

The Power of a Word

"A word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things. By means of words can a man deal with the world on equal terms. And the word is sacred." -N. Scott Momaday

In class on Friday, we earnestly discussed the meaning of the poem "The Word Plum". As we looked at the imagery presented by the poem, several people suggested that the word "plum" perhaps did not mean the object "plum" but rather was a metaphor. Others, however, argued that the word "plum" simply stood for the small, purple fruit. In my Native American Literature class, we are looking at various works of Native American authors. Throughout our study, we have commonly found a debate between the value of written and spoken word. Perhaps what the Native Americans deemed written could be equivalent to simply the word "plum" referring to the fruit. Spoken word, though, accompanied by voice inflections and subtle undertones, is analogous to "plum" standing for more than just a plum.

The Native American authors continually promote the use of spoken word and remain suspicious of written word. However, critics like Sontag, if we follow this train of thought, feel that the written word, merely the word appearing on the page, separated from other ideas or meanings, has value. How do we, as English students, come to determine for ourselves whether the power of a word stems from solely its definition or from the various associations, ideas, and images it represents?