

Evaluate the effectiveness of diction as an adjunct to meaning in John Updike's "Player Piano".

In "Player Piano", John Updike uses personification to give life to a 'unhuman' piano. By using diction to communicate his ideas, he effectively allows the reader to explore the psyche of a "Player Piano". In the first couple lines of the poem, assonance and consonance are present. In line one, these musical devices dominate the sentence as there is a repetition of the "ick" sound in "stick", "click", and "snicker" suggesting to the reader the sharpness of the piano, also reminding readers of the constant clicking sound found in mechanical devices. The harsh "k" sounds of the second line in "chuckling", "knuckle", and "key" suggest the abrupt sound of air passing through the paper roll of a player piano. In the next line, the word flicker is a phonetic intensive, closely associated with word 'flame'. Since the 'flame' is a symbol of life and light, it gives the reader a feeling that the piano is alive, further adding to the effect of personification in this poem. In the last line of the first stanza, there is consonance in "these", "keys", and "melodies". The repeat of the smooth "s" sound in these three consecutive words evokes a feeling of rhythm or harmony - pleasant sounds from the player piano.

The next stanza starts with an internal rhyme: "My paper can caper". The simple rhyme suggests that the paper can leap and jump about like a child. The connotation of the word "abandon" adds to this suggestion of unrestrained movement or activity. The words "dint" and "din" are alliterative, and the suggestion is that the "din" of the piano broadcasts its sound far and wide. In line three of stanza two there is both internal rhyme and assonance in "man", "band", and "hand". Updike tells us that the piano has a sense of pride in its ability to produce its own music, unassisted by any human hand. Of course there is irony in this because it was a human who originally programmed the piano. The last two lines of the second stanza are extremely rhythmic, and closely imitate the sort of rhythm that comes from the piano as in the line: "The tones I turn on from within." The words "tones" and "turn" receive especially heavy stress and we can imagine the strings of the piano being struck forcefully by the hammers.

Stanza three develops a sharp contrast in the type of sound the piano produces; there is both a jumble of deep rumbling sounds, and a sound as light and as cheerful as the moon in the sky. Updike seems to use "light" in a punning way because being light can mean both soft as in sound, or bright as in light. The dual sense of the word helps enrich the imagery of the poem because it can seem as both a visual and an auditory experience. The second from last line, in addition to containing assonance, is syntactically interesting because of the placement of the word never: "But never my numb plunker fumbles." The rather awkward positioning of the word "never" seems to suggest the way in which the piano, a completely controlled mechanical instrument, can meet the challenge of awkwardly placed notes. Though a human hand might fail in its task, the player piano, no matter how difficult the tone, never "misstrums" itself.

Player Piano is an extremely good example of the way in which sound, syntax, and diction can lend support to the theme and subject of a poem. This piano is like a machine with a well-developed mind and a sense of importance. It does a very good job of exploring its life and its achievements.

