

Image and Imagery

(Simplified from *A Glossary of Literary Terms*)

Introduction

"Imagery" is one of the most commonly used words in literary criticism, but it's also one of the trickiest, because critics use it in a few different (though related) ways. In general, imagery means language that appeals to your senses: it makes writing feel concrete and vivid, instead of abstract and vague.

Compare these two sentences:

Abstract: "She felt sad."

Concrete, using imagery: "She sat by the cold window, watching rain streak the glass, and said nothing."

The second sentence doesn't tell us she's sad directly, but through sensory details (cold, rain, silence), we feel the sadness. That's imagery at work.

Three common meanings of "imagery"

1. The broadest meaning: all sensory details. This includes everything a poem or story asks you to imagine through your senses, not just what you see, but also what you hear, touch, smell, taste, and even feel through movement. It's a common mistake to think imagery only means "mental pictures." A poem can create imagery through smell (the scent of rain on dry earth), through sound (the crunch of leaves underfoot), through touch (the roughness of tree bark), or through temperature (the warmth of summer air). Tennyson's long poem *In Memoriam* is a good example: alongside visual details, it uses smell, taste, sound, and warmth to build its imagery, not just sight.

2. A narrower meaning: just visual description. Sometimes critics use "imagery" more specifically, to mean only vivid visual pictures: descriptions of things we can see. Marianne Moore's poem "*The Steeple-Jack*" is famous for this kind of richly visual imagery, especially in its description of the sea.

3. A figurative meaning: imagery as metaphor and simile. A group of critics called the New Critics, working mostly after the 1930s, used "imagery" to mean something more specific still: the vehicles of metaphors and similes (the "vehicle" is the thing something is being compared to). For these critics, imagery in this sense was the single most important building block of poetic meaning: the place where a poem's deepest meaning actually lives.

A famous case study:

Critic Caroline Spurgeon wrote an influential book called *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (1935). Her method was almost like detective work: she carefully counted up all the metaphors and similes Shakespeare used across his plays, treating them as clues to Shakespeare's own personal interests, experiences, and temperament.

She discovered two important patterns:

I. Image clusters: groups of images that keep appearing together, even though they might seem unrelated at first (for example, Spurgeon noticed certain images that kept showing up near each other across different plays, suggesting Shakespeare's mind naturally associated them).

II. Image motifs — a dominant, repeated pattern of imagery running through one particular play. For example, she noticed that *King Lear* is full of animal imagery: characters are compared to wolves, vultures, serpents, and so on, which builds a sense of a world where civilization has broken down and people are behaving like beasts. Similarly, *Hamlet* is full of imagery of disease, corruption, and decay, supporting the play's theme that "something is rotten" in the state of Denmark.

Spurgeon's idea was that these repeated patterns of imagery help build the overall mood or atmosphere of a play, even when the characters themselves never directly say what that mood is. Later critics, including G. Wilson Knight and Cleanth Brooks (who analyzed *Macbeth* in his book *The Well Wrought Urn*, 1947), built on Spurgeon's approach, arguing that the hidden, implicit pattern of images in a work often reveals its central theme even more powerfully than what the characters directly say or do.