

## Connotation Denotation Handout

### AAPI Women Voices: Untold Stories Through Poetry

#### 1. Denotation and connotation refer to different meanings a single word can have

- A. Denotation is the literal, dictionary definition of a word.
- Hollywood denotes Hollywood denotes a neighborhood in the central region of Los Angeles, California.
- B. Connotation is emotional, social or cultural meaning of a word that goes beyond its dictionary definition. Words can have positive (favorable) or negative (unfavorable) connotations. Connotations are on a spectrum of positive or negative.
- Hollywood connotes materialist, glamorous, and superficial lifestyles or beliefs.

#### 2. A pair or set of words can have the same or similar denotation, but very different connotations. Therefore, poets are very intentional with the words they use in order to achieve a desired impression.

Example: "I live in a *house*, but I want to live in a *home*."

|           | Denotation   | Connotation  |
|-----------|--|--|
| Home      | the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household | Family, love, security<br>"Home is where the heart is"                           |
| Hollywood | A neighborhood in the central region of Los Angeles, California.                       | Materialist, glamorous, and superficial lifestyles<br>"A typical Hollywood plot" |
| Dove      | A small wild bird that is related to pigeons   | Gentle<br>"The new policy contains a dovish increase in interest rate."          |
| Shark     | A large and often dangerous sea fish with very sharp teeth                             | Ruthless<br>"This loan shark charges 10% interest per week."                     |

#### 3. Negative and Positive Connotation

| Negative connotation | General Denotation | Positive connotation      |
|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| Intrusive, Nosy      | Interested         | Curious, Inquisitive      |
| Stubborn, Inflexible | Persistent         | Strong Willed, Determined |

#### 4. Words can have the same denotation but still give off different impressions.

| Negative connotation          | General Denotation | Positive connotation       |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Stingy, Penny-pinching, Cheap | Thrifty            | Economical, Resourceful    |
| Off-the-wall, Bizarre, Weird  | Uncommon           | Exceptional, Extraordinary |

*Consider these two sentences that describe essentially the same situation, but in different words. How does changing the word choice affect the impression of the sentence?*

- a) The activist spoke passionately of his platform at the demonstration.
  - Impression: This person cares about changing the world.
- b) The vigilante fanatically preached his ideology at the riot.
  - Impression: This person is crazy and sticks to his beliefs even if they are wrong.

## 5. Poem of the Day: “Guantanamo” by Shadab Zeest Hashmi

- A. Background of the poem
  - Short for Guantanamo Bay Detention Center in the US Cuban Naval Base
  - Imprisons suspected members of al-Qaeda (Islamic militant group) and the Taliban (Islamic fundamentalist group) as part of the larger “War on Terror”.
  - Infamous for its many human rights abuses, use of torture tactics on prisoners and lack of due process.
- B. Put circles around negative connotations and put rectangles around positive connotations.
  - Discuss the meaning the connotations give to the poem according to the unit slides

## 6. “Desert Flowers II” by Janice Mirikitani

- A. Background for “Desert Flowers II”
  - WWII, 1944: Executive Order 9066 issued by President Roosevelt incarcerated 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent in 10 rural concentration camps around the US.
  - An injustice born out of racism, wartime hysteria, and plain greed, the internment resulted in lost livelihoods and broken communities.
  - Mirikitani and her family were incarcerated in Rohwer, Arkansas.
  - Mirikitani uses “I” in the poem to refer to the community of incarcerated Japanese Americans.
- B. Be prepared to write your own poem.
 

*You will be writing your own poem using “I” to refer to a community.*

  - *Therefore pay attention to how Mirikitani uses it.*
  - *And pay attention to the concluding line.*
  - *Learn how poets write the concluding line of their poems. This will help you to write your own.*
- C. Classwork: Identify the first 3 connotations. Put circles around negative connotations and rectangles around positive connotations.
  - Discuss the meaning of the connotations given to the poem.

## 7. Fold-It Poem group activity

### Instructions

1. Each student enters his/her name at the top line. Each student starts his/her Fold-It Poem.
2. Writer 1 will write one line except the last word of poetry in the first box. Writer 1 will write the last word of their line in second box. Before passing it on, Writer 1 will fold the paper so that Writer 2 can only see the last word of line A.
3. Pass it on to Writer 2.
4. Writer 2 will write line B using the last word of Writer 1's last word as the first word of his/her line.
5. Repeat the process until every writer has gone once.
6. Pass the poem back to the student with the name at the top. The student unfolds it and read it back to the team.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Writer 1 Line A                        | I like...<br>Example: I like fruit because it is |
| Writer 1 last word<br>Writer 2 Line B  | Example: Sweet                                   |
| Writer 2 last word<br>Writer 3 Line C  |  |
| Writer 3 last word<br>Writer 4 Line D  |  |
| Writer 4 last word<br>Writer 5 Line E  |  |
| Writer 5 last word<br>Writer 6 Line F  |  |
| Writer 6 last word<br>Writer 7 Line G  |  |
| Writer 7 last word<br>Writer 8 Line H  |  |
| Writer 8 last word<br>Writer 9 Line I  |  |
| Writer 9 last word<br>Writer 10 Line J |  |

## 8. Connotation Homework

- A. Practice writing about the same subject in different ways using positive and negative connotations of words. Poets and writers choose words carefully to achieve a desired effect. For each scenario below, write a short description that is favorable and a short description that is unfavorable.

Example: A fragrant and ripe fruit (favorable) vs. a pungent and mushy fruit (unfavorable)

1. Describe a rainy day.

*Favorable:*

*Unfavorable:*

2. Describe a football game.

*Favorable:*

*Unfavorable:*

3. Describe a party with many attendees.

*Favorable:*

*Unfavorable:*

4. Describe a plate of broccoli.

*Favorable:*

*Unfavorable:*

5. Describe the feeling after running a lap.

*Favorable:*

*Unfavorable:*

**B. Identify at least 5 additional connotations in the rest of “Desert Flowers II”**

|   | Word | Denotation | + or –<br>Connotation | Cultural, social, or<br>emotional meaning | What is the author trying<br>to say by using this<br>particular word? |
|---|------|------------|-----------------------|---|---|
| 1 |      |            |                       |   |   |
| 2 |      |            |                       |   |   |
| 3 |      |            |                       |   |   |
| 4 |      |            |                       |   |   |
| 5 |      |            |                       |   |   |
| 6 |      |            |                       |   |   |
| 7 |      |            |                       |   |   |
| 8 |      |            |                       |   |   |

**C. Discussion questions on “Desert Flowers II”**

- a) What events taking place in Japanese internment camps does Mirikitani describe in her poem?
- b) What do desert flowers symbolize?
- c) What words with positive connotations did she use and how does that shape the meaning of the poem? How do words with negative connotations shape the meaning of the poem?

- d) How well does Mirikitani prove her point?

Mirikitani begins her poem with

“What are you  
Where are you *really from*?  
Go back to where you belong  
What are you?”

And ends with

“So when they ask *What Am I*?  
I tell them,  
and shake the dust from my hands.”

- e) U.S.-born Asian Americans are often asked the opening questions in “Desert Flowers II”. Asian Americans are perceived as perpetual foreigners even many of them were born in the U.S. We don’t ask white people these questions. Why do these questions show ignorance?
- f) The inspiration for Mirikitani’s poem was the resilience of the Japanese American community during internment. What difficult experience have you overcome? How did you feel during and after the experience?

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Class \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

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### Homework 2

1. Read Sahra Vang Nguyen's biography in the "AAPI Women Voices" story.
2. Analyze the connotations in Sahra Vang Nguyen's "Idolize" poem.