



High School

Using Denotations and Connotations to Understand Character

Rationale

One of the ways students gain a deeper understanding of what they read is by exploring the denotations and connotations of the words and phrases used in character descriptions.

This lesson will present an activity to promote students' abilities to decipher denotations and connotations.

Goal

To provide students with practice identifying denotations and connotations to better understand the nuances of language and character description.

Standards

- ✚ **RL.9-10.4** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).
- ✚ **L.9-10.5** Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
- ✚ **L.9-10.5.B** Analyze nuances in the meaning of words with similar denotations.
- ✚ **RL.11-12.4.** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.
- ✚ **L.11-12.5.** Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
- ✚ **L.11-12.5.B.** Analyze nuances in the meaning of words with similar denotations.

Objectives

- ✚ Students will be able to identify denotations and connotations of words to develop a richer understanding of characters' personalities.

Materials

- ✚ Text: *Don Quixote* excerpt (one per student)
- ✚ Denotation/Connotation T-Chart (one per student)
- ✚ Online or Print Dictionary

Procedures

- ✚ Distribute the text and T-chart.
- ✚ Tell students that today they are going to read an excerpt from a text and focus on the words the author uses to describe a character. We're going to look at not only the denotations of words, or dictionary definitions, but the connotations of words, or the ideas or qualities that those words imply.
- ✚ Read the text aloud, or call on volunteers. Discuss and clarify any points that are unclear. Direct students to read the text again to themselves and this time, highlight any character descriptions they come across.
- ✚ Go over the example given on the T-Chart. Note this example elaborates further than students will be expected to do. For each column, students need only to write the words and their meanings for each column (Extra information is marked in red on the T-Chart).
- ✚ Next, using their T-Charts, students will work through the words they highlighted, doing as many as they have time for. Students first write the word in the "Denotations" column along with its definition. They can verify their denotations in a dictionary if necessary. Next, they write the word in the "Connotations" column, along with the feelings and implications of the word.
- ✚ Direct students to think about what these descriptions reveal about the character.
- ✚ Have students write a short paragraph describing the character based on what was learned in this activity. The writing should address the question: What do the descriptions reveal about the character?
- ✚ To wrap up, call on volunteers to read their paragraphs, or hold a discussion where everyone contributes to illuminate how the character is described.

Assessment

- ✚ T-Charts should clearly and accurately describe the words identified. Students should also be able to express their explanations orally. Student writing should cite evidence that supports logical inferences about the word choice.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Denotations

brave (in “a brave figure in his best homespun” (¶1)): Used in the rare sense of “excellent or splendid,” but also calls to mind the more common definition of “having or showing courage”

Connotations

brave: used ironically to suggest a pathetic figure. The author is ridiculing Don Quixote for his delusions of grandeur.

Don Quixote (excerpt from Chapter 1)
by Miguel de Cervantes

In a village of La Mancha, the name of which I have no desire to call to mind, there lived not long since one of those gentlemen that keep a lance in the lance-rack, an old buckler, a lean hack, and a greyhound for coursing. A stock of rather more beef than mutton, a salad on most nights, scraps on Saturdays, lentils on Fridays, and a pigeon or so extra on Sundays, made away with three-quarters of his income. The rest of it went in a doublet of fine cloth and velvet breeches and shoes to match for holidays, while on weekdays he made a brave figure in his best homespun. He had in his house a housekeeper past forty, a niece under twenty, and a lad for the field and marketplace, who used to saddle the hack as well as handle the bill-hook. The age of this gentleman of ours was bordering on fifty; he was of a hardy habit, spare, gaunt-featured, a very early riser and a great sportsman. They will have it his surname was Quixada. This, however, is of but little importance to our tale; it will be enough not to stray a hair's breadth from the truth in the telling of it.

You must know, then, that the above-named gentleman whenever he was at leisure (which was mostly all the year round) gave himself up to reading books of chivalry with such ardor and avidity that he almost entirely neglected the pursuit of his field-sports, and even the management of his property; and to such a pitch did his eagerness and infatuation go that he sold many an acre of land to buy books of chivalry to read, and brought home as many of them as he could get. But of all there were none he liked so well as those of the famous Feliciano de Silva's composition, for their lucidity of style and complicated conceits were as pearls in his sight, particularly when in his reading he came upon courtships and cartels, where he often found passages like "the reason of the unreason with which my reason is afflicted so weakens my reason that with reason I murmur at your beauty;" or again, "the high heavens, that of your divinity divinely fortify you with the stars, render you deserving of the desert your greatness deserves." Over conceits of this sort the poor gentleman lost his wits, and used to lie awake striving to understand them and worm the meaning out of them; what Aristotle himself could not have made out or extracted had he come to life again for that special purpose. He was not at all easy about the wounds which Don Belianis gave and took, because it seemed to him that, great as were the surgeons who had cured him, he must have had his face and body covered all over with seams and scars.

He commended, however, the author's way of ending his book with the promise of that interminable adventure, and many a time was he tempted to take up his pen and finish it properly as is there proposed, which no doubt he would have done, and made a successful piece of work of it too, had not greater and more absorbing thoughts prevented him.

...In short, he became so absorbed in his books that he spent his nights from sunset to sunrise, and his days from dawn to dark, poring over them; and what with little sleep and much reading his brains got so dry that he lost his wits. His fancy grew full of what he used to read about in his books, enchantments, quarrels, battles, challenges, wounds, wooings, loves, agonies, and all sorts of impossible nonsense; and it so possessed his mind that the whole fabric of invention and fancy he read of was true, that to him no history in the world had more reality in it. He used to say the Cid Ruy Diaz was a very good knight, but that he was not to be compared with the Knight of the Burning Sword who with one back-stroke cut in half two fierce and monstrous giants.

He thought more of Bernardo del Carpio because at Roncesvalles he slew Roland in spite of enchantments, availing himself of the artifice of Hercules when he strangled Antaeus the son of Terra in his arms. He approved highly of the giant Morgante, because, although of the giant breed which is always arrogant and ill-conditioned, he alone was affable and well-bred. But above all he admired Reinaldos of Montalban, especially when he saw him sallying forth from his castle and robbing everyone he met, and when beyond the seas he stole that image of Mahomet which, as his history says, was entirely of gold. To have a bout of kicking at that traitor of a Ganelon he would have given his housekeeper, and his niece into the bargain.

In short, his wits being quite gone, he hit upon the strangest notion that ever madman in this world hit upon, and that was that he fancied it was right and requisite, as well for the support of his own honour as for the service of his country, that he should make a knight-errant of himself, roaming the world over in full armour and on horseback in quest of adventures, and putting in practice himself all that he had read of as being the usual practices of knights-errant; righting every kind of wrong, and exposing himself to peril and danger from which, in the issue, he was to reap eternal renown and fame. Already the poor man saw himself crowned by the might of his arm Emperor of Trebizond at least; and so, led away by the intense enjoyment he found in these pleasant fancies, he set himself forthwith to put his scheme into execution.