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The Word Weavers: A Reader's Influence on Ever-Changing Definitions

Words are central to the functioning of society; without words, we would be unable to express our thoughts, communicate with others, or contribute to society in general. That being said, words are not concrete or unwavering, as conveyors of meaning, in the slightest. On the contrary, they are constantly being changed and reinterpreted by different people in different situations. Words are used in language as a way to make complex ideas understandable and relatable to others; however, somewhere along the way we are taught that these "abstractions", constructed through the combination of related concepts, are set in stone, and are *the* definitions of a word rather than *a* definition of a word. The truth is, however, that by allowing continuous reinterpretation of words, one leaves open the possibility of new perspectives and views regarding a potentially clichéd or overworked idea. By comparing author Neil Postman's theory of moldable definitions to an actual work of literature, in this case the poem "We Are Seven" by William Wordsworth, it is possible to not only support Postman's claims but to better understand the impact definitions make on our interactions, personal beliefs, and experiences.

In his essay, "The Word Weavers/The World Makers," Neil Postman challenges a number of widespread beliefs regarding the origins of word definitions. According to him, students are taught, often until graduate level education, that definitions are generally finite. Not only that, but Postman believes that as a result of this teaching, these students "come to believe

that definitions are *not* invented" but rather that they are "part of the natural world, like clouds, trees, and stars" (829). Furthermore, he believes that "in every situation...someone (or some group) has a decisive power of definition" (837). Postman argues that words or their concepts are not concrete; rather, they are continually redefined by whoever holds the power to do so. While this may seem a reasonable assumption, it contradicts the widespread belief that definitions of words are relatively stable and unwavering, or, at the very least, out of the immediate control of the individual. It stands to reason then that whoever or whatever has power of definition is truly in control.

William Wordsworth's poem "We Are Seven" is a prime example of Postman's theory that definitions are significantly unstable and variably influenced. The speaker is presumably an older male relating to the reader a conversation he had with an eight-year-old girl about her deceased siblings. Though they are no longer alive, she still considers them to be present. The speaker, on the other hand, continuously attempts to explain to her that since "their spirits are in heaven" (66), they should not be "counted" as present along with the rest of her siblings. Since the speaker is trying to get the little girl to agree with him, the reader can therefore assume that he considers his definition of the word "death" to be the accurate one. The man uses his initial description of the girl to discredit her beliefs, in hopes of gaining the reader's support by default. In fact, before he even reports his encounter with the girl in question, he comments on the collective naiveté of children: "A simple Child," he says, "what should it know of death?" (1, 4) By suggesting a child's possession of naïve notions regarding death, the speaker reasons with the reader as to his superiority, at least in experience in the subject. He continues on to describe the little girl as having a "rustic, woodland air" and being "wildly clad" (9-10), insinuating rather successfully that she should perhaps not be taken completely seriously.

By the time the girl is first quoted, the reader has already begun to form an opinion against her that is similar to that of the speaker. He draws the reader to his side, speaking to the girl in a sweet though slightly patronizing manner. He speaks from reason and is easily sided with, leaving little reason to be doubted. When the little girl begins to speak, however, the man's reasoning does not seem so absolute. While the speaker cites her innocence as a reason to discredit her beliefs, this same innocence wins over the reader. Though she may be innocent, the girl possesses at the same time a persistence and determination beyond her years. After the man first questions her view of her siblings, the girl attempts to explain their relationship to him. She describes in detail the spot they are buried; that their "graves are green" and that they are only "twelve steps or more from [her] mother's door" (37, 39). She relates to the man how much time she spends singing to her siblings, and that she sometimes "eats [her] supper there" (48). It is evident that the girl very much loves her siblings, something that is universally relatable to the reader. While the man's belief is arguably the more practical of the two, some logic can be found in the girl's argument. Her definition of a relationship appears to be based on the amount of interaction one has with another. That being said, her siblings are, though indirectly, still interacting with her through the proximity of their graves to her home and her time spent there. This logic then molds with the emotional aspect of her argument, which is highly relevant to the majority of readers. The possibility of having a deceased loved one's presence remain among us is an appealing thought, so much so that the reader may find themselves switching sides and defending the innocent views of death held by the girl.

Who then has the power of definition? Is it the man, supported by his logic and reasonability, or the little girl, armed with an innocent love for her siblings? I propose it is in fact neither of these. If Postman's conclusions are correct, or at least considered so for the sake of

this argument, then someone or some group *has* to be able to define words, and in this case the word "death" in particular. If neither the speaker nor the girl has been clearly stated or even insinuated by the author to have this power, the only other candidates are the reader and the author himself. Consider this: if the author leaves up to interpretation the definition of death, or any other word for that matter, does it not stand to reason then that the *reader* would gain the authority to pick whichever side s/he felt inclined to? The reader has the freedom, so given by the author, to make the narrative his own, in a sense. Though many readers will have a specific explainable reason for choosing a side, perhaps an in-depth examination of the reasons behind their decision, this is by no means required, and the reader is free to make their own conclusions as to what is meant by the work as a whole. Whatever the case, the reader has conclusive power to decide what the character's statements meant and overall what the author is trying to say.

With this control, the reader then has the ability to essentially make a work whatever s/he desires. Perhaps this is why we find certain stories and poems so entertaining to read. By giving the reader room for imagination, the author allows them to make a work their own in a sense. Postman states that "We give stability to our world only through our capacity to re-create it by ignoring differences and attending to similarities" (832). Each reader will have their own form of stability and their own way of achieving it. The open-ended nature of many works such as "We Are Seven," then, allows the reader to analyze the work and assign definitions as they see fit, which in turn allows them to attain something from the words that maybe no one else noticed or considered. The flexibility of the English language allows for creative freedom to turn a word into an entirely new definition, one that is completely valid, yet still uniquely their own.

Works Cited

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