

Riverside City College
English 1BH
“Word Definitions in Literature”

Purpose: Upon completion of this activity, students will understand the multiple layers of meaning in literary word choices and be able to use a word definition in their original analysis of a short story.

1. Read the short story “A Dream of Armageddon,” and mark out all instances of the word “dream” on the first four pages.
2. Read and understand this definition of and etymology of the word “dream.” You may also do your own investigation of the word.

dream (n.)

- A. Imaginary events seen in the mind while sleeping.
- B. hope or wish.
- C. A visionary scheme; a wild conceit; an idle fancy.

From Middle English *dreem*, from Old English *drēam* (“joy, pleasure, gladness, delight, mirth, rejoicing, rapture, ecstasy, frenzy, music, musical instrument, harmony, melody, song, singing, jubilation, sound of music”), from Proto-Germanic **draumaz*, from earlier **draugmaz*, from Proto-Indo-European **dʰrewgʰ-* (“to deceive, injure, damage”). The meaning was influenced in Middle English by Old Norse *draumr* (“dream”), from same Proto-Germanic root. Cognate with Scots *dreme* (“dream”), North Frisian *drom* (“dream”), West Frisian *dream* (“dream”), Low German *Droom*, Dutch *droom* (“dream”), German *Traum* (“dream”), Danish *drøm*, Swedish *dröm* (“dream”), Icelandic *draumur* (“dream”). Related also to Old English *drēag* (“spectre, apparition”), Dutch *bedrog* (“deception, deceit”), German *Trug* (“deception, illusion”).

But Old English *dream* meant only “joy, mirth, noisy merriment,” also “music.” And much study has failed to prove that Old English *dream* is the root of the modern word for “sleeping vision,” despite being identical in spelling. Either the meaning of the word changed dramatically or “vision” was an unrecorded secondary Old English meaning of *dream*, or there are two separate words here. OED offers this theory: “It seems as if the presence of *dream* ‘joy, mirth, music,’ had caused *dream* ‘dream’ to be avoided, at least in literature, and *swefn*, lit. ‘sleep,’ to be substituted”

3. Using this range of definitions, imagine that Wells was thinking of all of these meanings when he repeated the word “dream” so many times. Make an argument on a separate sheet of paper as to which definitions he was referencing most. Then, look at the last line of the short story, and make an argument as to how the notion of the word “dream” changed to “nightmare” by the end of Wells’s story. Ground your argument in the definitions and etymologies of the word “dream.”

4. Write down two questions that you have about this process of using definitions and etymologies for literary analysis. Write them HERE:
5. Meet with a professor to go over your answers and discuss your two questions. Have that person sign and date below:

Instructor signature

date