<u>One Page Concept Review: Connotation and Denotation</u>

What is it?

Denotation is what a word or phrase *literally means*. Connotation is what a word, phrase, or image *implies*. Denotation is the sort of information one gets by looking up a word or phrase in the dictionary. Connotation is the extra meaning created by the shared cultural or social understanding of an idea. Connotation is also created by context (as when a text links a word, image, or phrase to other ideas in the text).

That connotation is culturally specific is worth emphasizing, even though on the AP test you will probably be looking at texts from the Western European and American tradition (rendering this point largely irrelevant in practice). For example, in a particular context, the color red in a text might imply vibrancy or excitement (especially in juxtaposition with descriptions of more muted colors). In other contexts, it might imply blood or horror. In a Chinese context, however, red almost always implies good fortune, happiness, and luck-- one of the reasons why the Chinese Communist Party adopted the color in its iconography (and may, in a political context, itself imply other ideas).

The point here isn't to overcomplicate a relatively simple concept, but to point out that you have to look to context to intelligently discuss connotation. Unlike a literal meaning, connotation never has a fixed value (which is one of the reasons why it is worth using as an analytical strategy).

Why should I care?

If you're analyzing diction or imagery, you have to discuss connation for the discussion to be intelligible. Ditto for tone.

Considering that analyzing diction, imagery, and tone should be your go-to strategy for writing about poetry, it is obviously to your benefit that you be able to do this effectively.

How do I do it?

- **At the simplest level, ask yourself whether the connotation is positive or negative.** You will probably want to move beyond this (though not always), but if you are not actively thinking about the point of view of the text, you're not really reading literature in any meaningful sense (you're simply decoding words, which is never good enough).
- **Look to the context.** What a word, phrase, or images implies *to you* is irrelevant. All that matters is the meaning that *the text* intends to communicate. Use the context to determine this. To give a silly example, you may hate broccoli, but don't assume every time you read a word or description that references the vegetable that it is meant to be negative. Again, your job is to uncover the point of view of the text.
- **Look for contrasts.** If a repeated word, phrase, or image is truly important, it will often be contrasted to something else. This can be an especially fruitful line of analysis if you are looking at contrasts in the connotations of words, phrases, or images that are in very close in proximity to one another.
- **Look for patterns.** If something happens once in a text it is potentially interesting (though probably not terribly important). If it happens twice (or more) the author is emphasizing something, and it is always worth noticing the ideas that the text itself is highlighting as important.
- **Do not overreach.** I can remember a high school English teacher giving the class a critical essay tracing the water imagery in *The Great Gatsby*. The critic argued that this was the key to understanding the novel, as Gatsby should be viewed as a sort of sailor on a voyage of

discovery. While I have no doubt that F. Scott Fitzgerald used the water imagery deliberately, to suggest that this is the big idea in the text (as the essay did) is to distort what is really important in in order to force a novel reading. In other words, at some point a reading no longer passes the smell test, and it begins to feel a little obsessive or overwrought (which was the point my English teacher was trying to make in giving us the article). While it's certainly possible to write the water imagery essay effectively, just don't turn it into a conspiracy theory where only you have discovered the hidden meaning that explains everything (as in the Gatsby case, where the very sparing use of water imagery is sprinkled throughout a very long text and is almost self-evidently less important than the development of more sustained and relevant patterns of imagery-- such as images of *seeing* or *perceiving* that establish the novel's themes in a much more obvious way).

How do students screw this up?

Confusing Connotation and Denotation

- **Do not treat denotation as connotation.** It is frustrating to read an essay where students devote laborious effort to proving the obvious. For instance, a description of a *house* does not imply *shelter*. That's literally what a house means. It might be meaningful in context of a series of images that imply shelter (being but the most obvious and literal iteration of that idea), but what you don't want to do is to start re-defining words, phrases, and images and calling it analysis (when it is really just summary).
- **Focus on words, phrases, and images that actually connote something.** Adjectives and adverbs, for example, almost never get you anywhere, since you end up re-defining the words themselves. Look instead to the big concepts, especially repeated concepts that form a pattern (since this is the way that a text emphasizes that an idea is important).

Not Explaining the Inference

- **Know when you have to explain how a word, phrase, or image suggests something and when you don't.** If the connotation is obvious, it almost becomes insulting to the reader to explain it. Most of the time, for example, you can get away with just saying that a concept like *night* implies *mystery*. If you are discussing how *plant imagery* implies *life*, however, you need to explain a little more how you reached that conclusion. This is often as simple as being more specific. To return to the plant imagery example, instead of saying that it implies *life*, it is more convincing to say that it implies *the regenerative potential for growth and renewal*, which is what you really meant in the first place.
- **Always remember that you are making an argument.** Your job is to convince the reader that your reading of the text is a viable one. Do not skip steps or take things for granted if there is the potential for ambiguity. This obviously holds true for any type of explanation.

Formulaic Writing

- **Vary your language choices.** There are a handful of verbs that mean roughly the same thing as *connote* (such as *implies*, *suggests, evokes*, or *intimates*). Use them in rotation so that your writing does not grow stale.
- **Do not rely on formulas.** "X implies Y. This is true because ___. What this shows is ___." While this is literally what you want to be doing when you analyze the connotation of words, phrases, and images, treating writing like a mathematical formula that you repeat every time you perform similar tasks makes your essay feel stereotyped and dull. Style matters, so mix it up a bit to keep the reader interested in your argument.