

## DICTION, TONE, VOICE

**Diction** refers to a poem's entire word choice, the overall effect, like the ingredients selected for a recipe, creating the *tone* or *mood* of the poem.

The *voice* is the speaker (agent who is speaking through the poem, not necessarily the author), the *persona*. Voice may also determine who is presumably being spoken to or listening/reading the poem. Voice may represent the public or the inner thoughts of the speaker (*dramatic monologues* are often the latter).<sup>2</sup> The persona may be the *invented "I"* (who is not the poet), the poet himself (*Personal "I"*), the *public voice* ("We"), a mysterious voice, a combination, etc. The speaker may also be *invisible* [anonymous, unidentified] if a 3rd person voice narrates a story. In *dramatic monologue*, one person speaks to another-in *epistle*, one writes a letter to another. In contemporary poetry, as compared to more traditional poetry, the speaker is less inclined to assume who the listener is, or that the audience is universal and homogeneous.

The contemporary poem typically uses diction suggesting the poem was not formally composed, tone is natural and with friendly intimacy, uncomplicated word order, not self-conscious or pretentious, more like a neighbour than a professor.<sup>1</sup> The choice of words (and their connotations as well as denotations) contributes to the aural texture of the poem. Tone can be formal, stately, noble, didactic, informal, playful, ironic, angry, tense, exuberant, boisterous, teasing, bored, sad, querulous, nostalgic, etc.

## SOUNDS AND TEXTURES

### N.B. MO= Oliver, Mary *The Poetry Handbook*. Harvest Original, 1994

Poetry should be read aloud [except perhaps for certain poems whose effect depends on the visual layout on the page].

Many poets emphasize their love for the sounds of language. Good poems use fresh language, not *cliches*, and often choose concrete words over abstract. Verbs are often action verbs, not passive. A high density of one syllable words creates a vigorous impression. Some poets like to use "forgotten" words (e.g., archaic words) to add to texture, etc. Inclusion of vivid details is essential for texture creation. MO emphasizes that contemporary poets should avoid old-fashioned stylistic devices such as *poetic diction*, clichés, and *inversion* of word order, as well as *informational* (non-poetic, prosaic) language.

#### The alphabet contains families of sounds:

**vowels:** a e i o u (sometimes w and y)

**consonants:** [asp = aspirate liq=liquid]

**semivowel** [imperfectly sounded without a vowel]:

c (soft, asp) f (asp) g (soft asp) h (asp)

j (asp) l (liq) m (liq) n (liq) r (liq) s (asp) v w x (asp) y z

mute [cannot be sounded w/o a vowel]: b c (hard) d g (hard) k p t

## SOUND PATTERNS

*Onomatopoeia*: Word sounds imitate the natural sound. This remains a small but sometimes important element of language in poetry.

*Alliteration*: Repetition of initial consonant sounds of words, typically in the same line ("summer season")

*Consonance*: Repetition of the non-initial consonant sounds of a word, especially at the stressed syllables w/o vowel rhyming, typically in the same line ("boat/night", "And *drunk* the *milk* of Paradise")

*Assonance*: Repetition of vowel sounds within a line or lines of verse without repeating consonant sounds ("date/fade")

*Euphony*: The property of having flowing pleasing sounds without interruptions.

*Cacophony*: The property of having harsh discordant sounds.

*Sibilance*: The property of having many S- and hissing sounds.

**MO discusses the felt qualities of sounds and the role of mutes (hard and abrupt) versus liquid sounds (softer) etc.- example given is Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening".**

***Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening***

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

Words are selected for their sounds as well as their meaning. Poems often include an unusual use of familiar words to introduce an element of surprise.