

POETRY'S LANGUAGE

Poetry uses language in many different ways. By noticing the techniques poets use with language, it becomes easier to understand and talk about a poem. If you are a writer, consider using some of these language techniques to emphasize certain ideas, themes or images.

Imagery

Plain and simple, imagery is the word used to describe the types of images a poet uses throughout the poem. Images are references to a single mental creation; they are the verbal representation of a sense impression. However, there are many different types of imagery that can be used.

Visual Images (sight)

- Example: "The look-out man will see some lakes of milk-color light on the sea's night-purple"
"The Purse-Seine"
Robinson Jeffers

Tactile Images (touch)

- Example: "The only things moving are swirls of snow.
As I lift the mailbox door, I feel its cold iron."
"Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter"
Robert Bly

Auditory Images (sounds)

- Example: "she quietly rolled
flour tortillas-
the 'papas'
cracking in the hot lard
would wake me"
"My Grandmother Would Rock Quietly and Hum"
Leonard Adamé

Gustatory Images (tastes)

- Example: "Take out a three-pound leg of lamb,
rub it with salt, pepper and cumin,
then push in two cloves
of garlic splinters"
"How to Eat Alone"
Daniel Halpern

Olfactory Images (smells)

- Example: "The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands"
"Preludes"
T. S. Eliot

Internal rhymes:

Words in the beginning or middle of a line that rhyme with each other, either exactly or inexactly.

- Example: “And I who gave Kate a blackened eye
 Did to its vivid changing colours
 Make up an *incredible* musical *scale*”
 “Whatever Else Poetry is Freedom”
 Irving Layton

Techniques and Devices

There are many other tools that poets use to achieve a certain sound or rhythm

Alliteration

The repetition of a consonant sound in the beginning of words that are found close together in a line.

- Example: “O wild West Wind, thou *breath* of Autumn’s *being*”
 “Ode to the West Wind”
 Percy Bysshe Shelley

Assonance

The repetition of similar vowel sounds in words that are close to each other in a line.

- Example: “...and let the *coffee-pot* boil over on the stove”
 “Living in Sin”
 Adrienne Rich

Consonance

The repetition of identical consonant sounds but different vowel sounds found close together in a line

- Example: “*And broils root* out of the work of *masonry*”
 “Not Marble Nor the Gilded Monuments”
 William Shakespeare

Euphony

When the sounds of words in a line create an effect that is pleasing to the ear

- Example: “*There is no silence upon the earth or under the earth like the
silence under the sea*”
 “Silences”
 E.J. Pratt

Cacophony

The opposite of euphony, when the sounds of words in a line create a discordant or jarring effect when heard

- Example: “*For growl and cough and snarl are the tokens of spendthrifts
Who know not the ultimate economy of rage*”
 “Silences”
 E.J. Pratt

Onomatopoeia

Words that imitate a sound; a verbal echo of the action being described, such as *buzz*, *hum*, *slap*

- Example: "I hear
quiet clicks, cups of black
coffee, *click*, *click* like facts"
"Sonrisas"
Pat Mora

Figure of speech

An expression where certain words are arranged in a particular way to achieve a particular effect. The following are all different figures of speech commonly used in poetry:

Metaphor

A comparison device where two things are compared directly. Something will be described as though it is actually something else.

- Example: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough."
"In a Station of the Metro"
Ezra Pound

Simile

A comparison device where "like" or "as" is used as the clause.

- Example: "Eyes like the morning star,
Cheeks like a rose"
"The Colorado Trail"
Anonymous

Apostrophe

Words that are addressed to an absent or imaginary person, an object, or an abstract thought

- Example: "Love, O love, O careless love"
"Careless Love"
Anonymous

Denotation

The precise definition of a word, the "dictionary" meaning

Connotation

All the meanings, definitions or associations that a word suggests