

# Tagore's Poetry and Vocabulary

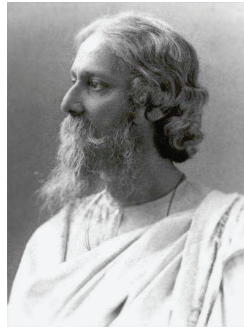
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## Section Objectives:

- Make inferences from details; identify main idea; and identify cause and effect
- Synthesize details from several sources
- Analyze symbols
- Identify similes
- Understand word origins, denotation and connotation
- Use context clues to determine meaning

## *Selected poetry by Rabindranath Tagore*

### *Introduction to Rabindranath Tagore and his poetry.*



A photo of Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore is a prolific writer, visual artist, playwright, novelist, composer, and poet from the region of Bengal, which is located in the northeastern portion of South Asia. Tagore, who first began writing poetry at the age of eight, is said to have transformed Bengali literature during the second half of the nineteenth century and through the first half of the twentieth century. One of his greatest accomplishments is winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913, a first for anybody from the continent of Asia. Showing signs of promising talent at an early age, he published his first poetry using the name *Bhanushingho*, meaning “Sun Lion.” A true revolutionary, Tagore rejects classical Indian poetic forms and incorporates philosophical contemplation into much of his work. This artist has had such a profound influence over the region that both Bangladesh and India have adopted two of his songs as their national anthems.

Tagore's ingenuity in his art can be attributed to his privileged education. During a tour of India with his father, he read and studied biographies, various sciences, and poetry. Shortly after his diligent studies, he wrote several pieces that became the foundation for his artistic career. His life was not without turmoil though. Even with his strong desire to learn and his

obvious talent and intelligence, he failed in his attempt to earn a law degree at University College London. His misfortune is also marked by the death of two of his children before they reached adulthood.



One of Tagore's pieces of art

Much of Tagore's life revolved around his religion, and this was greatly reflected in his work. His father, Debendranath Tagore, was a leader of a reformed Hindu sect known as Brahmo Samaj. In later years, Rabindranath Tagore founded a school where he promoted the Upanishads, which are a portion of the Hindu religious scriptures. All the while working on his artistic endeavors, he traveled the world, promoting social reforms and strongly protesting the British occupation of India. As he participated in the Indian nationalist movement, Mohandas Gandhi became a close personal friend of his, influencing his philosophy and his art.

The two poems that you are about to read, "On the Seashore" and "Playthings" are prose poems, which are formed by writing paragraphs as opposed to poetic stanzas. Much like fiction, the author is not concerned with rhyme schemes and how many syllables there are in each line. One could say that there is much more freedom in prose poetry, as there is no restriction on how the poet can structure the piece. Even though there are great differences between the two selected poems, they both have the common subject matter of how children perceive the world. "On the Seashore" is the more metaphysical of the two, meaning that it deals with a highly abstract subject matter. Despite their differences, both poems make great use of **symbolism**, which is the representation of something abstract through the use of an object, image, or character.



An image appearing in Tagore's "The Crescent Moon"

## Reading “On the Seashore” and “Playthings”

As you read these poems, pay close attention to the symbolism and metaphors that Rabindranath Tagore uses in his writing. “On the Seashore” deals with an almost dreamlike world in which the children play and interact with that world. Do not interpret everything that is written as literal, but instead try to determine the hidden meanings behind certain images. What could Tagore possibly mean by “endless worlds?” Could this be a symbol of eternal life? Perhaps it represents the endlessness of time? What about the image of children dancing on those seashores? Make inferences about the message he is trying to convey in his poetry. Do not feel overwhelmed or discouraged if you do not think that you have an accurate interpretation of these symbols and metaphors, because all poetry can be interpreted in different ways. What could the object of the empty shell represent? Think in terms of what the shell symbolizes and not so much about how the shell functions in the story. Use your own imagination and know that symbols can have different meanings to different readers. Read the poem several times and try to determine what Tagore’s main idea could possibly be.

Even though “Playthings” deals with a much less metaphysical setting, the use of symbolism and metaphor is still very prevalent. The child in this poem could very well be used to represent the speaker’s frustrations towards his or her own complicated life. What could the broken trig represent? Perhaps it symbolizes simplicity and the speaker’s longing for that aspect of his life that is no more. Come up with your own interpretations and take notes on your reasoning behind those interpretations. Once you have read and reread the poetry, it may be helpful to conduct some outside research about the poet’s life and learn about where he draws his inspiration. Use several sources and combine the information in order to gain a better understanding about the various aspects of his life. You may find that your own interpretations of his poetry are different from Tagore’s intentions, but you may also discover parallels between different interpretations.

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## Vocabulary

A dictionary is also a key tool when reading both prose and poetry. Many of the words that Tagore uses will be familiar to you, but some may be new in your experience as a reader. Oftentimes in poetry, there are words that have multiple meanings. Words may have **connotations**, which are meanings that are beyond their literal meanings. This is especially true if the word is being used for the purpose of conveying a symbol. **Denotations** are specific meanings of words. Keep in mind that it may not be enough to know a word’s denotation without knowing its purpose. To truly understand a word’s purpose in a poem, it is important to know what **context** it is being used in. Look at how the word is used in the sentence to determine its true meaning.

