AP ENGLISH LITERATURE -- LITERARY ELEMENTS

DICTION:

The term *diction* simply means a writer's choice of words, but to understand the significance of diction, we need to know more than just the definition. In order to explain the reasons why diction is important in communication, we first need to think about the most basic factor of diction—the fact that words have two different types of meanings:

denotation is the term used to mean the dictionary meaning or meanings of a word—the direct, specific meaning of a word or phrase: the literal meaning. Thus, when we read the word "dog," we mentally picture a four-legged, furry creature that barks.

connotation is the term used to capture the fact that words also have implied meanings—meanings and associations that are suggested indirectly by a word which greatly affect our understanding of an author's message. Connotation suggests that there is a "personal side" to words in that they carry emotional force and shades of suggestion. The words we use indicate not only what we mean but how we feel, and we choose words that we hope will engage others emotionally and persuasively, in conversation and daily usage as well as in essays, novels, and poems.

However, deciphering the denotation and connotation in a text isn't always easy. Many words have more than one (or even two) meanings listed in the dictionary. And discovering what an author wants to imply beyond the dictionary definition(s) of a word is much more complex than just trying to figure out what that word means to us personally.

Let's take this concept of denotation and connotation a step farther by considering four broad "levels of formality" of diction.

1. Formal diction – a dignified, impersonal, and elevated use of language. It is exacting in its adherence to the rules of grammar and complex vocabulary.

2. Middle diction – still follows the rules of correct language usage, but is less "elevated." It reflects the way most educated people speak.

3. Informal diction – the plain language of everyday use. This often involves idiomatic expressions, slang, contractions, and simple or common words.

4. Poetic diction – Poets sometimes use an elevated diction that is significantly different from the common speech and writing of the time period. These can be words that are chosen (or sometimes created) by the poet because they have a special "poetic" quality an ability to communicate a complex thought in a word or phrase.

Note that words have both denotative and connotative meanings at all four levels of diction. The level used by an author to communicate his/her message will depend a great deal on the message to be communicated, the intended audience, and the form of communication (i.e., formal speech/address, story with characters and dialogue, or poetry).

Now let's return to the issue of why we need to understand diction. The communication of a message is the primary concern of a writer or speaker. Because words have both specific and ambiguous meanings, the particular words an author uses affect not only the message the audience (reader) receives, but the way in which we interpret that idea. If you are giving someone directions to get to your house, you will use words that can be interpreted only one way—turn right on Broadway, then look for a Kwik Trip on the left. The same is true of a recipe or instructions about how to change a tire. In these situations, you want to have as little connotation as possible to be sure the message is communicated precisely. But in literature a wide variety of meanings—both denotative and connotative—are often desired. Writers take advantage of the fact that words have more than one meaning by using them to mean more than one thing at the same time. When a bird's color is described as scarlet, instead of just red, or when a word that normally conveys a sight image evokes a taste image, the author is doing more than simply communicating information. As a reader, you need to examine *how* the author communicates his/her point, and word choice is the writer's basic tool.

Look again at the four levels of diction, and notice that poetry has been singled out as being a distinct type of diction. Prose writers may use any of the levels, depending on their style and purpose. In fact, diction can be an effective way to establish characterization as the stuffy college professor speaks with formal diction and the youthful athlete mangles language as he tries to appear sophisticated but instead comes across as uneducated. But "poetic diction" is capable of communicating complex ideas using a minimum number of words; it is economical.

Many people approach poetry as if it is quicksand and automatically assume they will never comprehend it because it's "impossible to understand." They fear it primarily because they are reluctant to invest the mental energy necessary to figure out the denotations and connotations of the words in the poem. The problem isn't that poems lack meaning, it's that their density of meaning often requires some unpacking. Before we consider an example, we need to another term to our discussion: tone.

TONE:

Think of *tone* as the writer's or speaker's attitude toward her/his subject, her/his audience, or her/himself. When you are speaking with your mother, and she is berating you for not taking out the garbage as you had promised, you know she is unhappy by the sound of her voice, along with the words she is using. But we don't have the benefit of a person's voice to clue us in to the emotions when we read. Instead, we must recognize it by examining the various devices the author has used in the text. As

Perrine says, "almost all the elements of literature go into indicating its tone: connotation, imagery, and metaphor; irony and understatement; rhythm, sentence construction, and formal pattern. There is therefore no simple formula for recognizing tone. It is an end product of all the elements in a text."

Here are a few words which could be used to describe an author's tone: hopeful, compassionate, disgusted, scornful, playful, urgent, nervous, proud, dignified, lively. These are not the actual words used by the author to communicate how s/he feels or thinks about his/her subject. They are rather the words we use to describe what we perceive as the author's attitude. *Tone* does not **describe** feelings, but it does **express** emotions. For example, I used to know a man who, in the middle of a heavy rain storm, would say, "Lovely weather, if you're a duck." On the surface, that sentence seems to be cheerful about the rain, expressing that the speaker really enjoys the rain. But the attitude conveyed by the word "duck" tells us that the speaker is actually unhappy about the downpour by sarcastically saying that only a duck could enjoy this weather. Thus, "sarcastic" does not describe the speaker's emotions, but it does describe the way in which my friend communicated his displeasure.

Tone reflects writers' relationships with readers that result from writers making two decisions: (1) how they will express their feeling about the subject, and (2) how they will place themselves socially, intellectually, or morally with regard to their implied readers—as their superiors, looking down; as their inferiors, looking up; or as their equals, addressing them eye-to-eye. It's not necessary for the writer to state directly what s/he is feeling; the attitude can be expressed indirectly and yet be clearly communicated to the reader. However, if we are to fully understand the author's message, then we must comprehend both the words and the feelings involved in the communication. That means that the connotations of words will be a big factor in determining the author's attitude toward his/her subject.

In order to recognize **tonal shift** and to interpret **complexities of tone**, the reader must be able to make inferences based on an active reading of the work. As a start, familiarize yourself with the denotations and connotations of the following **tone words**. This is by no means a comprehensive list, but it is a good start:

- simple, straightforward, direct, unambiguous, candid
- indirect, understated, evasive, elusive
- complicated, complex, difficult
- admiring, worshipping, approving
- complimentary, proud, effusive
- disliking, abhorring, contemptuous
- strident, harsh, acerbic, angry, outraged, violent
- forceful, powerful, confident
- energetic, vibrant
- ironic, sardonic, sarcastic mocking, sly, wry
- satirical, critical
- sharp, biting
- bitter, grim, cynical
- interested, sympathetic, pitiful
- hollow, detached, cold, obdurate
- tired, boring, uninterested
- indifferent, unconcerned, disinterested, apathetic
- impartial, objective
- humorous, playful, joking, frivolous
- flippant, irreverent, facetious
- impish, silly, sophomoric, childish
- resigned, clam, tranquil, quiet, peaceful, reticent
- subdued, restrained
- sad, upset, depressed, melancholy, despairing
- afraid, fearful, horrific, terrified, panicked
- wistful, nostalgic, sentimental
- solemn, serious, somber
- apologetic, penitent, ignominious
- recalcitrant, stubborn, rebellious
- apprehensive, anxious, pensive
- thoughtful, dreamy, fanciful
- vexed, uncertain, confused, ambivalent
- excited, exhilarated, exuberant
- ardent, fervent, zealous
- happy, contented, ecstatic, joyful, giddy
- incredulous, questioning, skeptical, dubious
- insistent, urgent, pressing
- pertinent, pointed, incisive, poignant
- commanding, demanding
- exhortatory, admonishing, censorious, damning
- condescending, arrogant, haughty, dogmatic
- elevated, grand, lofty, bombastic, pretentious
- oratorical, dramatic, melodramatic
- scornful, disdainful, supercilious
- audacious, bold, impudent, insolent
- alluring, provocative, seductive
- shocking, offensive, reprehensible, lurid
- didactic, instructive, pedantic, teachy

Since we're making lists, here is another of **Words That Describe Language**. Different from tone, the words below describe the force or quality of the diction, images, and details. These words describe how the work is written, not necessarily the attitude/tone.

Jargon
Vulgar
Scholarly
Insipid
Precise
Esoteric
Connotative
Plain
Literal
Colloquial
Artificial
Detached
Emotional
Pedantic
Euphemistic
Pretentious
Sensuous
Exact
Learned
Symbolic
Simple
Figurative
Bombastic
Abstract
Grotesque
Concrete
Poetic
Moralistic
Slang
Idiomatic
Concrete
Cultured
Picturesque
Homespun
Provincial
Trite
Obscure
Precise
Exact

Evaluating Diction to Determine Tone

In one sense, analyzing an author's use of diction is quite simple: just note unusual word choices or words that seem to mean more than just what is on the page. In another sense, however, diction is quite complicated: sorting out all the clues that reveal the author's attitude and comprehending the emotional message underlying the words requires a large vocabulary and a willingness to allow the feelings of the text to have an impact on you. But being aware of all the facets of diction is not the same as using them as tools to put the entire piece together. Let's use a short poem as an example of the process of evaluating diction.

Slim Cunning Hands
Walter de la Mare

Slim cunning hands at rest, and cozening eyes—
Under this stone one loved too wildly lies;
How false she was, no granite could declare;
Nor all earth's flowers, how fair.

Begin by making a list of all the "diction words"—all the words that catch your attention. This task is easiest if you draw a line from top to bottom of a piece of paper, dividing the page in half. On the left side, write the words you have chosen and their denotations. (If you are not absolutely sure you know the meaning of a word, you need to look it up in a dictionary.) Use the right column for your thoughts about the connotations of those words.

At the bottom of the page, leave spaces for "tone" and "purpose." As you get ideas that suggest de la Mare's tone, write words that describe what you perceive as the tone of the poem. When you have a glimpse of the poet's purpose—what he wanted to communicate to you—make a note of your thoughts. You may also find it helpful to add a "comments" line to show the progression of your thoughts as you work through the meanings of the words.

This task is not really a linear process; you can't do step one, then move on to step two, and so on. As you understand one connotation, it will affect what you see as the tone of the poem, and grasping de la Mare's tone will allow you to comprehend more of the connotations of the words he has used. Similarly, understanding the words and the tone will help you get the idea behind the whole poem, and looking at the overall picture will lead you to additional insights into the individual words.

Generally, there is no definite right or wrong in an interpretation of a text. But you cannot simply make up an idea and then claim that's what the author was saying. Your understanding must be clearly supported by what's in the text. Compare your analysis of diction in "Slim Cunning Hands" with mine:

WORD/DENOTATION	**CONNOTATION(S)**
slim: slender, thin	thin, long fingers
cunning: shrewd, crafty, deceptive	capable of doing tricks or magic; hands that could do many things
cozening: deceiving by trickery; persuading by cajoling, begging	pleading, lying; eyes that lied
wildly: untamed; uncivilized; intensely; disorderly	loved too much, out of control; exciting
false: not true	unfaithful
granite: a hard stone that is often used for grave markers	stone; the finality of death
declare: state with authority	tell; announce to the world
fair: visually pleasing; not dark; impartial; more or less good.	beautiful, loving, sweet

Tone: bitter, cynical, regretful, sad, ironic
Purpose: The speaker expresses his frustration at feeling love and devotion for a woman who obviously did not deserve it.
Comments: Stone, granite, and flowers all refer to things that accompany the death of a person. Using these images clearly communicates the idea that the woman is dead. The images that refer to the man's love for the woman reveal complex feelings—loving deeply but not wisely. The word "wildly" shows that he cared a great deal for her. "Fair" indicates the warmth of the relationship and that she made the man feel loved in return. But the negative words—"cunning", "cozening", "false"—suggest that she was not trustworthy and that perhaps she only gave the illusion of loving him, rather than truly being in love with the speaker. But this negative feeling then could mean that "fair" also means "impartial," that she treated the man the same way she treated everyone else in her life.

MOOD

Closely related to tone, mood refers to the overall emotional effect or "atmosphere" of a literary work. If tone refers to the emotions the author expresses in the writing of the work, mood refers to the kinds of emotions the work evokes in the reader.

Much like tone, mood is usually described in terms of emotional states: "dreamy," "menacing," "romantic," "anxiety-provoking," "humorous," "light-hearted," "gloomy," "tense." One way to think about the mood of a work is to think of it as a text's emotional "weather." What does it feel like to step (imaginatively) into the world of this book? As with tone, judgments about mood are somewhat subjective; what's depressing to one reader may seem funny to another, and what feels achingly romantic to one may seem overblown or schmaltzy to another.

Frankenstein and Jane Eyre are both famously "moody" novels; in her introduction to her novel, Shelley even describes exactly how she wants to make readers feel. (For both these novels, check out the definition of "gothic" in a dictionary of literary terms. Frankenstein is pretty much straightout gothic, but Jane Eyre plays with gothic conventions in a fascinating way, alternately intensifying and undermining them.)

Those of you who are fans of the Harry Potter novels have surely experienced the profound difference in mood between the first couple of books (Sorceror's Stone, Chamber of Secrets), which remain fairly lighthearted and whimsical throughout, and the much "darker," more "intense" later books (Order of the Phoenix, Half- Blood Prince). Although the same major characters and settings are used throughout the books, and J.K.Rowling's tone does not change all that significantly, the "emotional weather" becomes much stormier as you go along. Heart of Darkness is also powerfully moody, as it takes readers deeper into Congo, and deeper into painful insights about human nature. If you read it, ask yourself as you read how you're feeling, and also ask yourself what words and phrases are making you feel that way.

Any time you look up from a novel and feel vaguely surprised to find yourself in your own familiar, brightly-lit living room, there's a good chance you've been caught up by the influence of mood.

SYNTAX

As we've seen, astute readers look at an author's word choices (diction) and how they contribute to projecting the writer's or speaker's attitude (tone). Both are essential to unlocking meaning. Another related approach is to examine a writer's **syntax**, the ways in which s/he structures sentences. Consider the following:

A. Examine the sentence length. Are the sentences telegraphic (shorter than 5 words in length), medium (approximately eighteen words in length), or long and involved (thirty words or more in length)? Does the sentence length fit the subject matter, what variety of lengths is present? Why is the sentence length effective?

B. Examine sentence patterns. Some elements to consider are listed below:

1. A declarative sentence (assertive) makes a statement, e.g., The king is sick. An imperative sentence gives a command, e.g., Stand up. An interrogative sentence asks a question, e.g., Is the king sick? An exclamatory sentence makes an exclamation, e.g., The king is dead!

2. A simple sentence contains one subject and one verb, e.g., The singer bowed to her adoring audience. A compound sentence contains two independent clauses joined by a coordinate conjunction (and, but, or) or by a semicolon, e.g., The singer bowed to the audience, but she sang no encores. A complex sentence contains an independent clause and one or more subordinate clauses, e.g., You said that you would tell the truth. A compound-complex sentence contains two or more principal clauses and one or more subordinate clause, e.g., The singer bowed while the audience applauded, but she sang no encores.

3. A loose sentence makes complete sense if brought to a close before the actual ending, e.g. We reached Minneapolis that morning after a turbulent fight and some exciting experiences. A periodic sentence makes sense only when the end of the sentence is reached, e.g., That morning, after a turbulent flight and some exciting experiences, we reached Mineapolis.

4. In a balanced sentence, the phrases or clauses balance each other by virtue of their likeness or structure, meaning, and/or length, e.g., He makes me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters.

5. Natural order of a sentence involves constructing sentences so the subject comes before the predicate, e.g., Oranges grow in California. Inverted order of a sentence (sentence inversion) involves constructing sentences so the predicate comes before the subject, e.g., In California grow oranges. This is a device in which normal sentence patterns are reversed to create an emphatic or rhythmic effect. Split order of sentences divides the predicate into two parts with the subject coming in the middle, e.g., In California oranges grow.

6. Juxtaposition is a poetic and rhetorical device in which normally unassociated ideas, words, or phrases are placed next to one another, creating an effect of surprise and wit, e.g., "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough." (from "In a Station of the Metro" by Ezra Pound).

7. Parallel structure (parallelism) refers to a grammatical or structural similarity between sentences or parts of sentence. It involves an arrangement of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs so that elements of equal importance are equally developed and similarly phrased, e.g., He was walking, running, and jumping for joy.

8. Repetition is a device in which words, sounds, and ides are used more than once for the purpose of enhancing rhythm and creating emphasis, e.g. "…government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

9. A rhetorical question is a question which expects no answer. It is used to draw attention to a point and is generally stronger than a direct statement, e.g., If Mr. Ferhoff is always fair, as you have said, why did he refuse to listen to Mrs. Baldwin's argument?

C. Examine sentence beginnings. Is there variety? Do patterns emerge?

D. Examine the arrangement of ideas in a sentence. Are they set out in a special way for a purpose?

E. Examine the arrangement of ideas in a paragraph to see if there is any evidence of any patterns or structure.

STYLE

Style, is the habitual, repeated patterns that differentiate one writer from another. Hemingway is noted for his sparse, objective style indicative of the isolation of people in the twentieth century; Hawthorne for his flamboyant exaggerated word pictures that create a mood of horror or fearful introspection. It is also about the deviation from the expected pattern. This is called *Expectation* (the pattern) and *Surprise* (deviation from the pattern). A discussion of style also is a discussion of the well-chosen word or phrase.

The most important thing about discussing style is to show its relationship to the theme or main idea of the passage. You must interpret the link between theme and language. For example if the theme is about fertility and success, does the author use images of spring, blossoming, growth, or fruition? Does the word choice have connotations of positive, safe, or loving feelings?

Colloquial word choice is not standard grammatical usage and employs slang expressions; this word usage develops a casual tone. Scientific, Latinate (words with Latin roots or origins), or scholarly language would be formal and employ standard rules of usage. Concrete words form vivid images in the reader's mind, while abstract language is more appropriate for discussion of philosophy. Allusive style uses many references to history, literature, or other shared cultural knowledge to provoke or enlighten the reader. Appeals to the senses make the writing more concrete and vivid. Since prose does not have a natural rhythm, an obvious metrical pattern in a passage signals an important idea.

Any time an author uses similes or metaphors, or any other poetic devices, it is because the author wants to draw attention to that particular characteristic and perhaps suggest a more complex relationship to the implied or stated theme.

If the author suddenly or obviously varies sentence structure or length of a sentence, this signals important ideas. Most certainly, a detail or action will appear in these sentences that the author considers crucial. Most sentences in English are loose sentences (subject, predicate, modifiers – He went to the store.). Any time an author wishes to call attention to an important idea a different

sentence structure can be used. These different structures are called emphatic because they emphasize the ideas contained in them.

In analyzing an author's style, then, seek out patterns, and spot variations from the norm. Suppose an author employs many lengthy, balanced sentences with the frequent use of parallelism and anaphora, and the word choice is formal and Latinate. You can say that his style is formal and balanced. If this same author then includes one or two short sentences, a metaphor, and an inverted word order, you can point out these constructions and discuss the importance of the ideas contained in and signaled by these constructions. In addition, you should be on the lookout for the well-chosen word, and/or the compelling turn of phrase. Don't forget: **all** discussion of style should show the relation to the tone or theme of the selection.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

There are several kinds of figurative language, also known as "figures of speech," with metaphor and simile being the most common and best known. Other figures of speech include: hyperbole; understatement; oxymoron; personification; synecdoche; metonomy

On the difference between "figurative" and "literal": with the exception of oxymoron, figures of are not meant to be taken as statements of fact—for instance, the metaphor "Bob was lightning on the track" is not meant to imply that Bob is actually a bolt of charged particles descending from the sky. If you say "His lawyer is a shark," you don't mean to say that he's being represented by a cartilaginous fish with hundreds of rows of teeth. What you're trying to say is that Bob is fast, or that the lawyer is ruthless. When you speak "figuratively," then, you're making an analogy: you're borrowing a quality from a familiar thing, and saying it applies to whatever you're describing. The opposite of "figurative" is "literal," a term which means "in fact, actually," but which is often misused as a simple intensifier. If you say "Pete is literally as big as a house!," you are actually saying Pete is really, truly the size of a house (say, 30 feet tall and spread over a quarter-acre).

Another exciting fact: metaphors are said to have two components, the vehicle and the tenor. The vehicle is the term actually used, like "lightning" or "shark" or "house" in the examples above. The vehicle is the part that is NOT LITERALLY TRUE. The tenor is the implied meaning, i.e., "fast" or "predatory" or "enormous."

IMAGERY

Images in literature are verbal evocations of the senses. Virtually any description of something that, in real life, could be seen, heard, smelled, touched, or tasted can be called an "image." Imagery can come in the form of direct description (i.e., "the waves roiled across the surface of the sea, heavy and gray") or figurative language ("he huddled in his overcoat like a disgruntled bear.")

Imagery is everywhere in writing. In fact, it's hard to imagine how someone could write a literary text without images, without evoking some physical object or scene. For that reason, when you do close reading timed writes in AP during the year, and when you take the national AP test, if a particular passage leaves you feeling stumped about what to say, you can always at least find some imagery to talk about. (Though whether or not you find something meaningful to say about it is another matter.)

When considering the importance of imagery, ask yourself what sorts of images an author is filling your mind with as you read the text. Often, especially when there is a strong pattern of related images, imagery is a window into an author's central imaginative and thematic concerns.

ALLUSION

An allusion is a reference made in a literary text to another text, or to a myth, historical or contemporary event, person, place, artwork, or element of popular culture. In literature classes, the most important kind of allusion is literary allusion—i.e., a reference to another literary text. For example, in The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne makes many direct allusions (references) to the Bible. In The Woman Warrior, the "White Tigers" section alludes to the traditional folktale of Fa Mu Lan.

Here's a more detailed example: In One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, when McMurphy and Harding discuss whether or not Nurse Ratched is attractive, and McMurphy asks, "could you get it up over her even if she wasn't old, even if she was young and had the beauty of Helen?" he is making a literary allusion to Greek mythology—specifically, to the story of the incomparably beautiful Helen of Troy. Of course, literary allusions are only really effective for readers who are familiar with the text being referred to. In Cuckoo's Nest, Harding apparently hasn't read much Greek mythology, and instead substitutes a popular culture allusion with the same basic meaning: "I don't know Helen, but I see what you're drivin' at. . . . I couldn't get it up over old frozen face in there even if she had the beauty of Marilyn Monroe."

Allusions can, admittedly, be a bit frustrating when you're still in the earlier stages of your serious reading career, since you have to constantly check out the footnotes or—if there aren't footnotes—be left in the dark, or be forced to guess at the meaning. But the more you read, the more literary allusions you'll recognize, and the more depth and richness of meaning they'll add to your reading

experience. (As an analogy, think of the way someone who's followed a sports team for years gets much more out of watching a game than a newcomer could because he or she knows all the players, their past records, their personal playing styles, and the obstacles they've overcome. Or the way a serious dance fan sees more in a modern dance piece, because he or she knows how the choreography plays with and against the traditional conventions of dance).

Allusions also tell you a great deal about an author's literary influences and aspirations, as well as about the author's philosophical, intellectual, and political concerns. Some literary allusions are more challenging than others. Most readers have at least some vague knowledge of Helen of Troy, and understand the allusion McMurphy makes. It takes a more experienced reader, though, to recognize the literary allusion in the final sentence of Chapter 25 of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, which reads, "The end was in the beginning." As readers of the poet T. S. Eliot recognize, this is an echo of a key line from Eliot's long poem Four Quartets, and it triggers a wave of thematic associations about the individual's painful search for identity and philosophical meaning. (Eliot himself loved to exploit the power of allusion: his famous poem The Waste Land is essentially a collage of allusions from literary, historical, mythological, and popular culture sources; the resulting footnotes take up as much space on the page as the "poem" itself.)

POINT OF VIEW

Point of view (often abbreviated POV) refers to the perspective from which a story is told. Of all the characters involved in a story, whose eyes are we looking through? Point of view may be "first person" (in which the narrator or main character speaks directly for him or herself, and says things like, "I walked down the street") or "third person" (in which the narrator describes the characters from an outside perspective, saying things like, "He walked down the street").

Like Huck Finn, Jane Eyre and Great Expectations are in first-person. Heart of Darkness has two different first-person narrators, an anonymous frame narrator (a member of the company who hears Marlow tell his story), and then Marlow himself. Many other novels, like The Scarlet Letter and Pride and Prejudice are written in third-person. On very rare occasions, novels have been written in the second person, in which "you" is used instead of "I" or "he / she." Such works, of which Jay McInerney's 1980s novel Bright Lights, Big City, is probably the most famous example, have the disconcerting, voyeuristic effect of speaking as if the reader is doing everything the main character is actually doing, as in "You make a line of cocaine on the back of the pay toilet and snort it quickly." The effect, which at first feels intimate, soon becomes alienating, a sort of literary out-of-body experience. Not surprisingly, few authors imitate McInerney's experiment.

Within a single text, point of view may remain constant, or it may shift from character to character. Sometimes several characters get to tell their stories in the first person (as in The Joy Luck Club). More rarely, there are some sections told in third person, and some in first (as in The Woman Warrior, or in Toni Morrison's Beloved, which we may read during the year in AP). In The Great Gatsby, Nick serves as a firstperson narrator, but he spends a great deal of time telling about Jay Gatsby in the third person. (Which raises the question of why Fitzgerald didn't just tell Gatsby's story in regular old third-person. What does the story gain by having Gatsby's life filtered through Nick's perceptions?)

If you do some supplemental reading, check out the importance of point-of-view in Frankenstein, in which we are presented with several layers of first-person narration. The novel starts with an explorer named Walton telling his own story in letters to his sister, then Walton reciting Victor Frankenstein's oral account of his own life story, then Walton reciting Victor's report of the creature's account of the creature's life. It gets a bit confusing, with all the concentric circles of narration, but Shelley is clearly trying to communicate something about the importance of one's point of view in the moral judgments one makes.

Sometimes a first-person narrator is said to be an "unreliable narrator," meaning either that s/he is naïve or highly biased, or that s/he is deliberately distorting the "truth." When discussing point of view in a first-person text, consider the relationship between the speaker and the author, and look for signs of "unreliability" on the speaker's part. Thinking back on The Great Gatsby, do you regard Nick as an entirely reliable narrator, or not? If you read Gulliver's Travels, be on the lookout for signs that Gulliver's perspective is at times quite different from Swift's. What clues are there that Swift may actually be critical of things that Gulliver says (or critical of Gulliver's moral values, or critical of Gulliver's assumptions about England and the larger world?) FYI: At least in places, Gulliver's Travels provides a good example of structural irony.

As for "third person narration," it can be either "omniscient" or "limited." In "omniscient third person narration," the story is told from an all-knowing perspective, with the narrator able to peer inside the minds of all the characters. In "limited third person narration," the narrator has access to the mind of only one (or perhaps a very small number of characters), while all the other characters are known only by their spoken words and visible actions. In extreme versions of "limited" POV, all of the characters are known only by their spoken words and visible actions; the narrator never tells us anything directly about any character's thoughts or feelings. In novels, since communication of the thoughts and feelings of characters is usually essential to the work's impact on readers, such an extremely limited POV is rare.