

Exploring Shakespeare’s Language: Imagery and the Art of Mental Pictures

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“Words to an actor are not mere sounds, they are designs of visual images. ... Communicate to others what you see on the screen of your inner vision... It is up to you to convert these images into reality.” - Konstantin Stanislavski

When we speak, we constantly evoke mental pictures and images not only to describe literal/visual events, but to describe our inner experiences and interactions with others. **Images** help us to ‘see’ things that aren’t there – like our feelings. They help us understand and describe our inner experiences, and those of others... and in fact, they’re the only way we possibly can.

When it comes to Shakespeare, describing these images with words was even more important, since there was no film, television, or even photography yet to evoke these experiences.

Inspiring your students to engage in the imagery of Shakespeare’s plays can:

- Inspire close reading
- Engage imagination
- Reach visual learners

There are two kinds of imagery you’ll find in Shakespeare’s plays: **literal images** (descriptions of actual things), and **evocative images** (visual descriptions used as metaphor or connective idea). Both are valuable to discover.

Regardless of the kind of imagery you’re finding, **the exercise we always recommend is to have students draw the picture that they see Shakespeare describing.** You’ll find specific text examples and recommendations below.

Literal Images. We use literal imagery to describe incredible events, intense dreams, and any people, places or things that aren’t immediately present:

He veered up the side of the mountain, over the first bridge, under the second one, and finally screeched his way into the station.

In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Titania uses extensive literal imagery as she explains to Oberon all the terrible weather changes happening in the human world that have happened as a result of his jealousy - she blames him for the wind “piping in vain,” and causing all of the fog and overflown rivers (and drowned farm fields):



TITANIA

These are the forgeries of jealousy:
And never, since the middle summer's spring,
Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,
By paved fountain or by rushy brook,
Or in the beached margent of the sea,
To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind,
But with thy brawls thou hast disturb'd our sport.
Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
As in revenge, have suck'd up from the sea
Contagious fogs; which falling in the land
Have every pelting river made so proud
That they have overborne their continents:
The ox hath therefore stretch'd his yoke in vain,
The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn
Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard;
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock.....

Evocative Images. We employ evocative terms – often using similes and metaphors – to communicate an emotionally charged observation or inner feeling. It can employ many other literary devices as well – personification, hyperbole, etc.

I love you like peanut butter loves jelly.

Watching that five hour lecture was like falling down an empty well for a million years.

She was a comet bolting through the room.

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more.*

Below are our favorite examples of rich, evocative imagery from Shakespeare's better-known plays. But you will find it throughout all of his canon.

Try drawing any or all of the images below on your own, or with your students - let your creativity go wild - you'll be glad you did!



A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM:

Helena: For ere Demetrius looked on Hermia's eyne,
He hailed down oaths that he was only mine;
And when this hail some heat from Hermia felt,
So he dissolved, and showers of oaths did melt. (Act 1 scene 1)

MACBETH:

Macbeth: If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? (Act 1 scene 3)

Macbeth: Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red. (Act 2 scene 2)

JULIUS CAESAR:

CASSIUS Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs and peep about
To find ourselves dishonourable graves. (Act 1 scene 2)

ROMEO & JULIET:

ROMEO: But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief,
That thou her maid art far more fair than she... (Act 2 scene 2)

