
UNIT 3 IMAGERY AND SYMBOLS

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3.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit aims at giving you an understanding of imagery and symbols, and shows you how they help in the process of dramatisation of ideas in poetry and prose. After reading this Unit, you will have learned:

- what images are, and their function in creative writing;
- what symbols, are their function;
- how to look at the images and metaphors in poetry and prose;
- how to become more sensitive to the world around you and your own experiences; and
- that extensive reading of prose and poetry will give you pleasure, sharpen your insight and enrich the quality of your inner life.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Course you have been learning about the general principles of writing. In the two preceding Units, we have seen how ideas can be dramatised through 'situations' and 'dialogues and monologues'. In the present Unit we shall be talking about how imagery and symbols can be used to heighten and deepen our perceptions—to provide fresh insights into events and objects. While the main emphasis is on the use of images and symbols in poetry (where imagery and symbolism play a vital role), their use can be extended to other types of writing as well.

3.2 IMAGERY

At the heart or core of poetry lies the capacity to see the relationships in things. This is what imagery is. An image is a word-picture, or a picture made out of words. If a poem is a kind of lighting-up or illumination of what was otherwise not seen, or was ordinary, it is because a poet sees objects afresh, through images. An epithet, a metaphor, or a simile may create an image, and arouse our imagination to see reality in a new and living way.

Precision and **revelation** are both central to poetry. Of course, precision for the poet is not the same as for a **scientist**. The poet's poetic truth, his sense of precision, and his revelation are achieved **mainly** through imagery.

3.2.1 What is an image?

An image does not necessarily mean a visual picture only. The writer **may** use metaphors, similes, epithets or other devices to convey images **that** appeal to our **senses** of sight, smell, taste, **touch** or hearing. Our imagination is thus stimulated to **see** reality in a new light.

3.2.2 What is the role of images?

An image not only makes us see and feels, it also makes us see into the heart of things. It does this by making us **see and** feel our affinity with other creatures. It makes us realise our relationship with the world around us. In a way, it is a kind of love that enables us to see a design in **all** things. We see that we are all parts of the same body, the same universe. We are no longer shut into **our** limited world. Poetry allows us to share this universal experience. Images are not used merely as superficial decorations, like **cherries** on a cake. They constitute, in a sense, the **very** basis of a poem itself. And all this is **accomplished** through metaphor and imagery.

3.2.3 How does imagery function?

Poet and critic, Middleton Murray, once said, 'Try to be **precise** and you are bound to be metaphorical.' Elsewhere he has said, 'What we primarily demand is that the similarity should be a true similarity and that it should have lain hitherto unperceived, or but rarely perceived by us, so that it comes to us with an effect of **revelation**.' What we most value in imagery is freshness, intensity and evocative power. **Freshness** is the capacity of an image to reveal something we had not realised before. **Intensity** is the concentration of the greatest meaning into the fewest words. This intensity may be achieved by separate images, or by the closeness of the pattern within **which** a poem's **images are** interrelated.

Some words, phrases or **patterns** have a **special power**—**because** words like moon, stars, fire, rose, champak **evoke** a mood in us by arousing diverse memories and associations.

3.3 SYMBOLS

Most generally, a symbol is a thing that stands for something else—a flag is a symbol of its nation. Creative writers make extensive use of symbols in order to give fresh vitality and immediacy to their work. Be it poetry, prose or **drama**, symbols serve to provide several layers of meaning to the scene, event or quality symbolised.

3.3.1 What are symbols?

A symbol is an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or stands for **something** else. Actions and gestures may be symbolic—for instance, a clenched fist may symbolise aggression **while** raised arms may denote surrender.

3.3.2 What is the role of symbols?

Symbols may serve to (a) interpret a theme, (b) to make it acceptable, (c) to awaken dormant or suppressed **experiences**, or (d) as mere embellishment.

3.3.3 How do symbols function?

Symbols evoke an **objective**, concrete **reality**, and this reality in turn suggests another level of **meaning**. In prose or poetry, symbols provide **the** reader with a number of meanings that can be associated with the object or idea symbolised. Thus, symbols serve to deepen **the levels of comprehension** or perception, and also to reinforce the ideas **presented**.

3.4 IMAGERY AND SYMBOLS IN POETRY— A STUDY OF SOME POEMS TO ILLUSTRATE THEIR USE

Let us first consider what makes poetry different from prose. Prose too has its rhythms; it may even have symbols and images in it. But poetry is the language of heightened awareness, of strong feelings. It is because of this that poets have always, traditionally, used some **form** of metre or rhythmic flow—this flow being created by the use of syllables of stresses. Prose is said to appeal to the reason or intellect, while the language of poetry appeals to our intuition, feelings and thoughts. Poetry springs, most **often**, from the unconscious. It is based not on rational analysis but on intuitive understanding or perception. The use of imagery and symbols helps to create this heightened awareness. Look at this poem by Shiv K. Kumar,

In that triple-baked continent
women don't etch angry eyebrows
on mud walks.

 Patiently they sit
 like empty pitchers
 on the mouth of the village well

Pleating hope in each braid
of their mississippi-long hair
looking deep into the water's mirror
for the moisture in their eyes.

What are the images evoked here? The same image may lead to different associations. But angry eyebrows makes me think of the plucked eyebrows of fashionable westernised women. The triple-baked continent is probably a reference to the Third World, of which India is a part. The women of the village, the author seems to suggest, are patient, and he likens them to those big mud or brass or copper vessels left by the side of the village well. Haven't we all seen these rural women as patient as the earth itself, or as enduring as the great rivers of the land? The image of the village women pleating hope in each braid, is especially evocative of the timeless quality of life in rural India, and especially the stoic acceptance of the **women** of our villages.

Now look at this one by the famous Bengali poet, Jibananda Das. Speaking of his beloved, the poet says,

Her hair was dark as night in Vidisha
Her face the sculpture of Sravasti . . .
'Where were you so long?' She asked, and more
With her bird's-nest eyes, Banalata Sen of Natore.

What a perfect picture we get from the image of the haunting and mysterious beauty of Banalata Sen, linking her to the legend and myth of Vidisha and Sravasti, as well as to the music of those names. And then, **suddenly**, the simple question: 'Where were you so long?' followed by the exquisite image of the bird's-nest eyes, **suggesting** not only heavy-lidded classical beauty, but the images of birds, nests, flight, and homecoming.

Again, take this excerpt from a poem by the **Kannada** poet, **Lankesh**, titled 'Mother',

My mother, black, prolific earth,
green leaf, a festival of white flowers,
with every bum, the earthier, with every pang
more fruit and petal.

Spending all youth in a tatter of sarees,
She died, she did;
What's the age of a hag bent double?

A **wild** bear
 bearing a litter of **little** ones,
 she reared a **husband**, saved coins
 in knots of cloth, like a hurt bitch
 She snarled, **grumbled** and fought.

A wild jungle **bear** has no need of **your** Gita
 My mother lived '
 for stick and **grain**, labour and **babies**;
 for rafter overhead, rice, bread, a blanket;
 to walk upright **among** equals.

Living **m** mud and soil, and
 for leaving as she did, as if
 leaving home for the fields,
 cool, in the middle of small talk.

The poet here makes **us** see his mother as a rough, but splendid, creature of the earth, loyal only to her family **and** to the fields, making things grow. We can almost see her, hear her. Here, **as** in Shiv K. **Kumar's** poem, we see a village woman. But while in **Kumar's** poem the women were seen from a distance, this woman is an immediate **presence—flesh** and blood, **animal**; tree, earth. The end is so very moving. She dies, **as she** lived, like one just leaving home to go into the fields—and she **left** in the middle of small talk. What does this make you feel? **Lankesh's** Mother is no beautiful heroina, but she is as hardy and enduring as the bark of trees, as the produce of the earth. She is the earth itself.

In one of her short poems, **Kamala Das** says:

Men are **worthless**, to trap them
 Use the cheapest bait of all, but never
 love, which in a **woman** must mean teats
and a silence in the blood.

Those lines are highly evocative of the **mood** of a painful love. If you have ever experienced it, you **will** know exactly what **Kamala Das** means. And yet—how can there be 'silence in **the** blood'? It's as though the whole body fails—circulation stops—the heart **seems** to drop into space. It's not a physical reality—it's a **feeling**, and the poetic image successfully captures it.

I'd now like to share **with** you a short poem I wrote many years ago, called 'Hibiscus':

Some people **put** pieces of
 broken glass on their walls,
 high walls; broken pieces of glass
glinting deceptively, almost prettily
 in the sunlight; broken glass
 to cut the intruder; to keep **out**
 the thief in the **night**.
 But there are some
 who are like **the** hibiscus flower
 that stands so openly by the low wall
 -So easily plucked
 So vulnerable
 So innocent

The hibiscus flower, **the** central image in this poem, is the image **of the** innocent, the unguarded, the **open**, as against those who protect **themselves—against** thieves, **perhaps against** life **too**? It is just about two contrastive attitudes, two different **ways**—of life.

Images and words **that** have been repeated too often become stale and so lose their power to move us. **These** are called cliches. For instance, 'She is like a rose—or a lotus'. But sometimes even much-used images like this can **become** meaningful if

3.9 GLOSSARY

You will find in the **glossary** a short list of the literary terms used in this Unit.

Epithet: A word or phrase applied to a person or thing to show a quality or characteristic.

Imagery: Language calculated to re-create the sight, smell etc., of physical things in the reader's **mind**.

Metaphor: A figure of **speech** in which one thing is described in terms of another, e.g., he was a lion in the **fight**.

Sensory: About the five **senses—sight**, smell, hearing, taste and touch.

Simile: A figure of speech in which two things, essentially different, are compared, using **like, as, as if, e.g. He** is as black as coal; her tongue is **as** sharp as a razor.

Symbol: A symbol is a thing that stands for something else.

Some stories (listed **below**) have been referred to in this Unit:

Somerset Maugham	:	The Kite
R.K. Narayan	:	The Axe
Katherine Mansfield	:	A Cup of Tea
Thomas Quiller-Couch	:	The Czarina's Violet
Khwaja Ahmed Abbas	:	The Sparrows
Manoj Das	:	The Tree

You are now advised to go to any university or college library close by and read as many of **these** stories as possible.