

Substitutional Inference in Poetry: Word Choice Substitutions Craft Multiple Meanings by Inference

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Abstract : The art of the poetic conjoins meaning and symbolism with imagery and rhythm. Perhaps the reader might read this opening sentence as 'The art of the poetic combines meaning and symbolism with imagery and rhythm,' which holds a similar message, but is not quite the same. The reader understands that these factors are combined in this literary form, but to gain a sense of the conjoining of these factors, the reader is forced to consider that these aspects of poetry are not simply combined, but actually adjoin, abut, skirt, or touch in the poetic form. This alternative word choice is an example of substitutional inference. Poetry is, ostensibly, a literary form where language is used precisely or creatively to evoke specific images or emotions for the reader. Often, the reader can predict a coming rhyme or descriptive word choice in a poem, based on previous rhyming pattern or earlier imagery in the poem. However, there are instances when the poet uses an unexpected word choice to create multiple meanings and connections. In these cases, the reader is presented with an unusual phrase or image, requiring that they think about what that image is meant to suggest, and their mind also suggests the word they expected, creating a second, overlying image or meaning. This is what is meant by the term 'substitutional inference.' This is different than simply using a double entendre, a word or phrase that has two meanings, often one complementary and the other disparaging, or one that is innocuous and the other suggestive. In substitutional inference, the poet utilizes an unanticipated word that is either visually or phonetically similar to the expected word, provoking the reader to work to understand the poetic phrase as written, while unconsciously incorporating the meaning of the line as anticipated. In other words, by virtue of a word substitution, an inference of the logical word choice is imparted to the reader, while they are seeking to rationalize the word that was actually used. There is a substitutional inference of meaning created by the alternate word choice. For example, Louise Bogan, 4th Poet Laureate of the United States, used substitutional inference in the form of homonyms, malapropisms, and other unusual word choices in a number of her poems, lending depth and greater complexity, while actively engaging her readers intellectually with her poetry. Substitutional inference not only adds complexity to the potential interpretations of Bogan's poetry, as well as the poetry of others, but provided a method for writers to infuse additional meanings into their work, thus expressing more information in a compact format. Additionally, this nuancing enriches the poetic experience for the reader, who can enjoy the poem superficially as written, or on a deeper level exploring gradations of meaning.

Keywords : poetic inference, poetic word play, substitutional inference, word substitution

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