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Chapter 1: Dealing with Meaning (not theme)

Part II: Connotations, ambiguities, and other meanings

Even as you develop a respect for the literal, dictionary definitions of the words used by an author, you must also be aware that just about every word an author might choose to use has, in addition to its denotation, any number of connotations—meanings that are commonly accepted by speakers, readers, and writers. The challenge that being aware of possible connotative meanings is that these connotations can change. Depending on time and place, for example, *to redeem* can mean to save a soul from eternal torment, pay a ransom for a prisoner taken in battle, or turn in a coupon for a fifty-cent discount.

Even after you look up the word in a dictionary, you cannot hope to fully understand the words—or the text they build—without also taking into consideration what the words may have meant at the time and in the place the author wrote them.

This issue of connotation is one of the factors that make different interpretations possible. It is true that a single text may have several possible meanings. It is also possible, however, for a reader’s interpretation to be inaccurate or invalid if it is not grounded in what the words really mean—whether denotatively or connotatively.

Another factor that can complicate your effort to understand the text’s meaning is the fact that even the denotations of many words can be vague, abstract, open to interpretation. Some words are simply vague. When does the weather pass from cool to cold? (By the same token, at what temperature does something that was warm become hot?)

Some words are ambiguous. They have two or more denotations that might often seem incompatible or contradictory. Consider the simple word *cut*. One can cut a class without cutting if from his or her schedule. If you are not cut from the team, then you have made the cut. A cut on your arm is probably a bad thing, but a cut of meat can be a good thing.

While an author’s use of *cut* might be absolutely clear, there might also be subtle implications in the author’s choice of a word like *cut* as opposed to a clearer, less ambiguous alternative like *skip* or *miss*, *excise*, or *reduce*. Just as it is important to consider what the word literally means according to a reliable dictionary, it is important to consider what else the writer may have meant by choosing a particular word.

The following passage, excerpted from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, presents few challenges to a reader looking for comprehension, but some of the clearest words have multiple meanings and a variety of connotations that create several layers of tone, mood, and meaning. Read it, being sensitive not only to the literal meaning of the characters’ conversations, but to how Carroll manipulates double meanings and varying connotations to create whimsy and a humorous sense of absurdity.
There was a table set out under a tree in front of the house, and the March Hare\(^1\) and the Hatter\(^2\) were having tea at it: a Dormouse\(^3\) was sitting between them, fast asleep, and the other two were using it as a cushion, resting their elbows on it, and talking over its head. “Very uncomfortable for the Dormouse,” thought Alice; “only, as it’s asleep, I suppose it doesn’t mind.”

The table was a large one, but the three were all crowded together at one corner of it: “No room! No room!” they cried out when they saw Alice coming. “There’s plenty of room!” said Alice indignantly, and she sat down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table.

“Have some wine,” the March Hare said in an encouraging tone.

Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. “I don’t see any wine,” she remarked.

“There isn’t any,” said the March Hare.

“Then it wasn’t very civil of you to offer it,” said Alice angrily.

“It wasn’t very civil of you to sit down without being invited,” said the March Hare.

“I didn’t know it was your table,” said Alice; “it’s laid for a great many more than three.”

“Your hair wants cutting,” said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first speech.

“You should learn not to make personal remarks,” Alice said with some severity; “it’s very rude.”

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\(^1\) A hare is a rabbit-like rodent. To be “mad as a March hare,” was a common English expression presumably derived from the hare’s apparently strange behavior during the March breeding season.

\(^2\) Notice that Carroll does not call this character “the Mad Hatter.” “Mad as a hatter” was another common expression in England. The exact origin of the expression is not known, but two possible explanations are that the mercury often used in making men’s hats occasionally resulted in madness and early death for men who followed the hatter’s trade and that the verb *hattter*, meaning “to harass or to make weary,” may have come to be used as a noun, a process known as “nominalization.” In an earlier chapter, the Cheshire Cat told Alice that the Hatter and the March Hare were both mad.

\(^3\) a very small rodent, mostly found in Europe, and known for its long periods of hibernation.
The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this; but all he *said* was, “Why is a raven like a writing-desk?”

“Come, we shall have some fun now!” thought Alice. “I’m glad they’ve begun asking riddles.—I believe I can guess that,” she added aloud.

“Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?” said the March Hare.

“Exactly so,” said Alice.

“Then you should say what you mean,” the March Hare went on.

“I do,” Alice hastily replied; “at least—at least I mean what I say—that’s the same thing, you know.”

“Not the same thing a bit!” said the Hatter. “You might just as well say that ‘I see what I eat’ is the same thing as ‘I eat what I see’!”

“You might just as well say,” added the March Hare, “that ‘I like what I get’ is the same thing as ‘I get what I like’!”

“You might just as well say,” added the Dormouse, who seemed to be talking in his sleep, “that ‘I breathe when I sleep’ is the same thing as ‘I sleep when I breathe’!”

“It *is* the same thing with you,” said the Hatter, and here the conversation dropped, and the party sat silent for a minute, while Alice thought over all she could remember about ravens and writing-desks, which wasn’t much.

The Hatter was the first to break the silence. “What day of the month is it?” he said, turning to Alice: he had taken his watch out of his pocket, and was looking at it uneasily, shaking it every now and then, and holding it to his ear.

Alice considered a little, and then said “The fourth.”

“Two days wrong!” sighed the Hatter. “I told you butter wouldn’t suit the works!” he added looking angrily at the March Hare.

“It was the *best* butter,” the March Hare meekly replied.

“Yes, but some crumbs must have got in as well,” the Hatter grumbled: “you shouldn’t have put it in with the bread-knife.”

The March Hare took the watch and looked at it gloomily: then he dipped it into his cup of tea, and looked at it again: but he could think of nothing better to say than his first remark, “It was the *best* butter, you know.”

Alice had been looking over his shoulder with some curiosity. “What a funny watch!” she remarked. “It tells the day of the month, and doesn’t tell what o’clock it is!”
“Why should it?” muttered the Hatter. “Does your watch tell you what year it is?”

“Of course not,” Alice replied very readily: “but that’s because it stays the same year for such a long time together.”

“Which is just the case with mine,” said the Hatter.

Alice felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter’s remark seemed to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English. “I don’t quite understand you,” she said, as politely as she could.

“The Dormouse is asleep again,” said the Hatter, and he poured a little hot tea upon its nose.

The Dormouse shook its head impatiently, and said, without opening its eyes, “Of course, of course; just what I was going to remark myself.”

“Have you guessed the riddle yet?” the Hatter said, turning to Alice again.

“No, I give it up,” Alice replied: “what’s the answer?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” said the Hatter.

“Nor I,” said the March Hare.

Alice sighed wearily. “I think you might do something better with the time,” she said, “than waste it in asking riddles that have no answers.”

“If you knew Time as well as I do,” said the Hatter, “you wouldn’t talk about wasting it. It’s him.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Alice.

“Of course you don’t!” the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. “I dare say you never even spoke to Time!”

“Perhaps not,” Alice cautiously replied: “but I know I have to beat time when I learn music.”

“Ah! that accounts for it,” said the Hatter. “He won’t stand beating. Now, if you only kept on good terms with him, he’d do almost anything you liked with the clock. For instance, suppose it were nine o’clock in the morning, just time to begin lessons: you’d only have to whisper a hint to Time, and round goes the clock in a twinkling! Half-past one, time for dinner!”

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4 The fact is, Lewis Carroll intended this riddle to have no answer. When pressed by readers for the solution, he created a few but always insisted that he never intended this riddle to have an answer.
“I only wish it was,” the March Hare said to itself in a whisper.

“That would be grand, certainly,” said Alice thoughtfully: “but then—I shouldn’t be hungry for it, you know.”

“Not at first, perhaps,” said the Hatter: “but you could keep it to half-past one as long as you liked.”

“Is that the way you manage?” Alice asked.

The Hatter shook his head mournfully. “Not I!” he replied. “We quarrelled last March—just before he went mad, you know—” (pointing with his tea spoon at the March Hare,) “—it was at the great concert given by the Queen of Hearts, and I had to sing

“Twinkle, twinkle, little bat!
How I wonder what you’re at!”

You know the song, perhaps?”

“I’ve heard something like it,” said Alice.

“It goes on, you know,” the Hatter continued, “in this way:—

“Up above the world you fly,
Like a tea-tray in the sky.
Twinkle, twinkle—”

Here the Dormouse shook itself, and began singing in its sleep “Twinkle, twinkle, twinkle, twinkle—” and went on so long that they had to pinch it to make it stop.

“Well, I’d hardly finished the first verse,” said the Hatter, “when the Queen jumped up and bawled out, ’He’s murdering the time! Off with his head!’”

“How dreadfully savage!” exclaimed Alice.

“And ever since that,” the Hatter went on in a mournful tone, “he won’t do a thing I ask! It’s always six o’clock now.”

A bright idea came into Alice’s head. “Is that the reason so many tea-things are put out here?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s it,” said the Hatter with a sigh: “it’s always tea-time, and we’ve no time to wash the things between whiles.”

“Then you keep moving round, I suppose?” said Alice.

“Exactly so,” said the Hatter: “as the things get used up.”

“But what happens when you come to the beginning again?” Alice ventured to ask.
“Suppose we change the subject,” the March Hare interrupted, yawning. “I’m getting tired of this. I vote the young lady tells us a story.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know one,” said Alice, rather alarmed at the proposal.

“Then the Dormouse shall!” they both cried. “Wake up, Dormouse!” And they pinched it on both sides at once.

The Dormouse slowly opened his eyes. “I wasn’t asleep,” he said in a hoarse, feeble voice: “I heard every word you fellows were saying.”

“Tell us a story!” said the March Hare.

“Yes, please do!” pleaded Alice.

“And be quick about it,” added the Hatter, “or you’ll be asleep again before it’s done.”

“Once upon a time there were three little sisters,” the Dormouse began in a great hurry; “and their names were Elsie, Lacie, and Tillie; and they lived at the bottom of a well—”

“What did they live on?” said Alice, who always took a great interest in questions of eating and drinking.

“They lived on treacle,” said the Dormouse, after thinking a minute or two.

“They couldn’t have done that, you know,” Alice gently remarked; “they’d have been ill.”

“So they were,” said the Dormouse; “very ill.”

Alice tried to fancy to herself what such an extraordinary ways of living would be like, but it puzzled her too much, so she went on: “But why did they live at the bottom of a well?”

“Take some more tea,” the March Hare said to Alice, very earnestly.

“I’ve had nothing yet,” Alice replied in an offended tone, “so I can’t take more.”

“You mean you can’t take less,” said the Hatter: “it’s very easy to take more than nothing.”

“Nobody asked your opinion,” said Alice.

“Who’s making personal remarks now?” the Hatter asked triumphantly.

Alice did not quite know what to say to this: so she helped herself to some tea and bread-and-butter, and then turned to the Dormouse, and repeated her question. “Why did they live at the bottom of a well?”
The Dormouse again took a minute or two to think about it, and then said, “It was a treacle-well.”

“There’s no such thing!” Alice was beginning very angrily, but the Hatter and the March Hare went “Sh! sh!” and the Dormouse sulkily remarked, “If you can’t be civil, you’d better finish the story for yourself.”

“No, please go on!” Alice said very humbly; “I won’t interrupt again. I dare say there may be one.”

“One, indeed!” said the Dormouse indignantly. However, he consented to go on. “And so these three little sisters—they were learning to draw, you know—”

“What did they draw?” said Alice, quite forgetting her promise.

“Treacle,” said the Dormouse, without considering at all this time.

“I want a clean cup,” interrupted the Hatter: “let’s all move one place on.”

He moved on as he spoke, and the Dormouse followed him: the March Hare moved into the Dormouse’s place, and Alice rather unwillingly took the place of the March Hare. The Hatter was the only one who got any advantage from the change: and Alice was a good deal worse off than before, as the March Hare had just upset the milk-jug into his plate.

Alice did not wish to offend the Dormouse again, so she began very cautiously: “But I don’t understand. Where did they draw the treacle from?”

“You can draw water out of a water-well,” said the Hatter; “so I should think you could draw treacle out of a treacle-well—eh, stupid?”

“But they were in the well,” Alice said to the Dormouse, not choosing to notice this last remark.

“Of course they were,” said the Dormouse; “—well in.”

This answer so confused poor Alice, that she let the Dormouse go on for some time without interrupting it.

“They were learning to draw,” the Dormouse went on, yawning and rubbing its eyes, for it was getting very sleepy; “and they drew all manner of things—everything that begins with an M—”

“Why with an M?” said Alice.

“Why not?” said the March Hare.

Alice was silent.
The Dormouse had closed its eyes by this time, and was going off into a doze; but, on being pinched by the Hatter, it woke up again with a little shriek, and went on: “—that begins with an M, such as mouse-traps, and the moon, and memory, and muchness—you know you say things are ‘much of a muchness’—did you ever see such a thing as a drawing of a muchness?”

“Really, now you ask me,” said Alice, very much confused, “I don’t think—”

“Then you shouldn’t talk,” said the Hatter.

This piece of rudeness was more than Alice could bear: she got up in great disgust, and walked off; the Dormouse fell asleep instantly, and neither of the others took the least notice of her going, though she looked back once or twice, half hoping that they would call after her: the last time she saw them, they were trying to put the Dormouse into the teapot.

“At any rate I’ll never go there again!” said Alice as she picked her way through the wood. “It’s the stupidest tea-party I ever was at in all my life!”

1. In this passage, the March Hare’s and the Hatter’s “madness” is primarily the result of a/n
   A. lack of commonly-accepted social manners.
   B. inattention to dialectical differences.
   C. application of cultural stereotypes and archetypes.
   D. strict adherence to literal meanings.
   E. total disregard for denotation and accepted convention.

2. In this passage, Lewis Carroll uses language primarily to
   A. clarify and defend.
   B. instruct and enlighten.
   C. challenge and dispute.
   D. confuse and perplex.
   E. amuse and delight.

3. On a thematic level, this passage most likely illustrates the
   A. basic incivility of people.
   B. insufficiency of language.
   C. willfulness of young girls.
   D. comic possibilities of caricature.
   E. complexities of human emotion.

4. The play on the word *draw* in the Dormouse’s story is based on the words’ being
   A. homonyms.
   B. homophones.
   C. homographs.

   a common phrase in Great Britain that means two things are so similar as to be virtually indistinguishable.
D. synonyms.
E. antonyms.

15 All of the following contribute to the comedy of this passage EXCEPT
  A. stereotype.
  B. misperception.
  C. slapstick.
  D. non sequitur.
  E. word play.

Free-response item 1 (text-based)
Carefully read “A Mad Tea Party” from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and then write a thoughtful, well-supported essay in which you analyze the ways in which Carroll uses wordplay, ambiguity, and other quirks of language to create an illusion of madness and illogic. Do not merely summarize the plot of the selection.

Free-response item 2 (independent)
Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) wrote, “Neurosis is the inability to tolerate ambiguity.” This notion of madness—a rational individual’s inability to understand or adapt to the apparently irrational—is a common theme in Western literature. Think of a novel or play in which the theme or conflict is based on something like Freud’s definition of neurosis. Then, write a well-organized and reasoned essay in which you analyze the role of madness in the overall meaning of the work. Do not merely summarize the plot of the novel or play.

Multiple-Choice Answers and Explanations
1. (A) might tempt some students, as there is considerable conversation about what’s uncivil and rude, but the “madness” is not so much the result of the Hatter’s and Hare’s behavior as it is the result of the words they use and what those words mean. (B) is probably the least tempting choice as there is no suggestion of linguistic difficulties between Alice and anyone she encounters in Wonderland. (C) might also tempt some students, as both hatters and March hares were stereotypically associated with madness, but the passage does not rely only on readers’ associations; it illustrates the characters’ “madness.” (E) might tempt a few, but a close examination of the characters’ dialogue reveals the exact opposite. **The correct answer is (D).** The chiasmus built on meaning what one says versus saying what one means and the issue of whether one can have more or less than none are the two clearest examples. The reader is most likely to accept the commonly-accepted meanings of these phrases, while the Hare and Hatter are using them in their most literal sense. Thus, their meaning seems “mad” to the reader.

2. It is important for students to note that this question asks about the language of the passage and not the content. The student must, therefore, examine word choice, syntax, use of idioms, and so on. Those elements that apply to structure or meaning are probably eliminated simply by the fact that they do not necessarily apply to language. (A) is therefore eliminated because it points more to thesis and support than language. (B) and (C) point more to meaning or theme than impact of language. (D) does suggest the impact of language on the reader and may actually tempt some students, but, while the wordplay and flawed logic are puzzling, the puzzlement is the means to an end, not the end itself. **Well beyond the comic situation and madcap characters, however, the essence of this passage is the wordplay, the puns, plays on sound and meaning, and so on. Thus, the best answer is clearly (E).**
3. Civility and incivility are issues in this passage, but most of the accusations of rudeness stem, not from actual rudeness, but from the characters’ inability to understand one another. Thus, (A) is eliminated. (C) might tempt some, but while Alice may be the first, she is certainly not the only character to act rudely. (D) might also tempt some, but it is impossible to state absolutely whether the Hatter and March Hare are caricatures or mere representations of ideas in folklore. Nor is the portrayal of these characters—caricature or not—the sole or primary point of the passage. (E) (D) is fairly easily eliminated by the fact that none of the characters exhibit more than superficial humor, rudeness, or anything else that might be interpreted as an emotion. Language, ambiguity, wordplay, the tension between literal and connotative meanings motivate the conflict and drive the plot of this passage. Thus, (B) is the best answer.

4. This question is, of course, a strictly linguistic question that relies on the students’ knowledge of parts of speech, speech patterns, and the idiosyncrasies of written and spoken language that the writers of an Advanced Placement exam will assume have been studied. It is an example of the only type of question that requires outside language likely to appear on an exam. Still, it illustrates the need to devote some time in an English language arts class to language arts. (B) is tempting, and might be a defensible choice, as homophones are pronounced the same, have different meanings, and may or may not be spelled the same; but it is not the best answer, given that homonym (A) is more strictly correct. (C) is eliminated by the fact that homographs are spelled the same but are pronounced differently, which is not the case with the two uses of draw in this passage. Synonyms (D) are different words with similar meanings, which is, of course, not the case with draw. Antonyms (E) are likewise different words, related by their antithetical meanings. The correct answer is (A). Homonyms are two words that are spelled and pronounced identically but have different (but not necessarily antithetical) meanings.

5. While (A) is not the chief source of comedy, it is apparent that Carroll chose a Mad Hatter and a March Hare for his characters in this scene specifically because of their associations with madness. (B) is eliminated by the many instances of Alice’s not understanding—and actually questioning—the conventions on which the tea party is based, as well as the instances in which the Wonderland characters are unable to understand Alice’s point of view. (D) is easily eliminated because much of the comedy springs from the illogical sequence of topics in the conversation. Similarly, (E) is eliminated by the number of puns and absolute literal applications of many of the words and phrases. The correct answer is (C). The humor in this scene in intellectual, not physical, and even what little physical humor there is—the dormouse’s sleepiness and the arrangement of the table—are based on logic and stereotype; they are not broad or exaggerated enough to be considered slapstick.