

Ode to a Nightingale

Identifying and Analyzing Imagery



Introduction

John Keats penned “Ode to a Nightingale” in 1819 in a burst of creativity that produced four other now-classic odes. The poem is a sustained meditation about death, with which Keats’s speaker has a conflicted relationship. “Ode to a Nightingale” contains some of Keats’s most accomplished uses of imagery. Through a vast and varied range of images, Keats evokes all five of our senses as he weaves his wide-reaching ruminations on oblivion.

This activity gives students an opportunity to practice identifying and analyzing imagery. Imagery creates a sensory experience that can connect readers to a text’s setting, atmosphere, or overall aesthetic. It can also help them understand how speakers or principal characters feel without having to rely heavily on exposition. In completing this activity, students will learn to identify and analyze different kinds of imagery, reflect on the effects of imagery, and develop close reading skills.

Skills

Analysis / Close reading / Drawing inferences from a text / Interpreting implications of imagery

Learning Objectives

In completing this activity, students will

- identify different types of imagery and locate examples of imagery within a text
- analyze the implications of the imagery
- connect examples of imagery to a personal experience in reading a text
- use analysis and personal experience to interpret the theme of a text

Defining Imagery

A widely used term with several distinctive meanings, **imagery** generally refers to descriptive language that appeals to the senses through concrete, rather than abstract, details in a text. More narrowly defined, imagery creates a detailed, vivid description of an object or scene.

Imagery allows readers to feel as if they were directly experiencing the narrative. Imagery is often created through **figurative language** and can employ the use of similes and metaphors.

Type of Imagery	Sense Appeal	Example:
Visual Imagery	Sight	The ghost hovered in the air.
Auditory Imagery	Sound	The fluorescent light hummed above her.
Tactile Imagery	Touch	The rough, cold stone scraped across his skin.
Olfactory Imagery	Smell	Roses perfumed the room.
Gustatory Imagery	Taste	The bubbly liquid was crisp and sweet on their tongues.
Kinesthetic Imagery	Internal	My stomach turned; his heart grew cold.

Examples of Imagery from Classic Texts

The swift December dusk had come tumbling clownishly after its dull day and as he stared through the dull square of the window of the schoolroom he felt his belly crave for its food. He hoped there would be stew for dinner, turnips and carrots and bruised potatoes and fat mutton pieces to be ladled out in thick peppered flour-fattened sauce. Stuff it into you, his belly counselled him.

—James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

I have lived long enough. My way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare not.

—William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

She was a thing of trophies. A cannibal of a craft,
tricking herself forth in the chased bones of her
enemies. All round, her unpanelled, open bulwarks
were garnished like one continuous jaw, with the long
sharp teeth of the sperm whale, inserted there for
pins, to fasten her old hempen thews and tendons to.

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

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

—Thomas Hardy, "The Darkling Thrush"

[. . .] and now pulling there-with sturdily, he so cracked,
and ripped, and tore all asunder, that the noise of
the dry and hollow-sounding wood alarumed and
reverberated throughout the forest.

—Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher"

Although it was so brilliantly fine—the blue sky
powdered with gold and great spots of light like
white wine splashed over the Jardins Publiques—
Miss Brill was glad that she had decided on her fur.

—Katherine Mansfield, "Miss Brill"

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings . . .

—Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Pied Beauty"

Continually, indeed, as it stole onward, the streamlet
kept up a babble, kind, quiet, soothing, but
melancholy, like the voice of a young child that was
spending its infancy without playfulness, and knew
not how to be merry among sad acquaintance and
events of sombre hue.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

Among the blossoms, a single jar of wine.
No one else here, I ladle it out myself.

Raising my cup, I toast the bright moon,
and facing my shadow makes friends three . . .

—Li Po, "Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon"

Instructions for Teachers

A suggested flow for this activity is as follows:

- Review the content of “Ode to a Nightingale” with your students.
- Put students into pairs or groups.
- Make one student the recorder, one the reporter in each pair or group.
- Have students use the attached worksheets to complete the activity.
- Monitor and assist students as necessary.
- Have the reporters share with the class the findings of their pairs or groups.

A Few Examples of Imagery from “Ode to a Nightingale”

Kinesthetic and gustatory imagery:

“My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past . . .”

Olfactory and visual imagery:

“I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month ends . . .”

Auditory imagery:

“Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call’d him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath”

Identifying and Analyzing Examples of Imagery

Identify 3 examples of imagery in “Ode to a Nightingale” and write them below.

In locating examples of imagery, focus on passages with descriptions that appeal to the physical senses—hearing, movement, sight, smell, temperature, or touch.

Analyze the examples of imagery by answering the questions about them in some detail.

Example 1:

Which type of image is it? (Which sense or senses does it appeal to?)

What is being described?

What does the image contribute to the text?

How does the image help you experience the text or understand the speaker’s feelings?

How does the sensory experience help you better understand the theme of the poem?

Identifying and Analyzing Examples of Imagery

Example 2:

Which type of image is it? (Which sense or senses does it appeal to?)

What is being described?

What does the image contribute to the text?

How does the image help you experience the text or understand the speaker's feelings?

How does the sensory experience help you better understand the theme of the poem?

Identifying and Analyzing Examples of Imagery

Example 3:

Which type of image is it? (Which sense or senses does it appeal to?)

What is being described?

What does the image contribute to the text?

How does the image help you experience the text or understand the speaker's feelings?

How does the sensory experience help you better understand the theme of the poem?
