

Connotation/Denotation

Study Guide

At the end of this unit you will be able to:

- define connotation and denotation
- read sentence and determine if the wording is connotative or denotative

Connotation is the emotional and imaginative association surrounding a word.

Denotation is the strict dictionary meaning of a word.

You may live in a *house*, but we live in a *home*.

If you were to look up the words house and home in a dictionary, you would find that both words have approximately the same meaning- "a dwelling place." However, the speaker in the sentence above suggests that home has an additional meaning. Aside from the strict dictionary definition, or **denotation**, many people associate such things as comfort, love, security, or privacy with a home but do not necessarily make the same associations with a house. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of a home? of a house? Why do you think that real-estate advertisers use the word home more frequently than house? The various feelings, images, and memories that surround a word make up its **connotation**. Although both house and home have the same denotation, or dictionary meaning, home also has many **connotations**.

Read the following sentences. Type in all your answers (ten) for this page on the answer sheet, and then send it in to Mrs. Dowling!

- **Annette was surprised.**
 - **Annette was amazed.**
 - **Annette was astonished.**
1. What is the general meaning of each of the three sentences about Annette? Do the words surprised, amazed, and astonished have approximately the same denotation?
 2. What additional meanings are suggested by astonish? Would one be more likely to be surprised or astonished at seeing a ghost?
 3. Which word in each pair below has the more favorable connotation to you?
 - **thrifty-penny-pinching**
 - **pushy-aggressive**
 - **politician-statesman**
 - **chef-cook**
 - **slender-skinny**

Since everyone reacts emotionally to certain words, writers often deliberately select words that they think will influence your reactions and appeal to your emotions. Read the dictionary definition below.

cock roach (kok' roch'), n. any of an order of nocturnal insects, usually brown with flattened oval bodies, some species of which are household pests inhabiting kitchens, areas around water pipes, etc. [Spanish cucaracha]

4. What does the word cockroach mean to you?
5. Is a cockroach merely an insect or is it also a household nuisance and a disgusting creature?

See what meanings poets Wild and Morley find in roaches in the following poems.

Roaches

Last night when I got up
to let the dog out I spied
a cockroach in the bathroom
crouched flat on the cool
porcelain,
delicate
antennae probing the toothpaste cap
and feasting himself on a gob
of it in the bowl:
I killed him with one unprofessional
blow,
scattering arms and legs
and half his body in the sink...

I would have no truck with roaches,
crouched like lions in the ledges of sewers
their black eyes in the darkness
alert for tasty slime,
breeding quickly and without design,
laboring up drainpipes through filth
to the light;

I read once they are among
the most antediluvian of creatures,
surviving everything, and in more primitive times
thived to the size of your hand...

yet when sinking asleep
or craning at the stars,
I can feel their light feet
probing in my veins,
their whiskers nibbling
the insides of my toes;
and neck arched,
feel their patient scrambling
up the dark tubes of my throat.

--Peter Wild



from Nursery Rhymes for the Tender-hearted

Scuttle, scuttle, little roach-
How you run when I approach:
Up above the pantry shelf
Hastening to secrete yourself.

Most adventurous of vermin,
How I wish I could determine
How you spend your hours of ease,
Perhaps reclining on the cheese.

Cook has gone, and all is dark-
Then the kitchen is your park;
In the garbage heap that she leaves
Do you browse among the tea leaves?

How delightful to suspect
All the places you have trekked:
Does your long antenna whisk its
Gentle tip across the biscuits?

Do you linger, little soul,
Drowsing in our sugar bowl?
Or, abandonment most utter,
Shake a shimmy on the butter?

Do you chant your simple tunes
Swimming in the baby's prunes?
Then, when dawn comes, do you slink
Homeward to the kitchen sink?

Timid roach, why be so shy?
We are brothers, thou and I,
In the midnight, like yourself,
I explore the pantry shelf!

--Christopher Morley

Reread the dictionary definition.

6. Which of the denotative characteristics of a cockroach both poets include in their poems?
7. What characteristics does Wild give his roaches that are not in the dictionary definition?
8. What additional characteristics does Morley give to roaches?

In each poem, the insect acquires meaning beyond its dictionary definition. Both poets lead us away from a literal view of roaches to a nonliteral one.

9. Which poet succeeds in giving roaches favorable connotations?
10. Which poet comes closer to expressing your own feelings about roaches?

