

Word Pictures in Poetry

We have seen that poets use words to create interesting and imaginative sounds. They also use words to draw pictures in the reader's mind so that the message of the poem is clearly and effectively received. Similes, metaphors, personification are some of the devices, called figures of speech, used by poets to achieve word pictures. This section deals with the devices and techniques used by poets to draw word pictures for the reader. These techniques include: simile, metaphor, personification, imagery, symbolism and allusion.

9. Simile

A simile is a figure of speech in which one thing is said to be similar to another. Poets use them to create vivid and effective word pictures which help us understand the meaning or emotion being expressed.

Similes use two forms:

- as... as...
- like...

Examples of similes:

- **as busy as a bee** (the person has a high level of energy)
- **as blind as a bat** (the person can't see any better than a bat)
- **Last night, I slept like a log.** (the person slept very soundly)
- **Don't sit there like a bump on a log.** (the person doesn't do anything)

Extended similes

Sometimes poets can use extended similes. They create a simile and then develop the comparison further by providing more detail to create a very complete word picture.

"Lightning" by J L Malone

Sometimes I am like the lightning.
Fierce.
Crackling.
Phosphorescent with anger.
Hurting whoever I please.

CHAPTER 9 REVIEW

Similes are figures of speech in which one thing is likened to another. For example, "as solid as a rock" and "the word bites like a fish."

10. Metaphor

A simile is where one thing is said to be like another, "hair as smooth as silk." A **metaphor** is like a simile but goes a step

further and compares one thing with another by saying it **is** the other. For example, her hair was silk.

Metaphors are used in everyday speech. We use them **directly**, for example, "He had a bird's eye view of the match", and **indirectly**, for example, "You are driving me up the wall!" Here, you are **speaking metaphorically**; you aren't really driving a car up a wall, you just mean that someone is annoying you! Many everyday sayings and proverbs in the English language are metaphors.

Metaphors in poetry

Poets create metaphors to add pictures to their poetry and thus make it more vivid and meaningful. Sometimes metaphors use everyday images we don't usually associate with poetry, like in the example below.

"The beach" by William Hart-Smith

The beach is a quarter of golden fruit;
a soft ripe melon
sliced to a half-moon curve
having a thick green rind
of jungle growth;
and the sea devours it
with its sharp,
sharp, white teeth.

Hart-Smith starts off by using a metaphor, saying that the beach is a slice of fruit, and then goes on extending the image even further so that the image is of the sea as an animal with sharp teeth biting into a piece of fruit (the beach). This poem is really an **extended metaphor**.

CHAPTER 10 REVIEW

A **metaphor** is a figure of speech in which one thing is said to be another. For example, "the curtain of night".

11. Personification

Personification is a special type of metaphor. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is said to be another. Personification goes one step further and gives human characteristics to animals, ideas or non-living things. For example, “The sun peeped over the horizon.” Poets really enjoy using personification—probably because it helps their poems come alive.

“Autumn” by Thomas Ernest Hulme

A touch of cold in the Autumn night—
I walked abroad,
And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge
Like a red-faced farmer.
I did not stop to speak, but nodded,
And round about were the wistful stars
With white faces like town children.

In “Autumn”:

- The moon is personified; it is pictured as a farmer leaning over a hedge.
- The stars are personified: they are pictured as wistful and as having faces like those of town children.

CHAPTER 11 REVIEW

Personification is a special type of metaphor in which something that is not alive is given the qualities of a human being. Example: “The fire ran wild.”

For your interest

- In the past, poets often used capital letters for words they were personifying.
- The noun or object personified began with a capital because it was treated like a proper noun, like a person.

12. Imagery

The use of word pictures to express ideas is called **imagery**. Word pictures can appeal to any or all of the senses, though they most often appeal to sight and hearing and are created by the special use of language. Devices or **figures of speech** such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, similes, metaphors and personification all help to create meaningful images. Imagery is often referred to as **figurative language** because it involves figures of speech.

“The Toaster” by William Jay Smith

A silver-scaled Dragon with jaws flaming red
Sits at my elbow and toasts my bread.
I hand him fat slices, and then, one by one,
He hands the back when he sees they are done.

Features of imagery

Figurative language:

- Creates word pictures
- Uses figures of speech—in the example above, personification

The imagery in “The Toaster” goes a little bit further than the use of personification. The poet describes the toaster as a “silver-scaled Dragon with jaws flaming red” but the dragon also has human abilities because it can make toast and hand it to the poet. Notice that this image is meaningful to us only if we are familiar with pop-up toasters—and dragons!

Every simile and metaphor (including personification) is an example of imagery. For example, consider the simile “**as** light **as** a feather”. The simile or image will not be as meaningful for someone who has never seen a feather floating down to Earth. Effective imagery draws on our experiences to create word pictures.

We use imagery in our everyday speech without realizing it. We may say we “bumped into” someone on holiday. Unless you physically bumped into them, you were speaking **figuratively** or **metaphorically**. The metaphor or image comes from the concept of an accident, meaning it was an accidental/chance meeting that occurred. If you really bumped into the person you were speaking **literally**, according to the literal or real meaning of the word.

Appreciating Imagery

Poets use imagery to help us understand the meaning of their poems better and more vividly. The images should not be “extras” thrown in as ornaments, but integral parts of the poem. Look at why and how they have been used and how effective they are. Ideally, on reading an image you will react by thinking, “Yes, that’s right. I wish I’d thought of that.”

As you read the following poems, use your imagination to see the word pictures.

POEM #1

“Brooms” by Dorothy Aldis

On stormy days
When the wind is high
Tall trees are brooms
Sweeping the sky.

They swish their branches
In buckets of rain,
And swash and sweep it
Blue again.

POEM #2

“Fog” by Carl Sandburg

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.

CHAPTER 12 REVIEW

Imagery is the use of word pictures created by **figures of speech** including similes, metaphors, personification, onomatopoeia and alliteration.

13. Symbolism and Allusion

Symbols and allusions are like codes or shorthand. A **symbol** represents something else apart from its literal meaning. Symbols often have the same general meaning for most people, so if a poet uses a symbol in a poem, many readers will understand a lot more than just the word that has been used. When you think of a symbol, think of something tangible or something that is very familiar to you. When we look at symbolism in poetry, we are looking at those items that suggest a meaning beyond the meaning the item itself represents in the poem. Conventional or everyday symbols have a predictable effect on us, provoking common responses to items that we share in common. For example, the four-leafed clover is a symbol associated with good luck. However, in literature, a symbol can

come to mean what the author or writer associates with the item.

Visual symbols

We sure visual symbols often in life: rose, yin/yang, skull and crossbones, etc.

The symbolism of color

Colors are often used as symbols. White may be a symbol of purity (as in dresses for brides), but a white feather is a symbol of cowardice. Color symbols can vary based on culture.

Allusion

An allusion is a reference in words to something which most people can be expected to understand. It is meaningless to make an allusion to something most people have never heard of. Many allusions used in poetry are to the Bible, historical events and characters, mythology and the works of well-known writers such as Shakespeare.

Examples of allusions

Achilles' heel: The term alludes to the Greek legend about the heroic warrior Achilles. His mother tried to make him immortal by holding him as an infant by his heel and dipping him into the River Styx. Eventually he was killed by an arrow shot into his undipped heel. It refers to a fatal weakness or vulnerable area.

Historical allusion

“Hiroshima” by Anonymous

Noon, and hazy heat;
A single silver sliver and a dull drone;
The gloved finger poised, pressed;
A second's silence, and
Oblivion.

The poem above alludes to the atomic bomb dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, during World War II.

CHAPTER 13 REVIEW

Symbolism and allusion use code words or references to bring related ideas to mind. A **symbol** represents something else apart from its literal meaning. An **allusion** refers to a person, event, place, etc. that is known or familiar to many people.