

**The Aesthetics of Words.**

The following article on the "Aesthetics of Words" by Prof. L. A. Sherman, appeared in the September number of the North Western Journal of Education. It is one of a series of ten articles by the professor which have been running since then. It is reprinted for the benefit of students in the literature courses through the courtesy of Prof. Sherman and J. H. Miller, publisher of the North-Western Journal.

Words, we have been taught, are signs of ideas. This is true, but not more true than that they are also signs of emotion; and often of both ideas and emotions together.

To begin at the beginning, it should be noted that words are, primarily, the signs of things. Children learn first, things, then the names of things. The mother puts her hand upon some article or object that the child has grown to know familiarly, and says "chair," or "look," or "table." Thus the child learns to identify these things respectively when their names are spoken. Each one of them bears perhaps already some name of the child's own making, or some other imitative or simplified nursery designation. But now that the child is old enough to begin mending its baby dialect, every such object will be recognized no less quickly by mention of the new name than of the old. Manifestly, then, we first use words as names of things, as signs by which we identify objects and actions to one another.

It should be noted that the objects first named thus to the child are always in sight. After the names have been often and familiarly used to designate and identify the things they stand for, they become signs of the ideas of the things. That is, if the objects they designate are no longer present to the eye of the child or mother, mental pictures, or "ideas," of these objects will come to mind when their names are mentioned. Whether children see a mental picture of the things named while in plain sight, is not so clear. In general, adult minds do not. If there is occasion to contemplate any object known to be in the room or in eyeshot, on mention of the name we instinctively turn and view the object and save a picture of it. Thus "flatiron," or "handsaw," if named under certain circumstances, prompt us to turn where a handsaw may be seen hanging on the wall, or a flatiron resting upon the stove. But if these words are uttered while the mind cannot identify by discovering the objects at first hand, a picture of each, more or less vivid according to the occasion, will form itself in the mental field of view.

In the circumstances just considered it is clear that the words used as signs of ideas are not, so far as we are conscious, signs also of feeling. They serve as means by which the speaker calls up the pictures respectively of the things he wishes to the mind of the hearer. To the hearer they serve as signs of what the speaker sees in his own mind, and for the sake of which he speaks. But words are not always thus merely names of things, or signs of the mental pictures of things, with no accompanying emotion. They seem sometimes, in turn, to be wholly signs of feeling. This feeling may be simply physical, as indicated in such, oh, and like interjections of pain. It is oftener more completely mental, as in surprise, disgust, dismay, in impatient, indignation, and contempt. Such words as "what," "fie," "pah," used as signs of these feelings, so far as we are conscious of their occasion, are purely emotional, and unaccompanied by any determinate mental picture of which they can be properly the name.

The number of words like those just named, serving solely as signs of feeling, is relatively very small. To these should be added various other expressions, as "beautiful," "splendid," "bravo," occasionally used as interjections, that lose in the stress of feeling whatever pictorial quality or definiteness as ideas properly belong to them as nouns or adjectives. Then there is a class of some magnitude comprising terms like "hush," "help," "murder," which retain more or less of their pictorial definiteness as ideas, while serving for the moment as signs of strong feeling.

This last is the transition class between signs of feeling and signs of ideas. They are not properly signs of ideas and feelings together, like the group of words now to be considered. They are primarily idea-words, impressed for the nonce into the service of exceptional and temporary emotion. The great mass of words consist primarily and chiefly of signs of ideas, which yet carry or suggest some kind or degree of emotion. In strictness, no name of an object that brings to the mind's eye a picture of the thing for which it stands can fail of bringing also along to consciousness somewhat of the partiality or the prejudice, or of the habitual attitude of the mind toward that object. In the case of "dove," "rabbit," "vampire," "jackal," and ideas similarly at the extremes of sympathy, we are readily and constantly aware that each word not only means a thing that looks so and so, but is so and so in nature. Hence the sign of the thing is regarded with somewhat of the feeling that accompanies contemplation of the thing itself. Objects that have never been looked upon with any special predilection or aversion will of course be pictured in mind with no apparent echo

or memory of emotion. Yet even names as neutral of ordinary emotional interest as "flatiron," or "handsaw" may take on, under exceptional circumstances, exceptional significance to the sensibilities. One accustomed in boyhood to use the handsaw will never quite lose out of mind the experiences had with it. Impressions had of some such thing in abnormal conditions of the mind sometimes haunt the memory, when the object is seen, or the name pronounced, in restored mental health. In sum, it may be affirmed that all objects in their last aspects are potential of some effect to the sensibilities, and that all kinds and degrees of feeling produced by the presence of objects themselves are more or less fully reproduced by the words serving as signs of these objects or of their ideas.

Words, then, have emotional as well as logical meanings. Their emotional meanings cannot be told by logical definitions, and are not to be sought for in the dictionaries. But literature is in large measure made up of meanings that dictionaries do not give.

Perhaps it will be helpful, at this point, to test the fulness of a few dictionary definitions. Let us look up clover, and autumn, and home in the International or the Century, and note how much of the real meanings has been set down. It becomes quickly clear that, if we are to find the power of words, we must know or study the things for which they stand.

In our study of the emotional effects of words it will be helpful to recognize certain classes. Words sometimes make us know first and feel afterwards, sometimes make us feel first and know after. Properly they should make us first to know. When we hear the name of any object mentioned, we proceed to realize or identify the meaning by either reviving our acquaintance with that object, or creating an acquaintance with it by what we call imagination. For instance, if the word sun is mentioned, we find ourselves challenged to know or realize what is meant, and in consequence straightway discover in our minds some representation of the sun as we see it in the sky. Here surely we know first, and know by a revival of impressions that have come to us by the sense of sight. Then comes to consciousness somewhat of how it feels to look at the sun, some sense of its power to affect the eyes when one looks at it. This is of course a feeling, and the effect of this feeling is greater than the effect, which preceded, of the knowing. We might represent the proportion between these by two parts of a line.



Let ab represent the effect or the duration of the effect produced by seeing the mental picture. It will need to be prolonged to some point like c, to indicate the stronger, or more lasting effect that now comes from restoring the experience of trying to look at the sun. If, on the other hand, we examine the effect of such a word as sting, or throb, or hoarse, or drowsy, provided we know it experimentally, we shall note that we seem to feel first and know afterwards. In other words, we do not identify the word, as in the first case, by a mental picture of the thing it stands for, but use the revival of the experience instead as our chief means. Our line, in such case, would be divided much like this:



The echo of the feelings at some time had from hoarseness or from being stung at once possesses us pretty strongly. This we will indicate by cb. The mind, now by dwelling upon the experience, brings to itself something more than feeling, and manages to picture somewhat of the cause which or place where. This extension of the meaning, which is plainly in the direction of knowing as opposed to feeling, will be indicated if we prolong our line to some such point as a.

Names of objects familiarly known to us through the sense of sight, which names occasion our seeing at once clear mental images of the objects named, and with little consequent effect upon the sensibilities, we may call conceptual or prosaic. We may compare, in diagrams, certain kindred examples. The intellectual line lengthens in proportion to the details brought to mind in the mental view. The emotional element will always be in dicted by the part of the line marked bc or cb.

	a	b	c
candle	—	—	—
lamp	—	—	—
chandelier	—	—	—
stool	—	—	—
chair	—	—	—
ottoman	—	—	—
ladder	—	—	—
stairs	—	—	—
elevator	—	—	—
chaise	—	—	—
carriage	—	—	—
coach	—	—	—
riding-whip	—	—	—
raw-hide	—	—	—
goad	—	—	—
agate	—	—	—
onyx	—	—	—
diamond	—	—	—

The last two groups bring us to the point of transition between this class and the one next higher. Words which make us "feel before we know" by way of reviving in us a past experience, or any sort of word that, representing

something of which we have experiential knowledge, has its major effect with the sensibilities and not the intellect, will belong to the new class. We will call it experiential or reminiscent. It will include only such terms as stand for things actually known at first hand by the sense or by inner experience. For example, goad to those who have never seen that instrument will not be reminiscent, but associational, and will have its place in a later class. In like manner fright, blame, neuralgia, when or if we have experienced each, are experiential. It must be borne in mind that to belong to this class a term must stand for an experience that is entirely personal, and not witnessed or recognized in another. The following exhibit of examples grouped as before for more ready comparison should be examined. Then extended lists both of conceptual and of experiential words, grouped like the exhibits just given, should be carefully selected and compared.

	c	b	a
pungent	—	—	—
remorse	—	—	—
poignant	—	—	—
corrosive	—	—	—
humble	—	—	—
meek	—	—	—
lowly	—	—	—
chagrin	—	—	—
regret	—	—	—

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