

Imagery

Definition of 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 is 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](#), and [onomatopoeia](#), in order to appeal to the bodily senses. Let us analyze how famous poets and writers use imagery in literature.

Short Examples of Imagery

The old man took the handful of dust, and sifted it through his fingers.
The starry night sky looked so beautiful that it begged him to linger,
but he reluctantly left for home.
The fragrance of spring flowers made her joyful.

The sound of a drum in the distance attracted him.
The people traveled long distances to watch the sunset in the north.
The stone fell with a splash in the lake.
The sound of bat hitting the ball was pleasing to his ear.
The chirping of birds heralded spring.
There lay refuse heaps on their path that were so smelly that it maddened them.
The silence in the room was unnerving.
The blind man touched the tree to learn if its skin was smooth or rough.
When he was on the way to work, he heard the muffled cry of a woman.
The beacons of moonlight bathed the room in ethereal light.
The wild gusts of cold wind pierced her body.
The burger, aromatic with spices, made his mouth water in anticipation of the first bite.

Imagery Examples in Literature

Example #1: *Romeo and Juliet* (By William Shakespeare)

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

“O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
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: *To Autumn* (By John Keats)

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

“Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft,
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 skies. Keats call these sounds the song of autumn.

Example #3: *Once More to the Lake* (By E. B. White)

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*:

“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 the chilly sensation that we get from wet clothes.

Example #4: *Great Expectations* (By Charles Dickens)

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

“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

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 miserable it was for him that damp and cold morning. The thick “marsh-mist” aids our imagination to visualize the scene of morning in a marshland.

Example #5: *Goodbye Mr. Chips* (By James Hilton)

“Brookfield he had liked, almost from the beginning. He remembered that day of his preliminary interview—**sunny June, with the air full of flower scents and the plick-plock of cricket on the pitch.** Brookfield was playing Barnhurst, and one of the Barnhurst boys, a chubby little fellow, made a brilliant century. Queer that a thing like that should stay in the memory so clearly.”

This is an excellent example of the use of imagery in *Goodbye Mr. Chips* by James Hilton. First the word **sunny** refers to the visual imagery. The **flower scent** refers to the sense of smell, and then the **plick-plock** refers to the sense of hearing.

Example #6: *Daffodils* (By William Wordsworth)

“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.”

This is a very good example of imagery in Wordsworth’s *Daffodils*. The poet uses the sense of sight to create a host of golden daffodils beside the lake.

Example #7: *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* (By Robert Frost)

“The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep ... “

Robert Frost uses visual imagery in these lines of his famous poem as, “the woods are lovely, dark and deep.”

Example #8: *My November Guest* (By Robert Frost)

“My Sorrow, when she’s here with me,
Thinks these **dark** days of autumn rain
Are beautiful as days can be;
She loves the **bare**, the **withered** tree;
She walked the **sodden pasture** lane.”

This poem by Robert Frost is yet another good example of imagery. In the second line, the poet uses **dark** days, which is an instance of the use of visual imagery. In the fourth line, the **bare, withered tree** uses the imagery of sight. In the fifth line, the **sodden pasture** is also an instance of tactile imagery.

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 drawn by using figures of speech like metaphor, simile, personification, and onomatopoeia, serve the function of beautifying a piece of literature.