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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Sound, Tone, and Rhythm

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “The Bells”:

Euphony, *n.*

Agreeable sound, especially in the phonetic quality of words

Expostulation, *n.*

Earnest reasoning in an effort to dissuade or correct

From “The City in the Sea”:

Pinnacles, *n., plural*

1. Small turrets
2. Pointed formations; peaks
3. Highest points; culminations

Viol, *n.*

Early stringed instrument played with a curved bow

More than any other form of writing, poetry communicates not only through the meanings of the words it employs, but also through elements that transcend dictionary definition, especially the *sound* values of words (the sounds that they make, both individually and in combination with one another) and its *tone* and *rhythm*. In reading a poem, we should first relax and experience the poem’s music. Learning to hear how a poem communicates is often an important first step in understanding what it communicates.

?? Discussion Activities

Like many other poets and critics, Poe likened poetry to music. If possible, play a recorded recitation of “The Bells” to the class (several are available on CDs or the Internet). Ask the class to characterize the tone and rhythm of each section of the poem. Point out how the third line of each section sets its “key”—“merriment,” “happiness,” “terror,” and “solemn thought,” respectively—and encourage students to find words in each section that help create that mood, such as “tinkle,” “liquid,” “scream,” “groan,” etc. Discuss the use of sound values to underscore these effects—e.g., the e sounds in the third section (“scream,” shriek”) and the o sounds in the fourth (“groan,” “monotone,” “tolls”).

Give an essentially flat and uninflected reading of “The City in the Sea,” and then play a professional recording of the poem. Ask your students the following questions: What is the intended effect of “The City in the Sea”? What specific sound devices are used to try to achieve that effect? How successful is the poem in achieving its intentions?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to examine the four sections of “The Bells” and then write a paragraph for each section, describing its dominant mood and pointing out key terms or poetic devices used to create that mood.

Homework

Read the poems “Annabel Lee” (pp. 319–320) and “Ulalume” (pp. 312–315). Keep in mind the details of Poe’s life as given in the biography and timeline on pp. 4–5 of the Reader’s Guide.