

Imagery

Imagery means to use figurative language to represent objects, actions and ideas in such a way that it appeals to our physical senses.

Usually it is thought that imagery makes use of particular words that create visual representation of ideas in our minds. The word imagery is associated with mental pictures. However, this idea is but partially correct. Imagery, to be realistic, turns out to be more complex than just a picture. Read the following examples of imagery carefully:

- *It was dark and dim in the forest.* – The words “dark” and “dim” are visual images.
- *The children were screaming and shouting in the fields.* - “Screaming” and “shouting” appeal to our sense of hearing or auditory sense.
- *He whiffed the aroma of brewed coffee.* - “whiff” and “aroma” evoke our sense of smell or olfactory sense.
- *The girl ran her hands on a soft satin fabric.* – The idea of “soft” in this example appeals to our sense of touch or tactile sense.
- The fresh and juicy orange are very cold and sweet. – “juicy” and “sweet” when associated with oranges have an effect on our sense of taste or gustatory sense.

Imagery needs the aid of figures of speech like simile, metaphor, personification, onomatopoeia etc. in order to appeal to the bodily senses. Let us analyze how famous poets and writers use imagery in literature.

Imagery Examples in Literature

Example #1

Imagery of light and darkness is repeated many times in Shakespeare’s *“Romeo and Juliet”*. Consider an example from Act I, Scene V:

1. “O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
2. It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
3. Like a rich jewel in an Ethiope’s ear;”

Romeo praises Juliet by saying that she appears more radiant than the brightly lit torches in the hall. He says that at night her face glows like a bright jewel shining against the dark skin of an African. Through the contrasting images of light and dark, Romeo portrays Juliet’s beauty.

Example #2

John Keats’ *“To the Autumn”* is an ode rich with auditory imagery examples. In the last five lines of his ode he says:

1. “Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
2. And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
3. Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
4. The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft,

5. And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.”

The animal sounds in the above excerpt keep appealing to our sense of hearing. We hear the lamb bleating and the crickets chirping. We hear the whistles of the redbreast robin and the twitters of swallows in the sing. Keats call these sounds as the song of autumn.

Example #3

In prose, imagery aids writers to accomplish a vivid description of events. Below is an example of an effective use of imagery from E.B. White’s “*Once More to the Lake*”:

1. “When the others went swimming my son said he was going in, too. He pulled his dripping trunks from the line where they had hung all through the shower and wrung them out. Languidly, and with no thought of going in, I watched him, his hard little body, skinny and bare, saw him wince slightly as he pulled up around his vitals the small, soggy, icy garment. As he buckled the swollen belt, suddenly my groin felt the chill of death.”

The images depicting the dampness of clothes, in the above lines, convey a sense of chilly sensation that we get from wet clothes.

Example #4

In “*The Great Expectations*” written by Charles Dickens, Pip (the hero of the novel) uses many images to describe a damp morning in a marsh:

1. “It was a rimy morning, and very damp. I had seen the damp lying on the outside of my little window... Now, I saw the damp lying on the bare hedges and spare grass,... On every rail and gate, wet lay clammy; and the marsh-mist was so thick, that the wooden finger on the post directing people to our village—a direction which they never accepted, for they never came there—was invisible to me until I was quite close under it.”

The repeated use of the words “damp” and “wet” makes us feel how rough it was for him in that damp and cold morning. The thick “marsh-mist” aids our imagination to visualize the scene of mourning in a marshland.

Function of Imagery

The function of imagery in literature is to generate a vibrant and graphic presentation of a scene that appeals to as many of the reader’s senses as possible. It aids the reader’s imagination to envision the characters and scenes in the literary piece clearly. Apart from the above mentioned function, images, which are drawn by using figures of speech like metaphor, simile, personification, onomatopoeia etc. serve the function of beautifying a piece of literature.

Types of Imagery

Imagery has its root in the word image, but as an idea it encompasses so much more than just our visual senses. Imagery in writing is capable of communicating to all five of our senses. When placed in the appropriate order, words can evoke sensations like the heat of the sun on our bodies, the smell of fresh bread or the sound of a subway station.

Visual imagery is the most comfortable form of imagery for most writers. Describing that particular shade of pink found at the eraser tip of your pencil, or the blinding white you see when you look directly at the sun easily brings forth the images described.

Olfactory imagery -- or that which connects to the sense of smell -- tickles your nose like pepper. Describing the simplest of things like a dirty gym sock, or a cup of mint tea can create truly powerful imagery as our sense of smell is one of the strongest and longest lasting forms of memory we possess.

Auditory imagery is another of the more powerful forms of imagery. The sound of raindrops on your window or a sweetly-sung nursery rhyme can bring back feelings of nostalgia. Or, if you so choose, you can write about a rocket breaking the sound barrier, the powerful and delayed boom of the engines roaring overhead as the rocket flies out of sight.

Gustatory imagery -- or that which relates to taste -- can be a bit tricky, because you never know what your writer likes or dislikes in terms of specific foods. However, these images can be relatively potent if chosen carefully. Mint is a taste that most people are familiar with, especially people who brush their teeth with mint toothpaste. However, there are also tastes that have little to do with food. For example, the taste of copper will bring images of blood to most people.

Kinesthetic imagery is the broadest of the five. Kinesthetics encompasses any physical interaction with our body, such as touch, heat or cold transfer, movement and internal emotions. Describing the feeling of an ice cube being dropped down the back of your shirt, slowly migrating down to your waist in a swerving line, getting colder and colder the farther it goes or that feeling you get in the pit of your stomach when you descend a roller coaster will evoke kinesthetic imagery.

8 Tips for Writing Compelling Imagery

In The Craft of Writing on December 3, 2009 at 9:20 am

In novel writing, the descriptions you create relative to setting can have a major impact on the power of your writing. Many new authors write descriptions but often miss the concept of imagery altogether. Think of a description as a photograph, if you will. The average writer looks over the photo and writes the various things he sees. This is not necessarily the best way to convey what you wish your readers to envision. Here's a typical description:

The construction of the building was of stone. It squatted on the wide field, surrounded by landscaping that suffered from neglect. The thin windows looked more like slits one might see in castles of old.

Instead, ***you might try to write in a way that incorporates the images you see into the action.*** For example the above description might be reworded as such:

He strode into the stone building and noted the poor quality of the landscape. Once inside, he wondered as to the purpose for the narrow windows, which allowed little light to enter the rooms.

Paint your verbal pictures in nibbles more than great gulps of information. This means you should avoid writing descriptions of setting in long narratives. A rule, and we all know rules are created for us to break, says to put no more than two sentences together when describing your scene. Try not to fall into the trap where long descriptions will draw your reader's attention from the main story.

Use your characters' senses. The following example will demonstrate this concept. Once inside, he noticed a soft clanging that drifted through the building. It sounded somewhat like someone hammered on bronze. He tiptoed farther in and noticed an odor waft up from beneath the floorboards. Old food, perhaps?

Pepper dialogue with imagery. That is to say you might consider allowing your characters to impart images of things happening when they speak. "I can't seem to stop these goose bumps from rising, no matter what I do."

Use verbs that convey action. Words such as *twirled, jumped, scurried* or *plotted* show action by their very nature.

Use adverbs that convey action. An example might be a character's shredded credit card. "Shredded" shows an action but is used to describe the noun. Another example is a groaning piece of equipment.

Use ordinary things in other than ordinary ways. For example, what about using an automobile to pull a tow truck or having a car chase a dog?

Think small. Have your characters take note of some of the smallest of details in your setting. Could you make use of the tiny nubs on the treads of a new tire? When might you point out the indentation at the bottom of a wine bottle? Can you imagine ever employing the scratches on a cell phone screen in your novel?