

Beyond denotations: the language in poetry

[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



Beyond Denotations If used skillfully, the language in poetry can capture the essence of words. It draws power from both the writings of the poet and the intellect and imagination of the reader, storing many layers of meaning in ordinary words. A poet does this by harnessing the connotations of words, meanings associated with them. While denotations are dictionary definitions, and may not change for a long time, connotations are ever-changing and gain new meanings as time passes. For example, in a post 9-11 world the word airplane has significantly different connotations than it used to. What had before suggested travel and peanuts now also brings to mind a tragic event. The main difference between denotations and connotations is that the former is defined by the context of the poem (although multiple denotative meanings may be used for a single word), and the latter can bring context into the poem. One word that has particularly significant connotative meanings is the word lamb. The dictionary definition of lamb is a young sheep, a wooly quadruped mammal. It can also refer to any mild or gentle person, but aside from that there aren't too many different dictionary meanings. The word lamb is, however, steeped in cultural and religious connotations. When Blake says " Little lamb, God bless thee! " in his poem " The Lamb" he is referring to Christ, who dies to atone for man's sins. Here, lamb is associated with Christianity and suggests purity, innocence of youth, and peace. It evokes calmness and appreciation of life and God. Blake tells an actual lamb how Jesus, who goes by the same name, " Gave thee life, and bid thee feed. " The word lamb suggests sacrifice; because they do not make sounds when they are killed, sacrificial lambs are symbolic to Christ's crucifixion. The word is also tied to religious connotations through things like

flock and shepherd, symbols for a reverend and those he looks after. Blake's poem "The Shepherd" depends on this connotation. The shepherd "follow[s] his sheep all day." Lambs, if left on their own, tend to wander and are defenseless; they need shepherds to keep them safe. This connotation brings to mind faith, community, and safety. The speaker mentions "How sweet is the Shepherd's sweet lot," staying true to the idyllic tone of the poem. Flock and shepherd can also create images of rustic pastoral life: the shepherd "hear[ing] the lamb's innocent call" and walking "From the morn to the evening." The poem has affection for the simple and humble country life. Lambs also evoke images of spring: life, rejuvenation, and nature. In his poem "For a Lamb," Roger Eberhart uses this to chilling effect. The poem brings death into the nature imagery when the speaker sees a "putrid lamb, / Propped with the daisies." Gone are the happy emotions, replaced by a feeling of horror. Connotation in this poem is used to contrast with what is described in it, and our associations with the fluffy animal are used against us. A lamb, in literature and in culture, wears as much connotative meanings as it does wool. It represents a wide scope of ideas, ranging from the ignorant and compliant sheep in *Animal Farm* to Christian allusions to counting sheep when someone can't fall asleep. A word's connotations can condense and magnify meaning, but they require experience and awareness on the reader's part. Words may be the keys to the imagination, evoking imagery, emotions, or ideas, but only with an awareness of where the door is can we unlock the significances stored inside poetic language.

Works Cited
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