
Poetic Imagery

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Abstract

Imagery plays an important role in the creation and comprehension of poetry. The poet portraits different actions, feelings and thoughts in his words through imagery. Such poetic process helps the human senses to be dynamic and eventually an artistic amusement takes place on the reader's side. In this article, the writer explored the different sources which take part in the creation of poetic imagery while presenting an analytical study of some selected pieces of English poetry.

Introduction

The word "image" has been derived from Latin word "imagin" and French word "imagarie." This word presents the meaning of portrait, statue, the exact resemblance of a person with another, the picture of an object being reflected in a mirror or formed in the eye- ball, to explain a thing, scene or an incident in a dramatic way or recalling of memories in mind. Well known critic and poet, Ezra Pound explains this term as follows:

"An image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" [1]

Several other words and terms have been derived from this word. For example imageble, imaginable, imaginarily, imaginary, imagination, imaginative and imaginativeness. The meanings of all these words present the formation of different kinds of pictures in human mind. This process of human mind can be explained through a term called "imagery". This term has been defined by J.A Cudden in the following words:

"Imagery as a general term covers the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind and any sensory or extra sensory experience." [2]

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Imagery plays an important role in poetry. The poet creates word pictures of different objects, feelings, thoughts, mental and spiritual experiences. These images are usually symbolic and metaphoric in nature. Elevated poetic images always appeal to the senses of human beings. Keeping in view this aspect, the following images may be found in poetry.

Visual Images (pertaining to sight)

Auditory Images (pertaining to listening)

Olfactory Images (pertaining to smell)

Tactile Images (pertaining to touch)

Gustatory Images (pertaining to taste)

Abstract Images (appealing to intellect)

Concrete Images (forming a solid picture)

Kinetic Images (pertaining to movement)

Kinesthetic Images (pertaining to movement and body language)

J.A Cuddon has also related the poetic imagery with the five senses of human beings.

He writes:

“An image may be visual (pertaining to the eye), olfactory (smell), tactile (touch), auditory (listening), gustatory (taste), abstract (in which case it will appeal to what may be described as the intellect) and kinesthetic (pertaining to the sense of movement and bodily effort).” [3]

All such poetic images create sensuous poetry appealing different human senses. Through his elevated imagination, the poet reflects his thoughts, feelings, sentiments and emotions in the form of word pictures. The poet’s intellect always relates itself through his senses to the outer world. Then the creative observations of the poet transform themselves in the poetic images.

X.J Kenedy has given the following opinion in this regard:

“When speaking of images in poetry we generally mean a word or sequence of words that refers to any sensory experience. Often this experience is a sight (visual imagery), but it may be a sound (auditory imagery) or a touch (tactile imagery as a perception of roughness on smoothness). It may be an odor or a taste or perhaps a bodily sensation such as pain, the prickling of gooseflesh, the quenching of thirst or the perception of something cold.” [4]

The poet uses figurative language – language that appeals to the senses while creating different types of images in poetry. This kind of language may also be called as sensory language as it is well explained by the well known American author Cornelius Eady in the following words:

“Imagery is descriptive language that creates vivid impressions. These impressions or images are developed through sensory language, which provides details related to sight, sound, taste, touch, smell and movement.” [5]

It is quite obvious that all such images are created through words. Even a single word may create an image. But effective impression of such image depends upon sense of creativity shown by the poet while using his words. It also depends whether the cluster images or separate images are being formed keeping in view all the aspects of sensory and figurative language or not. X.J Kennedy explains this process as under:

“An image may occur in a single word, a phrase, or sentence or in an entire short poem. To speak of the imagery of a poem – all its images taken together – is often more useful than to speak of separate images.” [6]

The poet uses different figures of speech, like similes, metaphors, symbols and personification while creating various images in his poetry. Sometimes all such figures of speech become alternatives of image. So symbol, metaphor and image often overlap each other in creative process of poetic imagery. The encyclopedia of Americana also points out the same thing:

“Image, symbol, simile, and metaphor all make up imagery.” [7]

In all these figures of speech, metaphor has great importance. It is usually said that each and every word is actually a doused metaphor. So the language is basically a collection of various metaphors. Metaphor is known as the beginning of wisdom and according to W.B Yeats, wisdom speaks first in images. While defining the poetic image, C.D Lewis has also related it to the metaphor. He says:

“Every poetic image is to some degree metaphorical. It looks out from a mirror in which life perceives not so much its face as some truth about its face.” [8]

All kinds of human experiences are usually expressed through some metaphors and images. These metaphors and images express themselves through words. It is a fact

that human psyche depends upon images or dreams to elaborate itself. According to Freud, the poetry is basically the language of dreams and unconscious. In his opinion, the poet is a day dreamer. He not only dreams himself but makes others to dream as well. Freud relates all such dreams to human unconscious. His great contemporary, Jung had introduced another theory of collective unconscious. According to him all the common experiences of mankind are found in collective unconscious in the form of Archetypes. Nicky Hayes explains Jung's theory of collective unconscious in these words:

“Jung also believed that there was a further level to the unconscious mind, which he referred to as the collective unconscious. The deepest levels of the unconscious, Jung thought, were shared by all humans and date back to our primeval ancestry. Although this is sometimes referred to as the “racial” unconscious, Jung himself included all members of the human race in his use of the term not just a sub-group within it.” [9]

Both kinds of unconscious, either individual or collective, express themselves in the form of images. Many experiences belonging to poet's unconscious appear at the level of conscious during the creative process and mould into new shapes through poetic imagery. These word pictures and images affect different human senses while the poetry is being read by someone.

Usually a poetic image affects a single sense of the reader. Mostly the visual and auditory images are found in poetry because sight and listening are those human senses which actively take part in the process of communication between human psyche and the outer world. So both of these senses are the major sources of knowledge for human being. That's why the human psyche usually expresses itself in the form of visual and auditory images. Olfactory images pertaining to smell, tactile images appealing to touch and gustatory images relating to taste are rarely found in poetry.

Sometimes the poet creates such kind of poetic images which affect more than one human senses at a time. Such type of poetic imagery may be called as mixed or compound imagery. This is actually a complicated form of poetic experience under which one human sense becomes substitute of another sense. For example, the fragrance transforms itself into light and colors. While the light and colors become intonation of music. Such kind of poetic imagery makes the poet as magician of words.

The poet is to be very careful while creating any kind of imagery as it plays an important role for the comprehension of his poetry. He has to pay special attention towards the selection of words, idioms and phrases so as to make the image quite clear and comprehensive. In this regard, the great critic Ezra Pound advised the poets in the following words:

“Don’t use such an expression as “dim land of peace.” It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer’s not realizing that the natural object is always the adequate symbol.” [10]

Now some selected pieces of poetry are being analyzed here on the basis of poetic imagery presented in the same as to understand the importance of poetic imagery in the creation and comprehension of poetry.

In his poem “Driving to Town Late to mail a Letter “ Robert Bly says:

It is a cold and snowy night
The main street is deserted
The only things moving are swirls of snow
As I lift the mail box door,
I feel it’s cold iron
There is a privacy, I love in this snowy night
Driving around, I will waste more time [11]

In the opening line of the poem, the poet introduces an image of a cold and snowy night. The visual image of the deserted street supports the first image as it is such a cold night that nobody is seen in the street. The phrase “swirls of snow” makes a kinetic and visual image which results in the rapid movements of reader’s eyes. The coldness of iron creates a tactile image which affects the sense of touch. Overall this poem leads the reader towards two different effects of the same image i-e driving. In the beginning, it gives an image of practical purpose of mailing a letter while at the end, the concept of roaming just for the sake of roaming creates an abstract image of a sentiment which may be called as pure pleasure.

Now a few lines from a poem “Temperature Normal” written by Arun Kolatkar:

I lean back in the armchair
And Bombay sinks
The level of the balcony parapet rises
And the city is submerged [12]

In this stanza, the shadows of the elevated buildings are shown in deep water of ocean in such a way that a visual image of a drowning city is emerged.

Timothy Steel, in his poem, “Waiting for the Storm” has created a series of images affecting different human senses.

Breeze sent a wrinkling darkness
Across the bay, I knelt
Beneath an upturned boat
And, movement by movement, felt
The sand of my feet grow colder
The damp air chill and spread
Then the first rain drops sounded
On the hull above my head [13]

The wrinkling darkness across the bay and upturned boat form the visual images. An olfactory image pertaining to the sense of smell is also being formed by the concept of blowing breeze. The growing coldness of humid sand and moisture of chilly air makes a tactile image appealing the sense of touch while the sound of rain drops creates an auditory image affecting the sense of listening. All these poetic images created in this poem successfully lead the reader towards an alarming atmosphere of a coming storm.

All these basic discussions about poetic imagery and the above analytical study of some selected pieces of poetry reveal the utmost significance of the poetic imagery in the creation and comprehension of the poetry.

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