

## Cockroaches

### Connotation and Denotation

#### Part I - Answer these questions before reading.

1. What is the denotation of “cockroach”? (Use a dictionary.)

#### Part II - Read the following poems by Wild and Morely to see what meanings they have for roaches. Underline the words that you think reveal either negative or positive connotation. Then answer the questions that follow the poems.

##### *Roaches*

Last night when I got up to let the dog  
out I spied a cockroach in the  
bathroom crouched flat on the cool  
porcelain, delicate antennae probing  
the toothpaste cap and feasting  
himself on a gob of it in the bowl: I  
killed him with one unprofessional  
blow, scattering arms and legs and  
half his body in the sink...

I would have no truck with roaches,  
crouched like lions in the ledges of sewers  
their black eyes in the darkness alert for  
tasty slime, breeding quickly and without  
design, laboring up drainpipes through filth  
to the light;

I read once they are among the most antediluvian  
of creatures, surviving everything, and in more  
primitive times thrived to the size of your hand...

yet when sinking asleep or  
craning at the stars, I can feel  
their light feet probing in my  
veins, their whiskers nibbling  
the insides of my toes; and neck  
arched, feel their patient  
scrambling up the dark tubes of  
my throat.

--Peter Wild



*from Nursery Rhymes for the Tender-hearted*

Scuttle, scuttle, little roach-  
How you run when I approach:  
Up above the pantry shelf  
Hastening to secrete yourself.

Most adventurous of vermin, How I  
wish I could determine How you  
spend your hours of ease, Perhaps  
reclining on the cheese.

Cook has gone, and all is dark- Then  
the kitchen is your park; In the garbage  
heap that she leaves Do you browse  
among the tea leaves?

How delightful to suspect All the  
places you have trekked: Does  
your long antenna whisk its  
Gentle tip across the biscuits?

Do you linger, little soul,  
Drowsing in our sugar bowl?  
Or, abandonment most utter,  
Shake a shimmy on the butter?

Do you chant your simple tunes  
Swimming in the baby's prunes? Then,  
when dawn comes, do you slink  
Homeward to the kitchen sink?

Timid roach, why be so shy?  
We are brothers, thou and I,  
In the midnight, like yourself,  
I explore the pantry shelf!

--Christopher Morley

**Part III - Answer these questions based on your knowledge of the denotation of cockroaches.**

3. Look at the denotation of a cockroach. What characteristics in the definition do both poems include in their poems?
4. What characteristics does Wild give his roaches that are not in the dictionary definition?
5. What characteristics does Morley give to roaches that are not in the dictionary definition?

**Part IV - Answer these questions based on your knowledge of the connotation of cockroaches each poem discusses.** In each poem, the insect acquires meaning beyond its dictionary definition. Both poets lead us away from a literal view of roaches to a nonliteral one.

6. Which poet succeeds in giving roaches favorable connotations? What positive connotations are given to the cockroach?
7. Which poet comes closer to expressing your own feelings about roaches? Give examples from the poem that best expresses your viewpoint.