures capable of removing portions of their anatomy at will. Eyes, arms—and maybe more. Without batting an eyelash. My knowledge of biology came in handy, at this point. Obviously they were simple beings, unicellular, some sort of primitive single-celled things. Beings no more developed than starfish. Starfish can do the same thing, you know. . . .

16 There was no doubt of the thing in the next passage. Julia, whom I had thought to be the one normal person, reveals herself as also being an alien life form, similar to the rest:

17 . . . *quite deliberately, Julia had given her heart to the young man.* . . .

18 Flushing crimson, I slammed the book shut and leaped to my feet. But not in time to escape one last reference to those carefree bits of anatomy whose travels had originally thrown me on the track:

19 . . . *her eyes followed him all the way down the road and across the meadow.* . . .

20 I had had enough of the thing. I want to hear no more about it. Let them come on. Let them invade Earth. I don't want to get mixed up in it.

21 I have absolutely no stomach for it.

Answer the following questions.

1 This question has two parts. Answer Part A, and then answer Part B.

Part A

What fact is available to the reader but not to the narrator?

- A** There is no indication of an alien invasion.
- B** The narrator is reading science fiction.
- C** The aliens mean no harm.
- D** The narrator has fallen for a practical joke.

Part B

Which sentence from the story supports the answer in Part A?

- A** "I was sitting in my easy-chair, idly turning the pages of a paperbacked book someone had left on the bus, when I came across the reference that first put me on the trail."
- B** "The reference was clearly to a nonhuman species of incredible properties, not indigenous to Earth."
- C** "The line (and I tremble remembering it even now) read: . . . his eyes slowly roved about the room."
- D** "The eyes had clearly come apart from the rest of him and were on their own."



2 Which of the following sentences from the story **best** conveys the narrator's growing sense of fear in the text?

- A** "It took some time for the full import to sink in."
- B** "My heart pounded and my breath choked in my windpipe."
- C** "A slow suspicion burned in my mind."
- D** "In any case, the full meaning was there, staring me right in the face."

3 In the last sentence from the story, the narrator states, "I have absolutely no stomach for it." Explain how the author's word choice adds a humorous meaning to the story. Use text evidence to support your answer.



Self Check

Go back and see what you can check off on the Self Check on page 128.