

Why Words Matter

"Words, words. They're all we have to go on."

--Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

This is not so much a quick lesson on diction, though it will deal tangentially with that idea, rather it is more about how particular words, placed in particular places within a poem can have a resounding impact on the overall work. Think of a single play in a long game which changes everything. The direction, the tone, the subject and our understanding of the poem is moved, shifted, altered by the placement and use of a key word or two.

Here's a poem entitled "Not Love Perhaps" by A.S.J. Tessimond:

This is not Love **perhaps** – Love that lays down
Its life, that many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown –
But something written in lighter ink, said in a lower tone:
Something **perhaps** especially our own:
A need **at times** to be together and talk –
And then the finding we can walk
More firmly through dark narrow places
And meet more easily nightmare faces:
A need to reach out **sometimes** hand to hand –
And then find Earth less like an alien land:
A need for alliance to defeat
The whisperers at the corner of the street:
A need for inns on roads, islands in seas, halts for discoveries to be shared,
Maps checked and notes compared:
A need **at times** of each for each
Direct as the need of throat and tongue for speech.

I've highlighted the words within the poem that I will refer to as **turn** words, points where the reader is nudged and influenced to think or understand something in a new way. If removed, the power of the lines they inhabit is unrestrained. By being present, that power is muted and creates a slowing down, a turn away from the immediate and to something more blunted, and possible.

Consider the words being used (**perhaps, at times, sometimes**) and how uncommitted they are to anything, much more neutral and common than anything, yet without them being placed at their particular places, at their particular points in the poem, it all changes. Try reading the poem without these words and you will see the difference.



Elite Literary Book Group
Advanced Academic Training