

## Chapter four

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# Imagery

Experience comes to us largely through the senses. My experience of a spring day, for instance, may consist partly of certain emotions I feel and partly of certain thoughts I think, but most of it will be a cluster of sense impressions. It will consist of *seeing* blue sky and white clouds, budding leaves and daffodils; of *hearing* robins and bluebirds singing in the early morning; of *smelling* damp earth and blossoming hyacinths; and of *feeling* a fresh wind against my cheek. A poet seeking to express the experience of a spring day must therefore provide a selection of sense impressions. So Gerard Manley Hopkins (No. 37) gives us “racing lambs” and “glassy peartree leaves and blooms,” “thrush’s eggs” looking like “little low heavens,” the thrush itself singing through the “echoing timber,” and “the descending blue” of the sky “all in a rush with richness.” Had he not done so, he would probably have failed to evoke the emotions that accompanied his sensations. The poet’s language, therefore, must be more *sensuous* than ordinary language. It must be more full of imagery.

**Imagery** may be defined as the representation through language of sense experience. Poetry appeals directly to our senses, of course, through its music and rhythms, which we actually hear when it is read aloud. But indirectly it appeals to our senses through imagery, the representation to the imagination of sense experience. The word *image* perhaps most often suggests a mental picture, something seen in the mind’s eye—and *visual* imagery is the kind of imagery that occurs most frequently in poetry. But an image may also represent a sound (*auditory*

*imagery*); a smell (*olfactory imagery*); a taste (*gustatory imagery*); touch, such as hardness, softness, wetness, or heat and cold (*tactile imagery*); an internal sensation, such as hunger, thirst, fatigue, or nausea (*organic imagery*); or movement or tension in the muscles or joints (*kinesthetic imagery*). If we wished to be scientific, we could extend this list further, for psychologists no longer confine themselves to five or even six senses, but for purposes of discussing poetry the preceding classification should ordinarily be sufficient.

## 29. MEETING AT NIGHT

The gray sea and the long black land;  
And the yellow half-moon large and low;  
And the startled little waves that leap  
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,  
As I gain the cove with pushing prow, 5  
And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;  
Three fields to cross till a farm appears;  
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch  
And blue spurt of a lighted match, 10  
And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears,  
Than the two hearts beating each to each!

*Robert Browning (1812–1889)*

“Meeting at Night” is a poem about love. It makes, one might say, a number of statements about love: being in love is a sweet and exciting experience; when one is in love everything seems beautiful, and the most trivial things become significant; when one is in love one’s sweetheart seems the most important object in the world. But the poet actually *tells* us none of these things directly. He does not even use the word *love* in his poem. His business is to communicate experience, not information. He does this largely in two ways. First, he presents us with a specific situation, in which a lover goes to meet his sweetheart. Second, he describes the lover’s journey so vividly in terms of sense impressions that the reader virtually sees and hears what the lover saw and heard and shares his anticipation and excitement.

Every line in the poem contains some image, some appeal to the senses: the gray sea, the long black land, the yellow half-moon, the startled little waves with their fiery ringlets, the blue spurt of the lighted match—all appeal to our sense of sight and convey not only

shape but also color and motion. The warm sea-scented beach appeals to the senses of both smell and touch. The pushing prow of the boat on the slushy sand, the tap at the pane, the quick scratch of the match, the low speech of the lovers, and the sound of their hearts beating—all appeal to the sense of hearing.

### 30. PARTING AT MORNING

Round the cape of a sudden came the sea,  
And the sun looked over the mountain's rim:  
And straight was a path of gold for him,  
And the need of a world of men for me.

*Robert Browning (1812–1889)*

#### QUESTIONS

1. This poem is a sequel to “Meeting at Night.” “Him” (3) refers to the sun. Does the last line mean that the lover needs the world of men or that the world of men needs the lover? Or both?
2. Does the sea *actually* come suddenly around the cape or *appear* to? Why does Browning mention the *effect* before its *cause* (the sun looking over the mountain's rim)?
3. Do these poems, taken together, suggest any larger truths about love? Browning, in answer to a question, said that the second part is the man's confession of “how fleeting is the belief (implied in the first part) that such raptures are self-sufficient and enduring—as for the time they appear.”

The sharpness and vividness of any image will ordinarily depend on how specific it is and on the poet's use of effective detail. The word *hummingbird*, for instance, conveys a more definite image than does *bird*, and *ruby-throated hummingbird* is sharper and more specific still. For a vivid representation, however, it is not necessary that something be completely described. One or two especially sharp and representative details will ordinarily serve, allowing the reader's imagination to fill in the rest. Tennyson in “The Eagle” (No. 1) gives only one detail about the eagle itself—that he clasps the crag with “crooked hands”—but this detail is an effective and memorable one. Robinson tells us that Richard Cory (No. 22) was “clean favored,” “slim,” and “quietly arrayed,” but the detail that really brings Cory before us is that he “glittered when he walked.” Browning, in “Meeting at Night,” calls up a whole scene with “A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch / And blue spurt of a lighted match.”

Since imagery is a peculiarly effective way of evoking vivid experience, and since it may be used to convey emotion and suggest ideas as well as to cause a mental reproduction of sensations, it is an invaluable resource of the poet. In general, the poet will seek concrete or image-bearing words in preference to abstract or non-image-bearing words. We cannot evaluate a poem, however, by the amount or quality of its imagery alone. Sense impression is only one of the elements of experience. Poetry may attain its ends by other means. We should never judge any single element of a poem except in reference to the total intention of that poem.

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### 31. A LATE AUBADE

You could be sitting now in a carrel  
 Turning some liver-spotted page,  
 Or rising in an elevator-cage  
 Toward Ladies' Apparel.

You could be planting a raucous bed 5  
 Of salvia, in rubber gloves,  
 Or lurching through a screed of someone's loves  
 With pitying head,

Or making some unhappy setter 10  
 Heel, or listening to a bleak  
 Lecture on Schoenberg's serial technique.  
 Isn't this better?

Think of all the time you are not 15  
 Wasting, and would not care to waste,  
 Such things, thank God, not being to your taste.  
 Think what a lot

Of time, by woman's reckoning,  
 You've saved, and so may spend on this,  
 You who had rather lie in bed and kiss 20  
 Than anything.

It's almost noon, you say? If so,  
 Time flies, and I need not rehearse  
 The rosebuds-theme of centuries of verse.  
 If you *must* go,

Wait for a while, then slip downstairs  
And bring us up some chilled white wine,  
And some blue cheese, and crackers, and some fine  
Ruddy-skinned pears.

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*Richard Wilbur (b. 1921)*

## QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *Aubade* (see Glossary), *carrel* (1), *raucous* (5), *screed* (7), *Schoenberg* (11).
2. Who is the speaker? What is the situation? What plea is the speaker making?
3. As lines 22–23 suggest, this poem treats an age-old theme of poetry. What is it? In what respects is this an original treatment of it? Though line 23 is general in reference, it alludes specifically to a famous poem by Robert Herrick (No. 59). In what respects are these two poems similar? In what respects are they different?
4. What clues are there in the poem as to the characters and personalities of the two people involved?
5. How does the last stanza provide a fitting conclusion to the poem?

## 32. AFTER APPLE-PICKING

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree  
Toward heaven still,  
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill  
Beside it, and there may be two or three  
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough. 5  
But I am done with apple-picking now.  
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,  
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.  
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight  
I got from looking through a pane of glass 10  
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough  
And held against the world of hoary grass.  
It melted, and I let it fall and break.  
But I was well  
Upon my way to sleep before it fell, 15  
And I could tell  
What form my dreaming was about to take.  
Magnified apples appear and disappear,  
Stem end and blossom end,

And every fleck of russet showing clear. 20  
 My instep arch not only keeps the ache,  
 It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.  
 I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.  
 And I keep hearing from the cellar bin  
 The rumbling sound 25  
 Of load on load of apples coming in.  
 For I have had too much  
 Of apple-picking: I am overtired  
 Of the great harvest I myself desired.  
 There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch, 30  
 Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.  
 For all  
 That struck the earth,  
 No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,  
 Went surely to the cider-apple heap 35  
 As of no worth.  
 One can see what will trouble  
 This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.  
 Were he not gone,  
 The woodchuck could say whether it's like his 40  
 Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,  
 Or just some human sleep.

*Robert Frost (1874–1963)*

### QUESTIONS

1. How does the poet convey so vividly the experience of “apple-picking”? Point out effective examples of each kind of imagery used.
2. How does the speaker regard his work? Has he done it well or poorly? Does he find it enjoyable or tedious? Is he dissatisfied with its results?
3. The speaker predicts what he will dream about in his sleep. Why does he shift to the present tense (18) when he begins describing a dream he has not yet had? How sharply are real experience and dream experience differentiated in the poem?
4. The poem uses the word “sleep” six times. Does it, through repetition, come to suggest a meaning beyond the purely literal? If so, what attitude does the speaker take toward this second signification? Does he fear it? Does he look forward to it? What does he expect of it?
5. If sleep is symbolic (both literal and metaphorical), other details may also take on additional meaning. If so, how would you interpret (a) the ladder, (b) the season of the year, (c) the harvesting, (d) the “pane of glass” (10)? What meanings has the word “Essence” (7)?
6. How does the woodchuck’s sleep differ from “just some human sleep”?

### 33. A NARROW FELLOW IN THE GRASS

A narrow fellow in the grass  
Occasionally rides;  
You may have met him. Did you not,  
His notice sudden is:

The grass divides as with a comb, 5  
A spotted shaft is seen,  
And then it closes at your feet  
And opens further on.

He likes a boggy acre, 10  
A floor too cool for corn,  
Yet when a boy, and barefoot,  
I more than once at noon

Have passed, I thought, a whip-lash  
Unbraiding in the sun,  
When, stooping to secure it, 15  
It wrinkled, and was gone.

Several of nature's people  
I know, and they know me;  
I feel for them a transport  
Of cordiality; 20

But never met this fellow,  
Attended or alone,  
Without a tighter breathing  
And zero at the bone.

*Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)*

#### QUESTIONS

1. The subject of this poem is never named. What is it? How does the imagery identify it?
2. The last two lines might be paraphrased as “without being frightened.” Why is Dickinson’s wording more effective?
3. Who is the speaker?

### 34. LIVING IN SIN

She had thought the studio would keep itself;  
no dust upon the furniture of love.  
Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal,  
the panes relieved of grime. A plate of pears,  
a piano with a Persian shawl, a cat 5  
stalking the picturesque amusing mouse  
had risen at his urging.  
Not that at five each separate stair would writhe  
under the milkman's tramp; that morning light  
so coldly would delineate the scraps 10  
of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles;  
that on the kitchen shelf among the saucers  
a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own—  
envoy from some village in the moldings . . .  
Meanwhile, he, with a yawn, 15  
sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,  
declared it out of tune, shrugged at the mirror,  
rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes;  
while she, jeered by the minor demons,  
pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found 20  
a towel to dust the table-top,  
and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove.  
By evening she was back in love again,  
though not so wholly but throughout the night  
she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming 25  
like a relentless milkman up the stairs.

*Adrienne Rich (b. 1929)*

#### QUESTIONS

1. Explain the grammatical structure and meaning of the sentence in lines 4–7. What are its subject and verb? To whom or what does “his” (7) refer? What kind of life do its images conjure up?
2. On what central contrast is the poem based? What is its central mood or emotion?
3. Discuss the various kinds of imagery used and their function in conveying the experience of the poem.

### 35. THOSE WINTER SUNDAYS

Sundays too my father got up early  
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him. 5

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress,  
fearing the chronic angers of that house, 10

Speaking indifferently to him,  
who had driven out the cold  
and polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?

*Robert Hayden (1913–1980)*

#### QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *offices* (14).
2. What kind of imagery is central to the poem? How is this imagery related to the emotional concerns of the poem?
3. How do the subsidiary images relate to the central images?
4. From what point in time does the speaker view the subject matter of the poem? What has happened to him in the interval?

### 36. THE DARKLING THRUSH

I leant upon a coppice gate  
When Frost was specter-gray,  
And Winter's dregs made desolate  
The weakening eye of day.  
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky 5  
Like strings of broken lyres,  
And all mankind that haunted nigh  
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be  
 The Century's corpse outleant, 10  
 His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
 The wind his death-lament.  
 The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
 Was shrunken hard and dry, 15  
 And every spirit upon earth  
 Seemed fervorless as I.

At once a voice arose among  
 The bleak twigs overhead  
 In a full-hearted evensong  
 Of joy illimited; 20  
 An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,  
 In blast-beruffled plume,  
 Had chosen thus to fling his soul  
 Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings  
 Of such ecstatic sound 25  
 Was written on terrestrial things  
 Afar or nigh around,  
 That I could think there trembled through  
 His happy good-night air 30  
 Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
 And I was unaware.

31 December 1900

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928)

#### QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *coppice* (1).
2. What three periods of time simultaneously end in the poem? What is the emotional effect of these terminations?
3. Two emotional states are contrasted in the poem. Pick out the words that contribute to each. How many of these words belong to images?
4. The image in lines 5–6 is visual. What additional values does it have?
5. Define as precisely as possible the change, if any, produced by the thrush's song in the outlook of the speaker. Does the bird know of a hope unknown to the speaker? Does the speaker think it does? Why does the bird sing? Is this an optimistic poem?

### 37. SPRING

Nothing is so beautiful as spring—  
When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;  
Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush  
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring  
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing; 5  
The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush  
The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush  
With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.

What is all this juice and all this joy? 10  
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning  
In Eden garden.—Have, get, before it cloy,  
Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,  
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,  
Most, O maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

*Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889)*

#### QUESTIONS

1. The first line makes an abstract statement. How is this statement brought to carry conviction?
2. The sky is described as being “all in a rush / With richness” (7–8). In what other respects is the poem “rich”?
3. The author was a Catholic priest as well as a poet. To what two things does he compare the spring in lines 9–14? In what ways are the comparisons appropriate?

### 38. TO AUTUMN

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run; 5  
To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
Until they think warm days will never cease, 10  
For summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?  
 Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
 Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
 Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind; 15  
 Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep,  
 Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
 Spares the next swath and all its twinèd flowers:  
 And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
 Steady thy laden head across a brook; 20  
 Or by a cider-press, with patient look,  
 Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?  
 Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—  
 While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day, 25  
 And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;  
 Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn  
 Among the river shallows, borne aloft  
 Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;  
 And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn; 30  
 Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft  
 The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;  
 And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

*John Keats (1795–1821)*

### QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *hook* (17), *barred* (25), *sallows* (28), *boorn* (30), *croft* (32).
2. How many kinds of imagery do you find in the poem? Give examples of each.
3. Are the images arranged haphazardly or are they carefully organized? In answering this question, consider: (a) With what aspect of autumn is each stanza particularly concerned? (b) What kind of imagery is dominant in each stanza? (c) What time of the season is presented in each stanza? (d) Is there any progression in time of day?
4. What is autumn personified as in stanza 2? Is there any suggestion of personification in the other two stanzas?
5. Although the poem is primarily descriptive, what attitude toward transience and passing beauty is implicit in it?