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ADVICE ON CREATIVE WRITING

http://allwritefictionadvice.blogspot.ca/2011/05/repetition-how-to-use-it-effectively.html

Repetition - How to Use it Effectively

Repetition isn’t something a writer will normally think about, particularly if one thinks about schools days of being told that repetition is a no-no.  In creative writing, however, there is good repetition and bad repetition.  Repetition can and does work.

The above opening paragraph uses repetition effectively. The actual word 'repetition' occurs five times, but it’s not overpowering within the text.  It is there to reinforce the message and provide and subtle way of denotative resonance.  This is an example of good repetition.

Bad repetition, on the other hand, occurs when the same descriptive words appear in the same sentence or paragraph several times without offering denotation or structure, for instance:    
  
*He****fumbled****for the keys in the dark, finally managed to open the door.  He shuffled through the hallway, switched on the lights, and in his drunken haze,****fumbled****with his coat buttons...*  
  
This basic illustration shows how easy it is to make repetition all the time throughout a story.  The first ‘fumble’ is fine, but then it’s repeated. A writer should engage different descriptive words, such as ‘struggled’ or ‘clawed’. This is a form of redundancy, where the second repeated word is pointless and should be changed.

Effective repetition of key words or phrases, however, can create different effects.  The denotative effect reinforces the overall message the writer wants to give the reader. It can also create a sense of tension, atmosphere and emotion.  It also creates resonance and rhythmic patterns – rather like poetry.

In effect, cleverly crafted, deliberate repetition can become a strategic weapon in any writer’s armoury.  Look at this example:

*His****dark****ways, his****dark****thoughts; soulless and barren and as****dark****as the swirling ocean beneath him...*

The repetition here works because ‘dark’ is a simple descriptive word, and each time it is mentioned, it adds to the feeling of the sinister overtones the writer wants to convey.  It also created rhythm within the sentence – it almost has a beat to it.  And also because it repeats three times.    
  
Other ways can create emphasis for emotion or conflict, for example:

*He was****slave****to their ways,****slave****to the demon colonel;****slave****to everything he had known...*

This style of repetition creates a dynamic flow of a powerful key word: *slave.*  This simple sentence creates an impression of emotion simply because the very word slave creates this effect and it can be employed effectively with any well chosen words.  Again, it is repeated three times.

*She was****soft****against his touch,****soft****like the silken threads he had slipped from her body,****soft****like the gentle murmur of summer.*

Once again, repeated three times, the word ‘soft’ reinforces the mood and atmosphere.

It also comes into its own when writing pensive scenes, to create a sense of tension.  It works the same way as children’s stories, repeating one emphasised word two or three times.

*They huddled in the dark, listening as the silence gave way to their fear.*  
***Thud.  Thud****.*  
*This sound, creeping ever closer...*

Of course, repetition works well within dialogue too. Well chosen words and phrases emphasise what the writer wants to achieve.

*‘I****told you****what would happen,****I told you****, and you chose not to listen.****I told you****and you refrained.’*

This example shows how the character is reinforcing his/her message, not just to another character, but to the reader, too.

Repetitive strokes can enliven dialogue, and again gives rhythm and resonance to speech patterns, something the reader will be intuitively tuned into, without them even noticing.

As a writer, you have to choose which words and phrases you think would be effective, or how they would create the effect you want to achieve, but repetition is always about emphasis, whether you are highlighting mood, emotion, tension, atmosphere or even action, or whether you use it with within your, narrative or dialogue.

**Summary:**

         Repetition should emphasise

         Make repetition denotative – reinforces the message

         Make it simplistic and effective

         Create resonance and rhythmic patterns

         Create word dynamics

         Don’t repeat complex words, but instead keep them simple.