

Creating Meaning in Poetry

Warm-up

I want you to think about a time in your life where you changed as a person. Change in a person can come in different forms – sometimes it's an active choice; the decision to be kinder to people, to pursue a new career or hobby, to quit a destructive habit.

Other times change can be gradual. People often say that living in a city like London can make people tougher, harder. When you have children you undergo a long change of shifting from being your own person to being a parent.

People change depending on their environment, relationships, and altering world views.

Think about one instance where this happened to you, or even a journey you may still be on, and write a short piece based around this.

You can go wherever you want with this subject. Your poem can be serious, dramatic, or even humorous.

You have **5 minutes**.

The Meaning of 'Meaning'

Poetry as an art form can be extremely illuminating. Poets use poetry to tell stories and impart ideas in a way more powerful than spoken word ever could.

Meaning is the practice of how you craft your poem, what emotional response is triggered in your audience or reader by the words, imagery and content you use.

Meaning is not the same as subject. Subject is what your poem is about, meaning is the underlying themes of your poem and the message it's trying to tell.

Meaning can be found in anything. A poem about a dog could be more powerful than a poem about war or strife based on the choices of the poet.

Word Choice

Word choice refers to the words a poet chooses to use. Word choice is extremely important in poetry, since the poem is such a compact form. Every word counts. Sometimes poets choose words for the way they sound; sometimes for their connotations.

Your word choice can invoke certain feelings or emotions depending on how they are used. We associate images, feelings, and ideas with words used.

'Words, Words, Words' by Sipho Sepamla:

We don't speak of tribal wars anymore
we say simple faction fights
there are no tribes around here
only nations
it makes sense you see
'cause from there
one moves to multinational
it makes sense you get me
'cause from there
one gets one's homeland
which is a reasonable idea
'cause from there
one can dabble with independence
which deserves warm applause
--- the bloodless revolution

we are talking of words
words tossed around as if
denied location by the wind
we mean those words some spit
others grab
dress them up for the occasion
fling them on the lap of an audience
we are talking of those words
that stalk our lives like policemen
words no dictionary can embrace
we mean words
that spell out our lives
words, words, words
for there's a kind of poetic license
doing the rounds in these parts

“We don’t speak of tribal wars anymore, we say simple faction fights”

The word choice here is deliberate. When the word ‘tribal’ is used, it invokes connotations of something primitive, something alien in a modern world.

The word ‘faction’ has a much more modern sound and meaning to it – it’s a much more “civilised” sounding word than tribal.

In a poem inspired by the viewpoints of African history and culture, this word choice invokes a powerful message central to the theme of the poem in its opening two lines. A faction or nation is taken more seriously than a tribe. How something is addressed alters the reality in which it is perceived.

Lets take a few minutes to look back at the poem we just created. What word choices have you made that invoke a certain emotion or connotation? Are there any opportunities for a stronger or different choice of words?

Imagery

Imagery refers to language that evokes a physical sensation produced by one of the five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell.

When you read the word 'black' for example, your mind visualizes the colour. It may also attach any emotional connotations that you may have with the colour black.

Common associations with that colour are death and evil, so that colour may 'feel' threatening to you.

Imagery is an important tool for a poet, because it helps him establish a mood, and it may also help indicate theme.

“Preludes” by T.S. Elliot

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots;
The showers beat
On broken blinds and chimney-pots,
And at the corner of the street
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.
And then the lighting of the lamps.

“The winter evening settles down, with smell of steaks in passageways.”

The addition of the smell of steaks adds more depth to the world created in the poem. We are not just reading about this world, we are invited inside it – the inclusion of our sense of smell makes the world feel more real and paints a stronger image than just hearing about the passageway.

Emotions associated with ‘Winter’ are coldness, harshness, bitterness. The ‘smell of steaks’ however is something that invokes warmth, creating a juxtaposition in the poem, a light shining in the darkness.

We are able to picture the scene – as well as the emotional connotations of the scene, more clearly now.

Take a look at your previous poem and look for any examples of strong imagery, or opportunities where strong imagery could be included.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is an extreme kind of exaggeration used in writing.

“I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.”

When we use this expression, we are not literally saying we could eat a horse – we are instead just saying that we are extremely hungry.

Hyperboles are not comparisons, like similes and metaphors, but they are extravagant and even ridiculous overstatements not meant to be taken literally. In literature, hyperbole will often be used to show contrast or catch the reader's attention. Here are some more examples:

Without hyperbole - This game is taking a long time.

With hyperbole - This game is taking forever.

Without hyperbole - This helmet is hurting my chin.

With hyperbole - This helmet is killing me.

An extract from 'The Unfortunate Lover' by Andrew Marvell

The sea him lent those bitter tears
Which at his eyes he always wears;
And from the winds the sighs he bore,
Which through his surging breast do roar.
No day he saw but that which breaks
Through frightened clouds in forked streaks,
While round the rattling thunder hurled,
As at the funeral of the world.

Let's write with meaning

Using the writing tools we've looked at today, I want you to create an entirely new piece with new layers of meaning.

This poem can be about whatever you want, but if you're stuck for ideas, in a similar vein to the poem about a time where you've changed as a person, write about an event that inspired or caused change.

Think about your word choice, imagery, and connotations when you write. How can you effectively paint the scene? What emotions do you want us to feel? Try experimenting with hyperbole as well.

You have **10 minutes**.