

5.D Function of Imagery



The old [adage](#) "A picture is worth a thousand words" may be true for visual artists, but to communicate emotions and abstract ideas, poets and authors must use words to create powerful images. By appealing to the senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, imagery invites the reader to experience a poem or story through the imagination. In other words, the images evoked in the reader's mind facilitate an understanding of the poet's or author's thoughts and feelings.

Key Concepts

Descriptive words like adjectives and adverbs contribute to the sensory quality of an image.

Descriptive words serve an important function in a poem or prose passage. They can communicate the [tone](#) and [mood](#), specify the characteristics of something or someone, create comparisons and contrasts, and suggest how the reader should react to something in a text.

- In Mary Oliver's poem "Crossing the Swamp," the speaker describes the swamp as "earthsoup" that is "black" and "slack" to convey its thick, motionless consistency, illustrating the speaker's struggle as she trudges through the swampy water.

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- In his novel *Go Down, Moses*, William Faulkner creates a picture of a legendary bear through the use of descriptive imagery:

It [the bear] ran in his knowledge before he ever saw it. It loomed and towered in his dreams before he even saw the unaxed woods where it left its crooked print, shaggy, tremendous, red-eyed, not **malevolent** but just big--too big for the dogs which tried to **bay** it, for the horses which tried to ride it down, for the men and the bullets they fired into it, too big for the very country which was its **constricting** scope.

The descriptive verbs "loomed and towered," along with adjectives like "shaggy, tremendous, red-eyed," create an image of the bear's enormous size. The simple adjective phrase "too big" is repeated several times to emphasize the bear's seeming invincibility.

An image can be literal, or it may create a comparison that appeals to the senses in order to represent an idea.

Because writers more often show the reader something rather than telling the reader something, use your imagination to picture what an image suggests. However, always use the context—the parts of the poem or passage that come before and after the image—to accurately associate the image with the thoughts and feelings the author is expressing.

- Robert Frost uses literal imagery in his poem "After Apple Picking," allowing the reader to experience apple picking through the eyes and ears of the speaker:

I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound
Of load on load of apples coming in.

- In her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison mentions that Janie "starched and ironed her face," a nonliteral image that conveys how Janie mentally prepared herself for her husband's funeral much like she would starch and iron her dress for the formal occasion. However, reading more of the context in which this image appears, the reader learns that her formal appearance conceals Janie's hidden joy at her husband's passing because marriage to him stifled her personality.

Imagery is a collection of visuals and sensory descriptions used to emphasize ideas throughout the text.

As mentioned above, your interpretation of the ideas suggested by imagery must be guided by the context of the poem or passage. If asked on the AP exam about the effect of imagery, select the answer that comes closest to the way the images are presented in the surrounding lines.

- To emphasize his deep connection to nature, William Wordsworth creates an image of himself wandering like a cloud through the sky and encountering daffodils during his walk described in his poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud":

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

A motif is a recurring image used to emphasize an important idea throughout some or all of a text.

Motifs can be repeated images or images with similar characteristics, such as images of trees to suggest nature or images of clocks and the sun's shadows to emphasize time passing.

- Early in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout's father reminds the children that it's a sin to kill mockingbirds—innocent, harmless birds that bring joy. In addition to the title, the author refers to mockingbirds five other times throughout the novel to reinforce the theme of innocence and the need to protect it.
- In Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, the presence of doubles is a motif throughout the novel. For example, the action takes place in two cities, Lucie and Madame Defarge are two opposed female characters, and Carlton and Darnay, who look strikingly similar, switch places at the end.

What to Look for

As you read a poem or prose excerpt, look for the elements below and determine what idea or perspective they develop or emphasize:

- Adjectives and adverbs that appeal to the senses
- Sensory descriptions that create an image to convey an idea
- Objects or ideas that recur throughout the text

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Practice Activity

Directions: As you read the poem "On Receipt of a Familiar Poem" by Paul Laurence Dunbar, highlight the imagery and make an annotation explaining what image is described, its connotation, and what the lines seem to suggest.

On Receipt of a Familiar Poem

To me, like **hauntings** of a **vagrant** breath
From some far forest which I once have known,
The perfume of this flower of verse is blown.
Tho' seemingly soul-blossoms faint to death,
Naught that with joy she **bears e'er withereth**.
So, **tho'** the pregnant years have come and flown,
Lives come and gone and altered like mine own,
This poem comes to me a shibboleth*:
Brings sound of past communings to my ear,
Turns round the tide of time and bears me back
Along an old and long **untraversed** way;
Makes me forget this is a later year,
Makes me **tread** o'er a **reminiscent** track,
Half sad, half glad, to one forgotten day!
(1913)

* use of language to distinguish between different groups; a password

Sample Annotations

To me, like hauntings of a vagrant breath
From some far forest which I once have known,
The perfume of this flower of verse is blown.
Tho' seemingly soul-blossoms faint to death,
Naught that with joy she bears e'er withereth.
So, tho' the pregnant years have come and flown,
Lives come and gone and altered like mine own,
This poem comes to me a shibboleth*:
Brings sound of past communings to my ear,
Turns round the tide of time and bears me back
Along an old and long untraversed way;
Makes me forget this is a later year,
Makes me tread o'er a reminiscent track,
Half sad, half glad, to one forgotten day!

-breath from the forest = a soft feeling of a fading memory
-perfume of a flower whose scent is fading = pleasant memory of the poem

-past years are "flown" like a bird = rapid passage of time

-sounds in the ear = memories of past emotions
-ocean tide = a feeling of being carried back to a long-forgotten time by the force of the poem

-treading over a track = mentally reliving a "Half sad, half glad...day"

Commented [SL3]: Can you move the margin so the annotations are closer to the poem? See my example below.