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Simple words or phrases often speak volumes about one’s feelings or intentions, and such careful wording is frequently used in literature to express the subtly or extremity of an author’s feelings. This type of emotional wordplay often assists the reader to understand the significance of the event the author describes.  Examples of such finely-tuned diction can be found in classics such as: *The Iliad*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and the memoir *An American Childhood* by Annie Dillard. *An American Childhood* details the childhood of the author, touching on her various shifting interests, growing awareness of the world, and events that shaped her youth. Dillard uses her connotative diction to further the reader’s understanding of the significance Dillard’s move from their first house, her discovery of the library, and her ascension into young adulthood.

Moving to a new home is a common occurrence in many people’s lives and can often be an upsetting one, especially when young. In Dillard’s case her family moves from her early childhood home when she was eight. Soon after moving she becomes fixated with Sherlock Holmes, wanting to use his talents of observation to capture and preserve her own life and past. Dillard’s wish to “notice everything” (Dillard, 135) conveys how important and urgent it is to her to “trap” (Dillard, 135) her past memories. Her desire to remember “everything” (Dillard, 135) stems from both her love of Mr. Holmes’ brilliant mind and her damaged feelings about leaving her old home. She wishes to return, but this is impossible, so she instead fruitlessly attempts to remember “everything” (Dillard, 135) around her. Her memories of her old home are like “scenes of light” (Dillard, 135) to Dillard. This careful wording shows the reader how precious the memories of her past home are to her.  By employing connotative diction Dillard is able to transport the reader into her thoughts, furthering their understanding of how significant her memories of her old home were to her at this time in her life.

A love of reading is not uncommon; books often present an adventure, escape, or a roller coaster of new information. When the young Dillard discovers the library she is suddenly catapulted into a new world of knowledge. She describes her favorite books as “bomb[s]” (Dillard, 263) which serves to connect the reader more deeply to her feelings about the books she reads in her childhood, for this wording insights visions of explosions and action, perfectly complimenting the excitement reading a new book. Dillard’s childhood love of reading is so intense that she expresses the excitement of opening a new book as “a land mine you wanted to go off”(Dillard, 263). Her use of this metaphor fills the reader, again, with images of explosions which transfer Dillard’s excitement to the reader. Dillard’s eloquent use of her creative diction and metaphors helps the reader connect and understand her intense excitement when she reads, along with the significance of her childhood love of books.

Adolescence is often a time when one feels penned in, unable to be truly independent, and angry because of it. Dillard’s ascension into young adulthood was a rocky one. Dillard states that she “felt it coming” (Dillard, 230) and when “it hit” (Dillard, 230) she becomes angry and rebellious, even being “suspended from school for smoking”(Dillard, 243). Her use of the phrases “felt it coming” (Dillard, 230) and “it hit” (Dillard, 230) are reminiscent of an on coming wave, something that will sweep you up and tear you away from all you know. For some people this is what adolescence is like, a tidal wave of new brain chemistry and emotions that threaten to rend them apart. Dillard’s clever use of connotative diction both clarifies her intended meaning, and also helps the reader understand and feel the significance of her emotions as an agitated and rebellious youth.

Events like moving from their first house, Dillard’s discovery of the library, and her ascension into young adulthood are all examples of Dillard using her connotative diction to further the readers understanding of these significant events. Dillard eloquently explains her feelings about leaving her home and her wish to remember all she sees, she insights visions of excitement and discovery when discussing her love of reading, and she transports the reader into her troubled adolescent mind. Good diction and rhetoric have always been valued; from Roman emperors, to presidents, prime ministers, an author’s a firm handle on words has always been a sign of intelligence and quick wit.