Making Sense Out Of Modern Poetry

This is an excerpt from an eBook probably to be titled Enjoying Retro-Mod Poetry. That book will explain ways to read modern poems by focusing on form rather than on message. Technical terms, some of which are used in this excerpt, will be explained and applied to other modern American poems. The goal of this excerpt and the book itself is to help you make sense out of modern American poems and to enjoy their riches.

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“If you were coming in the Fall”

Emily Dickinson

If you were coming in the Fall,
I’d brush the Summer by
With half a smile, and half a spurn,
As Housewives do, a Fly.

If I could see you in a year,
I’d wind the months in balls—
And put them each in separate Drawers,
For fear the numbers fuse—

If only Centuries, delayed,
I’d count them on my Hand,
Subtracting, till my fingers dropped
Into Van Diemen’s Land. [Tasmania, regarded as very remote]

If certain, when this life was out—
That yours and mine, should be
I’d toss it yonder, like a Rind,
And take Eternity—

But, now, uncertain of the length
Of this, that is between,
It goads me, like the Goblin Bee—
That will not state—its sting.

http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/emilydickinson/10463
The poem is perhaps addressed to Rev. Charles Wadsworth, a friend who moved from Amherst, Massachusetts to San Francisco.

Emily Dickinson is the American Shakespeare, IMHO. We don’t know whether this poem was written to Rev. Wentworth, whom Dickinson saw a few times, or someone else, or is a product of her incredible imagination. Well, it is the latter in any case. It is an amazing poem, full of high-energy metaphors.

Miss Dickinson starts out prosaically enough, “If you were coming in the fall, / I’d . . .” but that’s about as long as Dickinson can be prosaic. “Brush” is an energetic metaphor in the context of brushing away summer, not something most of us can do. Then she uses the simile comparing the summer to a fly—just something to get out of the way, quickly and easily.

In the second stanza, she gives us an even more energetic metaphor, “winding” the months in balls like lengths of yarn. And just in case you glide over that metaphoric image, she brings you back to it by telling you she would store those “balls” of time in her dresser drawer. Why does she do that? Because she knows that months are calendarized by being stored as collections of numbers in boxes. If the dates escaped their cells they would fuse and could no longer be measured off and made to go away. Einstein would probably have enjoyed this poem. She wants the months to go away without putting up resistance. At least that’s my interpretation. What’s yours?

The metaphor in the third stanza is not as wild. It just amounts to her exaggerating how long she could go on counting centuries on her fingers. She wouldn’t have to count off many centuries before her fingers would be skeletal hands and the separate bones would drop off into Nowheresville. She is continuing her concern with counting away the time between the present and the day he might return to her. She can be patient, just so long as whatever length of time it is it will bring him back to her.

The fourth stanza backtracks from the centuries being counted off in the preceding stanza. Now, instead of counting off the time, she tells him she would give up her life if . . . What? The grammar gets distorted. Dickinson loves to compress her meanings. Why waste energy spelling out things the reader can supply? The second line clearly implies that she would throw away her life if he and she would be united after this life, in Eternity. The powerful metaphor here is conceiving of her life as a rind that she would dispose of like the remains of a cantaloupe—IF she knew that his life and her life would be . . . Fill it in.

In that last stanza, she reverts in the first two lines to a prose statement, albeit a compressed one. She is uncertain when she will see him again. And that uncertainty “goads” her, in other words, allows her no respite. Sleepless in Amherst! Then she gives us a final metaphor. The uncertainty is like that you feel when a bee lands on your arm. The bee has not yet stung you but you know it’s about to, even before you can brush it away. The harmless housefly of the first stanza has morphed. “State its sting” is also an imaginative way of perceiving what a bee does when it stings you. The bee’s statement, when it comes, removes the painful uncertainty but leaves another kind of pain, the implication being that she knows their lives will never be one.
“The Soul has Bandaged moments” (J512)
Emily Dickinson

The Soul has Bandaged moments—
When too appalled to stir—
She feels some ghastly Fright come up
And stop to look at her—

Salute her— with long fingers—
Caress her freezing hair—
Sip, Goblin, from the very lips
The Lover— hovered— o'er—
Unworthy, that a thought so mean
Accost a Theme— so—fair—

The soul has moments of Escape—
When bursting all the doors—
She dances like a Bomb, abroad,
And swings upon the Hours,

As do the Bee—delirious borne—
Long Dungeoned from his Rose—
Touch Liberty—then know no more,
But Noon, and Paradise—

The Soul's retaken moments—
When, Felon led along,
With shackles on the plumed feet,
And staples, in the Song,

The Horror welcomes her, again,
These, are not brayed of Tongue—

http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/246444

Please tell me the electricity of this poem makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. BTW, four line stanzas but Dickinson arranges one verse paragraph to have six lines and ends the poem with a slant couplet. That shows her concern for patterns and some non-ordinary counting.

Some “ghastly Fright” approaches the soul, salutes her, and then with “long fingers” caresses “Her freezing hair.” Long is not an extraordinary modifier of “fingers,” but I think it evokes a skeletal image here—part of the personified Fright.

And freezing evokes a strange image here. Does hair freeze? The Fright then sips at her lips the way her lover had earlier. She exclaims that it’s an unworthy picture that superimposes this Fright on the image of her lover. I’ll admit the grammar in that second verse paragraph is garbled. Whatever the best way of untangling it is, certainly she is disturbed by the joining in her mind of this Fright and her lover. Sometimes I
wonder whether William Faulkner had this poem in mind when he wrote the ghoulish story “A Rose for Emily.” That’s about another soul who needed to be bandaged.

Then she enters a second movement, when the soul escapes. It dances like a bomb, perhaps in the sense that you can’t very well restrain a bomb. Are you going to throw YOUR body on it? As this image modulates into that of the bee, something new enters—the hint of The End. The soul swings upon the Hours like a bee. Where is this bee—long Dungeoned from his Rose—headed? To oblivion.

But notice the grammatical distortion that explodes when she transforms the noun “dungeon” (a prison cell) into a verb. The soul and the bee escape and as they Touch Liberty they are wiped out, they know no more. That would mean the end of knowing . . . but then the Master (that’s Dickinson!) give us a lesson in using line breaks. The escaped bee and soul know Noon, and Paradise. Knowing did not come to an end as we slow readers thought.

The third movement of the poem garbles not only the grammar but the metaphors and images. It begins by telling us the escaped soul has been recaptured, presumably by the Fright. It is led along like a “felon” with shackles on its plumed feet, / And staples—in the Song. The implied image is that of the soul as a bird of some exotic kind (“plumed feet”?). And then the metaphoric energy leaps back up to the extraordinary level of the soul’s having “Bandaged moments.” The recaptured soul’s song is stapled. That’s hard to visualize but it IS powerful and its emotional meaning is unmistakable. (What an Incredible Metaphorist Dickinson was!) Do you agree?

The last two lines confirm our suspicion that the Fright, now renamed the Horror, is her captor, sarcastically welcoming her back to renewed torture. The last simple declaration is that we mortals do not speak, bray, of the doom we face.

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“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”
Robert Frost

Click on the poem’s title above to open the poem online. You may want to keep the window open while you read the following as we explore ways of participating in Frost’s poem. We need to do it this way because the poem is still copyrighted.

This Robert Frost poem is accessible, has rhymes and a comfortable meter, and is coherent from top to bottom. Despite the user-friendly appearance of this poem, it is, in fact, an intricately wrought work that is a triumph of the Retro-Mod poet’s craft. Frost often wrote poems like “Mending Wall” and “Road not Taken” to draw Easy Readers into finding a popular message to carry away—“Good fences make good neighbors” and Individualists “take the road less travelled by.” Participatory readings deconstruct these popular take-away messages. Similarly, “Stopping by Woods” may appear to be informational prose, but when we paraphrase it we find that it has hidden depths instead of a lesson.

An informational-prose paraphrase of “Stopping by Woods”

“I think I know who owns these woods. He lives in the village and will not see me stopping here to watch the snow falling in his woods. I also think my horse does not want to stop here because there's nothing but the woods and the frozen lake. He shakes the harness and the bells jingle, which I think means he wants to move on. The only other sound is the light breeze. The deep, dark woods filling up with snow attracts me,
but I cannot stay here watching because I have a lot to do before I can get home and go to bed.”

Frost’s poem and this paraphrase lead a participatory reader—not an Easy Reader—to look more deeply into the poet’s words. Right off you notice that the paraphrase of “Stopping” yields no take-home message like Kipling’s “IF—” and Henley’s “Invictus.” Another major difference is that Frost’s lone observer says, “I think” twice. The speakers of the other poems do not suffer from such weak uncertainty. Frost’s speaker’s self-awareness and speculative attitude separate set him apart. We can definitely consider him a “Retro-Modernist.”

An interpretation based cautiously on the paraphrase

“Cautiously” means not running your own scripts and finding the poem confirms them and it means honoring the words of the poem, building your meanings on the words the poet gives you. Here’s a cautious interpretation:

The woods will not literally "fill up" with snow, if “up” means to the treetops. The speaker’s concern that the owner is not around to question him about why he is stopping implies the speaker's furtiveness. He imagines the owner must think the speaker has no practical purpose for stopping there unless he’s a timber poacher.

The poet believes the absence of a farmhouse—along with the implied warmth, food, and comfort—is agitating the horse. The horse, as a non-aesthetically responsive creature (in the speaker’s estimation), cannot comprehend his pleasure in stopping. And again his self-awareness comes into play. He imagines his horse must think his stopping “queer,” a word with pejorative connotations in this context.

The poet has not mentioned the quiet, but now he notices that aside from the irritating harness bells the only other sound is the pleasant breeze. The image words of this unprepared for observation, seemingly trivial, are important to the significant form of Frost’s poem.

The speaker would enjoy staying longer to watch the wintery scene, but he has responsibilities and must fulfill them before he can rest. The word “But” in the last stanza signals a transition from one side of the imagistic opposition to the other: The loveliness of the woods, and indeed the entire scene, is set in tension against “promises.” And not only is the loveliness drawing the poet to postpone fulfilling the promises, it is also associated with sleep. When the poet says, “But I have promises to keep, / And miles to go before I sleep,” sleep, like stopping by the woods, becomes something contrasted with keeping promises. Admittedly, this association between sleep and enjoying the dark, and deep woods is not obvious, but you need to perceive it if you are going to respond to the significant form of the poem.

“Promises” is a theme word in this poem and so is “sleep.” Whatever the promises are, they are bonds between the poet and other human beings. They are responsibilities that tie him to other individuals (a wife? a sick friend?) and to society in general. And that’s where the owner of the woods comes in. The owner, as a representative of society and its parceling of the woods and farmhouses and villages, might disapprove the speaker’s “invasion” of his woods. The owner is thus allied with the theme of “Promises.”

That’s a “participatory” reading of the poem. It can be extended further historically or psychologically.

Historically, Frost was a student of the New-England Transcendentalists and undoubtedly knew the following passage in which Henry David Thoreau praises a generic poet’s ability to capture the beauty of other people’s farms without having to work those farms or pay the owners for his enjoyment. Thoreau writes in Walden Or Life in the Woods:

“I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most
valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk.”

http://www.concord.org/~kathy/Walden/wldwhere.html

Replace “farm” in this passage with “woods.” The horse’s shaking its bells to urge the sleigh driver to move on contributes its little bit to the property owner’s imagined disapproval of the poet’s stopping. The property owner, that staid representative of society and the little horse do not realize the poet is stopping in order to help himself to the “most valuable part” part of the woods. The reader now applies her imagination to create (or recreate?) the ineffable bonds between darkness, coldness, a gentle breeze and soft snow flakes, and sleep. The tension between that urge to fulfill his promises and his desire to enjoy the beauty of this snowy evening is the poem’s significant form.

Reading the poem psychologically, the literary critic John Ciardi, a famous literary commentator of Frost’s era, saw in those ineffable bonds between dark, cold, and aloneness, and the way these images attracted the speaker, a small dramatization of the death wish, death imagined as restful oblivion. What’s important is to sense the form that can clearly be built on Frost’s words but not to become dogmatic about their one-and-only meaning. If Ciardi’s reading appeals to you fine; if it does not fine. More than one elaboration can be built—within reason—on the significant form of a complex poem.

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Many modern American poets write meditatively on the theme of time. Gary Snyder wrote “Milton by Firelight” in 1955, a free-verse poem that beautifully embodies the ubi-sunt theme (“Where are [the snows of yesteryear]?”). The poem develops a realistic image pattern, probably drawn from Snyder’s time working as a fire lookout on Crater Mountain in the Sierras. Can see the image pattern and its relation to the theme of mutability, the passage of time?

“Milton by Firelight”
Gary Snyder

“O hell, what do mine eyes
with grief behold?”
Working with an old
Singlejack miner, who can sense
The vein and cleavage
In the very guts of rock, can
Blast granite, build
Switchbacks that last for years
Under the beat of snow, thaw, mule-hooves.
What use, Milton, a silly story
Of our lost general parents,
eaters of fruit?

The Indian, the chainsaw boy,
And a string of six mules
Came riding down to camp
Hungry for tomatoes and green apples.  
Sleeping in saddle-blankets  
Under a bright night-sky  
Han River slantwise by morning.  
Jays squall  
Coffee boils  

In ten thousand years the Sierras  
Will be dry and dead, home of the scorpion.  
Ice-scratched slabs and bent trees.  
No paradise, no fall,  
Only the weathering land  
The wheeling sky,  
Man, with his Satan  
Scouring the chaos of the mind.  
Oh Hell!  

Fire down  
Too dark to read, miles from a road  
The bell-mare clangs in the meadow  
That packed dirt for a fill-in  
Scrambling through loose rocks  
On an old trail  
All of a summer’s day.

Permission by Gary Snyder. “Milton by Firelight” was originally published as part of Riprap by Origin Press (1959) and subsequently in Riprap & Cold Mountain Poems. Four Seasons Foundation, San Francisco, 1969.  
The poem can be found at here.

As you read the poem, where do you see the themes and images most clearly deepening each other’s significance?  
I would say in these lines:  
No paradise, no fall,  
Only the weathering land  
The wheeling sky…  

“No paradise, no fall” states the main theme of Snyder’s poem and explicitly contradicts the main theme of Paradise Lost. The other two lines are images associated by similarity and contrast. “Land” and “sky” contrast, but “weathering” and “wheeling” are similar in sound and more importantly in large motions, changes, one planetary and one cosmic. We’ll need to develop this pattern as we participate in the poem.

“Stopping by Woods” presents the fairly coherent thoughts and perceptions of the poet, although, as we have seen, he feels the tension between the impulse to move on and the pleasure of watching “the woods fill up with snow.” Frost’s words give us those thoughts and perception in rhyme and meter. Snyder’s narrative of external events and his meditation on Paradise Lost and the two illusions of permanence, the landscape and Milton’s religious mythology, come to us in fragmented non-sentences and juxtaposed images. (Where does the memory of the Han River come from?) This poem is as far from the norms of informational prose as it is from kitsch! Good for it!

We need to get the facts of the setting clear before we begin constructing our
meanings on these images and thematic meditations. The speaker has been working with an old miner in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Before going to sleep, he has been reading John Milton’s Paradise Lost by light of the campfire. The day before, one of the workers, an Indian boy, joined the poet and the old singlejack miner for breakfast. Snyder fleetingly recalls a similar morning on the Han River in Korea. But now, before sleep, he thinks of the book he’s reading, Paradise Lost, and ahead to the future of the Sierras. But finally he closes the book and turns to go to sleep: “Fire down / Too dark to read . . . / All of a summer’s day.” We will certainly have to make some sense out of that last unexpected line.

The first verse paragraph (not a stanza like those in “Stopping by Woods”) introduces an old singlejack miner, a man who hammers a drill bit into hard rock for planting dynamite charges. He has spent his life building mountain roads that “last for years.” He’s old, but not quite as old as the granite rocks to which he gives form. His roads stand up “Under the beat of snow, thaw, mule-­hooves”—the forces doing the erosive work of time and nature. The poet admires the skill and useful work of this old miner, but then breaks off and addresses Milton, whose poem he has been reading nights before going to sleep.

What use, Milton, a silly story Of our lost general parents, eaters of fruit?
How do we make sense of that apparent non sequitur, jumping from the singlejack miner to Milton? The words “use” and “silly” are blocks for our bridge building. Snyder considers the life’s work of this nameless roadbuilder as useful as Milton’s “immortal” but “silly” poem.

Let’s participate a little more deeply in Snyder’s non-­kitsch, non-­informational poem. We have three elements of form to understand: 1) the image pattern, 2) the relevance of Paradise Lost, and 3) the theme of time in relation to the images. One difficulty is that the image pattern is embedded in the time frame and we’ve already seen that that is achronological. At least we already know the passage that binds together the image pattern and the main theme, the ineluctable passage of time. Keep it in mind: “No paradise, no fall, / Only the weathering land / The wheeling sky.” Two theme words from the “silly” story contrasted with two parallel images of unchanging change. Snyder’s epigraph, “O Hell, what do mine eyes with grief behold,” is from Paradise Lost, Book IV. The words are Satan’s, spoken when he first invades Paradise and sees the beautiful earth and “our . . . general parents,” Adam and Eve. “O Hell” is not Satan cursing, but thinking of his new much uglier abode and comrades down below.

Snyder’s next verse paragraph juxtaposes to this rejection of Milton’s story an Indian boy descending from higher on the mountainside, “Hungry for tomatoes and green apples.” Informational prose would provide a logical or narrative coherence linking Adam and Eve to the Indian boy. But a retro-­mod poem invites the participatory reader to sense an “interinanimation” between the words “eaters of fruit” and “Hungry for tomatoes and green apples.” This invitation is especially pointed since an apple is widely supposed to be the forbidden fruit our “general parents” ate, bringing “death into the world and all our woe.” If Snyder’s Indian boy had been hungry for flapjacks and salt pork, the poem would not have allowed us to participate in this small construction of aesthetic form.

A fleeting moment in time butts against Milton’s timeless battle between God and Satan for human souls, and the prelapsarian “eaters of fruit” are butted against a hungry boy. The images suggest the desirability of the physical and fleeting while dismissing Milton’s predestined drama taking place in eternity. The blur of images ceases to be confusing when the reader sees that they are joined by their temporality. Time telescopes the boy’s hunger for breakfast, the men sleeping under the wheeling bright
stars, the poet's remembering a morning on the Han River, and the jays squalling as the coffee boils.

Is Snyder just expressing a simple hedonism, a Hemingway-like indulgence in mere physical sensation? The next brief verse paragraph disabuses us of that simplistic view. He is aware of what "ten thousand years" will do to the Sierras and, by implication, to "the great globe itself," as Prospero says in Shakespeare's Tempest. (I have linked you to a Shakespearean passage because of its fame and beauty as a presentation of the Mutability theme. You will be able to return here. Please read it and come back.)

Snyder's next-to-last verse paragraph presents an image pattern of things rocky but life-sustaining opposed to things eternal but useless and silly. This contrast gives way to a clear thematic statement that adjudicates between the opposing images. Milton's timeless story is denied and "the weathering land / [and] The wheeling sky" are affirmed. If you are uncertain of how the earth and sky fit into the pattern I have just described, the adjectives "weathering" and "wheeling" tell you that earth and sky are ever-changing. They are not eternal and perfect and never will be. And then Milton's larger-than-life Satan is brought down to the human level. He is "man's Satan." That he is "Scouring the chaos of the mind" gives a participating reader pause. "Scouring" is a striking word here, not something we easily imagine Satan doing. What! is he Cinderella? Hmmm. I hadn't thought of that before, but it is a possibility for this figure that lives with cinders of burning brimstone. Man-made Satan scours human mental chaos so that we will not try to do any useful work, whether it is forming a poem or a switchback road in the Sierras.

Snyder returns to the opening. The fire is burning down, this time not hellfire. It's time to put Milton away—in two contrasting senses of the word, away for the night and away forever as a serious theologian and cosmologist. Images of human construction, building a road ("dirt for a fill-in"), amid the inner and outer chaos ("scrambling through loose rocks") in which we build, are all in a day's work. A workful "summer day" is better than a fantasy "forever."

But the poet has not put Milton away. Snyder pointed out to me that the last line of the poem, "All of a summer's day," alludes to the fall of Hephaestus described in Paradise Lost. Snyder writes,

"I have one piece of information to share with you: the very last line comes from Paradise Lost and is the length of time it took Hephaestus to fall from heaven to hell as thrown by his father Zeus. v. Iliad 589-593. I was carrying that book with me and reading while working on back country trails in the northern Yosemite, summer of 1955."

The relevant passage from Milton describes Hephaestus' (Malciber's) fall:

Sheer over the crystal battlements: from morn
To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
A summer's day; and with the setting sun
Dropt from the zenith like a falling star....

Paradise Lost, Book I, 741-45
Read it here.
Scroll down to the appropriate lines or better yet read your way there.

Snyder's "Milton by Firelight" prefers the world of "the weathering land and the wheeling sky" to John Milton's imagined world of eternal perfection, temporal trial, and eternal torment—"a silly story."
“Metaphors”
Sylvia Plath

Read Sylvia Plath's “Metaphors” here.

Let's start with grammatical and logical relations among the words. The poem is punctuated as six sentences, if we count the exclamatory fragment as a sentence. Three of the sentences have first-person singular pronouns (I), two with copulas (am) plus complements and one with coordinate transitive verbs (eaten and boarded) with their accompanying objects. The exclamatory sentence fragment adds three rather obscure adjectival complements. The poem has ten parallel, mostly coordinate, nouns renaming the speaker, such as "elephant," "house," "melon," "loaf," and so on.

Logically, the poem begins with an assertion by the speaker that she's a riddle. It continues with a series of figurative reifications that the riddling woman applies to herself. The poem ends with a compound assertion, a non sequitur that implies the speaker's pain and helplessness. The last line, half of this compound assertion, expresses the speaker's somewhat angry resignation to her unhappy condition, implying she would like to "get off" this train, whatever that is. Looking at the grammatical and logical structures does not get us very far. Something else is happening in this poem and that "happening" asks the reader to perceive the words differently. Obviously, we're not reading informational prose or kitsch. It asks the reader to see the similarities among the letters, syllables, metaphors, and connotations in these nine lines.

The first line, "I am a riddle in nine syllables," provides a couple clues. The "I" of the poem, the speaker, IS the riddle's answer. Is that answer Plath herself or a fictional persona or a combination of the two? The first line also tells us that the solution is in nine syllables, so we'll need to somehow relate the poet to the unknown nine syllables, which we'll also have to unearth. Doesn't sound as if that will lead to interpreting the poem. But it will. If we're going to make sense out of this poem, we must do it by pattern-seeking, not by grammatical or logical analysis.

The second line offers two images of the speaker and they enliven each other—the elephant and the house are ponderous, but that doesn't help much. Count the syllables in line two. Nine! That helps. Go back to line one; count; it too has nine syllables. Every line in the poem has nine syllables.

Oh Oh, look! The poem has nine lines. The title, "Metaphors," has nine letters. But how do the images in lines two through eight interanminate each other? The same way the elephant and the house do: the images are all variations on the speaker's body-image. She says it herself: “I am this. I am that.” If we haven't found the relationship among the images by line eight, we are given it explicitly—I am "a cow in calf." Not being a farm boy, I didn’t know how this last image fit the emerging pattern until I looked up “in calf.” Here's an explanation: "6. in calf, (of a cow or other animal having calves) pregnant," (“calf”). The elephant, the house, the melon, the ripe fruit, the bread rising, the purse bulging with coins—all are “bulging” metaphors. The images in lines two through eight coalesce to become the speaker's body-image, her sense of herself as a pregnant woman.

How many letters in "pregnancy"? Nine! Wouldn't you know! Maybe that word's the solution to the riddle. But she told us the answer to the riddle is "in nine syllables," not letters. Let's see . . . "Sylvia is a pregnant woman." Nine syllables. We did it. That’s one
of several nine-syllable sentences that would solve the riddle. But this one fits the details nicely, and it brings Sylvia into this seemingly impersonal cry of pain. (I’ll contradict this in a moment.)

But.

These images have something else in common and that is their connotations. We will treat connotations further in Chapter 7, but for now it is enough to know that the term refers to the implied attitude of the speaker toward what he or she is talking about. The connotations are the feeling tones of a word that change as the word’s contexts change. Plath’s image-words serve as the context for each other and cumulatively their connotations imply that the speaker is unhappy about being pregnant. The words “I am a cow in calf” express a traditionally pejorative view of women, a view that Plath also expresses in “Morning Song,” calling her pregnant self “cow heavy and floral.” That poem is brilliant but emotionally devastating. In “Metaphors,” the speaker sees herself as grotesque and doomed. She is on a train going where she does not want to go—into motherhood.

The brilliant literary critic and scholar Helen Vendler says of this poem: “Only the last line is grim enough to wake a reader’s response. The rest is pure silliness. Still, in sympathy one wants to say that the aridity of the intellect in dealing with life, and its pure insufficiency to metabolic processes, is enough to send anyone around the bend in this particular fashion, to turn a woman into a talking melon.” (*Part of Nature, Part of Us*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980. 273).

If we meet the difficult challenge of reading “Metaphors” as an impersonal artistic object, not as a personal confession, we probably wouldn’t dismiss the first eight lines as “pure silliness” and we wouldn’t wait till the last line of this poem to “wake up.” Yes, the riddling intellect creates an impersonal tone, but the speaker, who is experiencing an unwanted pregnancy, may well be repressing terrified feelings of guilt. Plath’s “Metaphors” is a deep-sea exploration of this dark, pressured world, as if in the bathyscaphe of her intellect.

You cannot always identify a poet with the speaker of her poem, but in this case the unfortunate facts are that in 1963, at age 30, Sylvia Plath asphyxiated herself using gas from the kitchen oven while her two toddlers slept in a nearby room.

And then sometimes, as we all know, words fail.

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**“Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock”**

Wallace Stevens

The houses are haunted  
By white night-gowns.  
None are green,  
Or purple with green rings,  
Or green with yellow rings,  
Or yellow with blue rings.  
None of them are strange,  
With socks of lace  
And beaded ceintures.  
People are not going  
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.  
Only, here and there, an old sailor,  

[A belt or sash for the waist]  
[Flower or saltwater snail]
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches tigers
In red weather.

http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/20754
This poem is in the public domain.

Stevens, though philosophically deep in many poems, was a whimsical writer, one who always went for the out-of-the-ordinary in sound patterning, images, and word choice. He said of this poem that he “liked words that sound wrong,” so the poem is intended to jar the reader with its flippancy. “Baboons and periwinkles”!? Really?

“Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock” was published in 1915, and in those days many men and women in this country wore night gowns. The first nine lines do not cohere into a single sketchable picture, but instead give a list of night-gown fashions NOT found in the speaker’s dull town. What does the poet see around him? Nothing but white nightgowns. That’s one contrastive image pattern—plain white nightgowns as opposed to colored and decorated ones.

The near-by houses are haunted by the poet’s ghostly appearing neighbors. The alluded-to ghosts are the hackneyed and cartoonish image of ectoplasmic white, flowing garments. And that, for a person of powerful imagination like Stevens, is a humorous but serious indictment of their very lives.

The problem, however, reaches beyond sleeping apparel and cliché ghosts into the sleepers’ dreams. The poet mercifully does not bore us with the dreams of the white-gowned sleepers. They’re not about “periwinkles and baboons”—words and dreams that would seem “wrong” to wearers of white nightgowns.

Instead of such a life, spent in an impoverished reality,
   An old sailor,
   Drunk and asleep in his boots,
   Catches tigers
   In red weather.

The poet, by NOT saying, “An old sailor dreams of catching tigers in red weather,” erases the line between dream life and waking life. Similarly, the sailor’s being “drunk and asleep in his boots” excuses him from wearing “socks of lace” to fit into his place in the image pattern. Thank goodness.

Stevens is writing about the lack of imagination in the way many people live their lives. He is not writing about literal fashions in night wear. He himself was rarely seen in anything but the conformist uniform of a corporate lawyer, suit and tie, supposedly even in his bedroom. But he had more than enough imagination to be “disillusioned” by sober people going to bed at 10 o’clock in their white night gowns.

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