

Visual Imagery and Figures of Speech

The language of poetry is often visual and pictorial. Rather than depending primarily on abstract ideas and elaborate reasoning, poems depend more on concrete and specific words that create images in our minds. Poems thus help us see things afresh or feel them suggestively through our other physical senses, such as hearing or touch. Sound is, as we will see, a vital aspect of poetry. But most poems use the sense of sight to help us form, in our minds, visual impressions, images that communicate more directly than concepts. Some people think that those media and arts that challenge the imagination of a hearer or reader allow us to respond more fully than those that actually show things more fully to our physical senses.

Poems are sometimes quite abstract - they can even be about abstractions like grandeur or history. But usually they are quite concrete in what they ask us to see. One reason is that they often begin in a poet's mind with a picture or an image of a person, a place, an event or an object of observation. That image may be based on something the poet has actually seen but it may also be totally imaginary and only based on the "real world" in the sense that it draws on the poet's sense of what the world is like. Even when a poet begins with an idea that draws on visual experience, however, the reader still has to imagine (through the poem's words) an image, some person or thing or action that the poem describes. The poet must rely on words to help the reader to flesh out that mental image. In a sense, then, the reader becomes a visual artist, but the poet directs the visualization by evoking specific responses through words. How that happens can involve quite complicated verbal strategies - or even visual ones that draw on the possibilities of print.

The languages of description are quite varied. The visual qualities of poetry result partly from the two aspects of poetic language; on the one hand, the precision of individual words, and on the other hand, precision's opposite - the reach, richness, and ambiguity of suggestion that words sometimes accrue. Visualization can also derive from sophisticated rhetorical and literary devices (figures of speech, for example). But often description begins simply with naming - providing the word (noun, verb, adjective, or adverb) that will trigger images familiar from a reader's own experience. A reader can readily imagine a dog or cat or house or flower when each word is named, but not all readers will envision the same kind of dog or flower until the word is qualified in some way. So the poet may specify that the dog is a greyhound or poodle, or that the flower is a daffodil or a lilac, or Queen Anne's lace; or the poet may indicate colors, sizes, specific movements or particular identifying features. Such description can involve either narrowing by category or expanding through detail, and often comparisons are either explicitly or implicitly involved.

Seeing in the mind's eye - the re-creation of visual experience - requires different skills from poets and readers. Poets use all the linguistic strategies they can think of to re-create for us something they have already "seen." Poets depend on having had a rich variety of visual experiences and try to draw on those experiences by using common, evocative words and then refining the process through more elaborate verbal devices. We as readers inhabit the process the other way around, trying to draw on our previous knowledge so that we can "see" by following verbal clues. Pay attention to specific images, to how shape, color, relationship and perspective become clear, not only through individual words but also through combinations of words and phrases that suggest appearance and motion.