

Sound in Poetry

The importance of imagery

Many students are familiar with Visual Imagery in the literary field as well as in everyday conversation. You may remember a quote like Wordsworth's description of the daffodils:

'I wondered lonely as a cloud' and 'They stretched in never ending line... along the margins of a bay'.

Don't you love Wordsworth and the directness of the appeal of these images?

Likewise, Geoffrey Chaucer starts his 'Prologue to the Canterbury Tales' with:

'When that Aprille with his showers soote
Hath pierced the droughte of March to the roote.'

The next category of imagery is Sound Imagery. The effect that the sound of a word has is dependent on CONTEXT. In general, long vowels tend to evoke peacefulness, slowness or solemnity. For example:

'Cool moonlight' sounds restful and still, and the idea of moving slowly.

On the other hand, combinations of VOWELS tend to give an impression of languorous or unified movement. Examples of this are:

'... Across the hill field, mushroom brown in
'The sun, the mass of the sheep trundle
'As though on small wheels.'
G. MacBeth (Poem for Breathing).

SHORT VOWELS tend to give an impression of quick movement or lightness. Note the efficacy of speed in the anonymous author of Sir Gawayn and the Green Knight':

'Gawayn grips his great axe and gathers to the swing, Puts his left foot forward, on the floor for balance, Lets it swing swiftly down.'

Here the short 'i's convey the fastness of the knight's arm in bringing down the weapon. Similarly we may note the freshness and the briskness of the short 'l' sounds in:

'It was a high day, a crisp day, The clearest kind of Autumn day
With brisk intoxicating air, a Little wind that frisked...'

'The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs' which gives the effect of time

Sound in Poetry

Effects associated with particular letters:

Certain effects can be produced by the repetition of certain sounds. For example: 'b' and 'p' create explosive sounds, which may suggest quickness, movement, violence and contempt.

Examples of this are:

'That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend

There is contempt evoked in:

Your force, to break, blow, burn and make me new.'

'I then. All smarting with my wounds being cold, To be so pester'd with a popinjay...'

Also in:

'And tell the pleasant prince this mock of his

Hath turned his balls to gunstones...'

(Shakespeare: Henry V)

The letters 'm','n' and sound 'ng' create various effects of humming, singing, music and are occasionally sinister.

An example is the droning sound evoked in Tennyson's:

'The moan of doves in immemorial elms And murmuring of innumerable bees'

Liquid 'l' sound, as you might expect, suggests liquids in motion such as streams, waterfalls and birds such as swans moving on the water.

'Swiftly glides the silken crest Upon the waters, dire and dressed.'

'k','g','st','ts' and 'ch' suggest harshness, violence, cruelty, movement, discomfort, noise and conflict.

's' and 'sh' evoke hissing, softness, smoothness and quiet peacefulness:

'Here are cool mosses deep,

And through the moss the ivies creep,

And in the streams the longleaved flowers weep, And from the craggy ledge the poppy hangs in sleep.'

'f' and 'w' (and to a lesser extent 'v') suggest wind, wings and easy motion:

't' and 'd' are like 'k' and 'g' but less emphatic and are much used in contexts where short actions are described.

'r' tends to depend on the sounds near it, but is generally found in the contexts of movement and noise. 'th' tends to be quiet and 'soothing'.

Look at this example from the Solitary Reaper by William Wordsworth and make a comment.

'O listen! For the Vale profound

Is overflowing with sound.'