Imagery

"The metaphor is probably the most fertile power possessed by man." --Jose Ortega y Gasset

Welcome to the next step in poetry detecting. So far, as poetry detectives we've talked about poets' use of single words--denotations, connotations, etc. However, good poetry goes beyond just single words. Good poetry is more than the sum of its words and bad poetry is somehow less than the sum of its words. Sometimes just single words can generate the power necessary to create a good poem. Often, poets put together words to form phrases or patterns that ask readers to capture a specific image, to create a new or unique way of thinking of something, to see and feel and hear in ways we've never seen or felt or heard before. Other times, they put together words to form phrases or patterns that ask readers to see and feel and hear a specific place, time, or emotion in the way the poets do or did at that specific moment in time.

Just as criminals leave obviously visible evidence--a glove, a key, the weapon--or not obviously visible evidence discovered only with the aid of something else--fingerprints, thread or DNA evidence--so do poets leave evidence in a poem. When criminals leave evidence, it allows detectives to create an image or a picture of what happened and who is responsible. One of the types of evidence poets leave is imagery--a word or combination of words that creates a sensory image. Poets use this sensory image to help the reader create an image or a picture or a feeling in the poem. These images extend the meaning of the poem beyond just the sum of its words. This lesson focuses on the way poets use imagery.

Imagery or evidence helps poetry detectives get to the why of a crime/poem. Imagery also helps poetry detectives see and feel and hear what the poet wants them to see and hear and feel. But why is this important? Do we realize how often we think and speak in images and how we take those images for granted?

For instance, "She's as pretty as a picture." "He's a hotty." "He's a pig." "She's a doll." "He's a man of steel." "It's hot enough to fry eggs on the sidewalk." All of these phrases, trite though they may be, help the hearers create some sort of image as a way to shape their perceptions of the world. All of the phrases I've used have been used before, but when poets use imagery, often they're asking us to see or hear or feel something familiar in a new way, or better yet, they may even be helping us shape new ways to think about our world.

With imagery as the evidence in a poem, we can, in essence, recreate the scene of a crime/poem. Images come in five types, to appeal to our five senses: *visual* (sight), *auditory* (hearing), *tactile* (touch), *olfactory* (smell), and *taste*. Visual, auditory, and tactile imagery are used most frequently by poets. Each of these can be a single word or a series of words, but each of them contributes a different idea to the poem, and in time, and can help recreate for the reader what the poet had in mind when he/she wrote the poem. Each type of image connects in a new way. For instance, an auditory image creates a sound image, a visual image creates a mental picture, and a tactile image may recreate a touch, an odor or taste or even a bodily sensation. Poets may use one word, several words, or a figure of speech.

For instance, in "A Narrow Fellow" we should know by now that the "fellow" is a snake. But how does Emily Dickinson use imagery to help us see the snake differently? Look at the first view she gives us of the snake: "A spotted shaft" as a visual image of a snake. Another visual image is "a Whip lash/Unbraiding in the Sun." Both phrases use visual imagery and ask us to see the snake in a different way. Interestingly, a shaft seems rigid and hard while a whiplash is a much more flexible image, but there is the sense of the weaving of the snake's muscles and the strength of the snake.

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--
A spotted shaft is seen--
And then it closes at your feet
And opens further on--
He likes a Boggy Acre
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
It wrinkled, and was gone--
Several of Nature's people
I know, and they know me--
I feel for them a transport
Of cordiality--
But never met this Fellow
Attended, or alone
Without a tighter breathing
And Zero at the Bone—

--Emily Dickinson

Dickinson doesn't just resort to visual imagery. I especially like the last two lines. "Without a tighter breathing/and Zero at the Bone." Those are tactile images. What does "Zero at the Bone" make you feel? What about "tighter breathing"? How do those tactile images enhance your understanding of what the speaker feels about the snake? How do those two phrases change how you view fear? Has it made you feel or think about fear or surprise in a new and different way?

When poets can bring what we feel, see, smell, taste, or hear into sharp pictures, it helps us to experience the world in a new way. Notice how Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" (p. 790) and Taniguichi Buson's "The Piercing Chill I Feel" (p. 790) use visual and tactile imagery to give strong pictures. One of the things my teachers forgot to tell me about poetry is that sometimes a poet is just trying to give his or her readers a picture. What readers do then with those pictures is up to them. However, poets reserve the right to create images that ask their readers to feel something.

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.
--Ezra Pound

The Piercing Chill I Feel

The piercing chill I feel:
my dead wife's comb, in our bedroom,
under my heel . . .
--Taniguchi Buson

For instance, Ezra Pound's poem is a visual image. In this poem, Pound asks the reader to picture the faces in a subway in a certain way--in essence, he's asking us to see people in a way we've never seen before. See if you can decide how or what comparisons he's asking us to make. How is he asking us to see these faces? Does this increase the value of these faces? Of this image?

Taniguichi Buson's poem is what kind of imagery? Notice he's asking us to feel grief in a different way. By giving us this image, he's bringing us a sharp feeling of grief--one triggered by something as commonplace as stepping on a discarded item. Why does this image make you shiver and feel something that an angry poem would not help you feel? How does this poem bring the grief over a loved one into a sharp focus?

Here's a poem for you to practice identifying imagery. Here are some questions to consider as you read the poem. What words or phrases trigger auditory, visual, or tactile imagery? What is it about the whole poem that creates the images? What do you think is happening here? Look now at Peter Davison poem "The Last Word." Remember to read it out loud--at least once and maybe twice.

The Last Word

When I saw your head bow, I knew I had beaten you.
You shed no tears--not near me--but held your neck
Bare for the blow I had been too frightened

Ever to deliver, even in words. And now,
In spite of me, plummeting it came.
Frozen we both waited for its fall.
Most of what you gave me I have forgotten
With my mind but taken into my body,
But this I remember well: the bones of your neck
And the strain in my shoulders as I heaved up that huge
Double blade and snapped my wrists to swing
The handle down and hear the axe's edge
Nick through your flesh and creak into the block.

-Peter Davison

This poem, "The Last Word," is the fourth poem in a series entitled "Four Love Poems." Odd to think of this poem as a love poem. Read the poem again and see if you can see it as a "love poem." How do these images--auditory, visual, and tactile--trigger your memories or connections to your life?

This poem contains visual, auditory, and tactile imagery. Can you identify one or two examples of each type of imagery? What words do you see as visual images, tactile images, auditory images? How do those images extend your understanding of the poem? Heighten the poem's impact? How does the use of these specific words and phrases enhance your understanding of the poem? Why do you suppose these words or phrases contain such power? How do they help you understand the poem? Did the speaker really kill this person? Or is the speaker talking about the power of words to wound, to kill, to sever a connection?

In addition to using single words to create imagery, poets put a series of words together in a traditionally recognized pattern, called a *figure of speech*. These figures of speech serve as recognizable shortcuts poets take to create imagery and images. Here are the definitions for the most common figures of speech. While the definitions help, be thinking about how these figures of speech work in a poem and start picking them out of the poems we read for this lesson.

- *Simile* is a comparison using "like" or "as": "My love is like a red, red rose," so it's more obvious than metaphor, which would suggest "My love is a rose." Another simile would be "He eats like a pig." Similes usually refer to specific characteristics. In "A narrow Fellow" the line "The grass divides as with a comb" is a simile. It's comparing the way the snake's movements divides the grass to the way a comb divides hair or makes a part.
- *Metaphor* is a more direct comparison of two dissimilar things. Rather than using "he eats like a pig," a metaphor would be "He is a pig." An *implied metaphor* would be one in which one half of the comparison isn't given. For example, "The Last Word" is an implied metaphor. He isn't heaving an axe, but what? An *extended metaphor* is in force throughout the whole poem and compares the two dissimilar things--a verbal exchange and an execution--in a detailed fashion.
- *Personification* gives animals, ideas, or inanimate objects human qualities. We all believed at one time that "The moon followed me home." Or, in more poetic terms, "Ten

thousand [daffodils] saw I at a glance,/Tossing their heads in sprightly dance." Daffodils can't dance and don't have heads, and the moon didn't follow you home. But by giving these objects human qualities, we personify them.

- *Apostrophe* is not the punctuation mark, but a little oration in which something absent or abstract is addressed: "Car, you had better start now." Another apostrophe would be the talk you had last night with your boyfriend or girlfriend after they had gone to sleep or gone home.
- *Hyperbole* is poetic exaggeration: "If I've told you once I've told you a million times never to exaggerate." "I'll just die if I can't go to that party." Most of us haven't really been told a million times, and we probably really won't die if we don't go to the party. That exaggeration is called hyperbole.
- *Litotes* is understatement, in which we say things like "not bad" when we mean "good."
- *Metonymy* substitutes an object closely associated--"The White House decided today" when newscasters mean the president has decided something, "the crown" for the king, "in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread" for you'll have to work hard to eat.
- *Synecdoche* is closely related, substituting a part of the whole--"rednecks" for farmhands, "threads" for clothes, "wheels" for a car, "hands" for workers.
- *Paradox* is a statement that at first seems contradictory and untrue. However, on further reflection, the statement is true on some level: "Less is more." "He who loses his life for my sake shall find it." How can a lost life be found? The contradictory statement is nonetheless true. Paradox includes the direct contradictions of *oxymoron*, two words placed together that contradict each other, "live recording," "numb feeling," "jumbo shrimp," the traffic violation "rolling stop," and my personal favorite, "serious fun."
- *Pun* is a play on words based on similarity of sounds, as in the following "Medical Terminology for the Layperson." Reading this out loud will help you to hear the puns:

    1. dilate: to live long
    2. barium: what you do when CPR fails
    3. morbid: a higher offer
    4. nitrate: higher than the day rate
    5. outpatient: patient who has fainted
    6. node: was aware of
    7. urine: opposite of "you're out"

It would be to your benefit to find from the poems we've read an example of the following:

- metaphor
- simile
- personification
- apostrophe
- litotes
- metonymy
- synecdoche
- paradox

- pun

Often, we tend to think of images and figures of speech as boring or typical, and this can be true of those worn-out phrases that we hear all the time in our everyday exchanges. However, poets can often play with the language in ways that we see as atypical and sometimes even fun. This section will walk you carefully through the imagery in one poem, and the next section will ask you to apply these skills to a number of poems. Notice what kinds of questions and extensions can be found--and how imagery and the other ideas we've studied can help poetry detectives expand their reactions to a poem.

Look carefully at Sylvia Plath's "Metaphors" (p.820). The poem is actually a riddle which can be solved only by interpreting the metaphors: What's the solution? What's Plath announcing about herself?

Metaphors

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I've eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there's no getting off.

--Sylvia Plath

- How all these metaphors refer to pregnancy? It's obvious enough how being pregnant could feel like an elephant, a house, a strolling melon. How is "red fruit, ivory, fine timbers" a description of pregnancy? In what way is "this loaf big with its yeasty rising"? How is "money new-minted in this fat purse"?
- The pregnant Plath sees herself as a "means" to the baby's end, a "stage" in the embryo's development, a "cow in calf." Is that more than just self-insultingly bestial? Is she suggesting the cow is in the calf? She's part of the baby? She's invested herself in another?
- Why has she "eaten a bag of green apples"? Why "boarded the train there's no getting off"? She is worried about more than just giving birth. Is it being responsible for as long as you live for this coming being, whose coming is making you increasingly nervous? Someone once made the observation to me that parenthood is the only irrevocable decision. Is that part of the poem's tension?
- What do these metaphors suggest about the way Plath feels? How thrilled is she about this pregnancy? Do the mixed metaphors of the poem equal mixed feeling?
- Is there a pattern to those metaphors? Does the poem try to describe the process of pregnancy?

- Why does the poet describe herself as "a poem in nine syllables"?
- How many lines are in this poem? How many syllables are in each line? What is that nineness indicating? Are those formal indications of nine months' gestation?
- Why do you think Sylvia Plath describes her pregnancy in such riddling terms? Does the unraveling of the metaphors take you into the experience of pregnancy?
- Have you had personal experience with pregnancy? How close are Plath's metaphors to your experience?

Now that you've seen the kinds of specific questions that can be applied to one poem, let's investigate several poems and see if we can apply the skills we've learned.

One of the problems with poetry is that people often claim that "It's just my opinion" when it comes to poetic interpretation. However, the most valid opinions are always based on textual support found within the poem itself. By using the evidence a poet leaves in a poem, we can form an opinion about a poem's meaning that goes beyond mere guesswork. This section is going to ask you to investigate the remaining poems for this lesson. However, because you are just beginning detectives, I've provided some questions for each poem that should get you started. Conduct an in-depth investigation. Make notes about the poems, as real detectives make notes about the cases they work. Do some exploring on your own. Most of the questions asked about "Metaphors" use imagery to help establish the meaning and purpose of the poem. Ask yourself some of those same kinds of probing questions about these poems. What new questions do you have?

Here are your cases/poems for the day:

Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

--Langston Hughes

- "Dream Deferred

If "Metaphors" is both a series of metaphors and a great description of the poem, then "Dream Deferred" could be called "Similes"--except for two lines. One line asks the question that gets the responses--"What happens to a dream deferred?" But what about the other line? Not only is it not a simile, but it is printed differently than the rest of the poem. How does the last line change things? If it's not a simile, what is it? Why do you suppose this is? For what purpose do we need to know this? Look at the shape of "Dream Deferred." What about word choice? Connotation? Denotation?

The Fish

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled and barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
--the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly--
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes

which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
--It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
--if you could call it a lip
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels--until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

--Elizabeth Bishop

- "The Fish"

How does the imagery of "The Fish" contribute to its tone? Why does Bishop choose to give us such vivid (occasionally disgusting, always interesting) images of this fish? Were you surprised by the end--why or why not? What did you feel when you got to the last two lines? Why the repetition of "rainbow"? How does the contrast between "rainbow" and the last line make you feel? Do you see a contrast?

Nothing Gold Can Stay

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

--Robert Frost

- "Nothing Gold Can Stay"

The title of "Nothing Gold Can Stay" gives us the main idea, but what about the first line? Hint: It's not a metaphor. What is it when a statement seems contradictory, but is really true? How does the idea of Eden provide a clue to the poem? What other images do you see that explain the poem and contribute to the title? What about the third line? Or the next to last line? How do these statements helps us realize what the poem means?

My Misstress' Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

- "My Mistress' Eyes are Nothing like the Sun"

  Here's something you will find funny. I would like to receive "My Mistress' Eyes are Nothing like the Sun" as a love poem. If you've read the poem, do you know why? How many of you are cringing? I even asked another woman if she would like to get this as a love poem and she said "yes." (So I'm not crazy.) This poem is a kind of protest against the extravagant love poetry that was being written in Shakespeare's time. Poets were comparing their loved ones to the most glorious things they could find. A common comparison was "She has eyes like the sun." What kinds of comparisons is Shakespeare *not* making? Why is this a big deal? Why would a woman like to get this poem? How do the last two lines change or enhance the meaning and tone of the poem?

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.

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,

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

- "Those Winter Sundays"

  What tactile images run through "Those Winter Sundays"? Who is the speaker? How old is the speaker? What about word choice? What is the idea of "austere"? How many of the images have to do with coldness--both literal and figurative. Are love and the things we do for love always pleasant? What images here help us feel empathy for both the child

and the father? What kind of things did you realize about your parents after you left home that you didn't realize before?

The Cherries' Jubilee

The Cherries' garden gala
was the finest seen in years,
the Pears arrived in couples,
and the Prunes all carried shears,
the Greens had splendid collars,
and the Peaches wore new shoes,
an Orange danced a hornpipe,
and a Berry sang the blues.
The Beets were playing bongos,
as the Lettuce marched ahead,
the Zucchini made a racket,
but the Ginger seemed well-bred,
the Dates appeared unsteady,
though the Currants stayed on course,
the Turnips whirled in circles,
and the Radishes grew hoarse.
The Beans could not stop coughing
as the Corn told awful jokes,
the Plums were bobbing gaily
with some hearty Artichokes,
a Cauliflower listened
as the Grapes began to whine,
and the Melons started bawling
just to see the Apples pine.
When the Garlic dropped a penny
and the Mint produced a bill,
the Chard grew overheated,
and a Pepper caught a chill,
then the Rhubarb got to fighting,
and the Lemons seemed afraid,
but the Thyme could not help watching,
though the Mushrooms all sought aid.
The Onions dipped politely,
as the Leeks began to spring,
the Sage repeated maxims,
and the Carrots formed a ring,
a Tomato acted saucy
to a rather bossy Pea,
and Potatoes wept with pleasure
at the Cherries' jubilee.

--Jack Prelutsky

- "The Cherries' Garden Gala"

  "The Cherries' Garden Gala" is a fun poem. Read it out loud. Poetry is meant to be heard. There is something about hearing poetry--especially this poetry--that makes a difference. Hint: "The Cherries' Garden Gala" is full of puns and wordplay. Let me explain one or two. "The Lettuce marched ahead" = a head of lettuce. "The Mushrooms all sought aid" = sauteed mushrooms. See what other ones you can find? Most of the lines have some sort of pun or wordplay involved. Which ones can you identify? I'm not even sure I get all of them. Do you?

While I've provided a few starting points for each poem, these poems move beyond what I'm asking; they are poems you can return to again and again as your lives grow and change. Even Jesus, the Master Teacher, taught in images. When people couldn't see His images, He felt sorrow for them. However, when people saw beyond His images into what He wanted them to see, he blessed their lives.

Read Matthew 13:13-16

> Therefore speak I to them in parables:
> They seeing see not;
> and hearing they hear not,
> neither do they understand.
>
> And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias,
> which saith,
> By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand;
> and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive:
>
> For this people's heart is waxed gross,
> and their ears are dull of hearing,
> and their eyes they have closed;
> lest at any time
> they should see with their eyes,
> and hear with their ears,
> and should understand with their heart and be converted,
> and I should heal them.
>
> But blessed are your eyes,
> for they see:
> and your ears,
> for they hear.

When we see the meaning of the images, blessed are our eyes when they see, and our ears when they hear. Poetic imagery blesses our eyes and ears and lives and can heal us much as spiritual insight does, by training us in how to really see:

> Listen even to the silences:
> hear the voices in the rain.
> Look closer, look longer,
> so long you become what you've seen.
> Seeing more than we have seen
> makes us more than we have been.