



Imagery Explorer

#3: Passages with more complex images

What's imagery?

Imagery is language that appeals to our senses and inspires us to imagine something specific. Imagery can prompt us to visualize something or imagine sounds, movements, or feelings. Because Shakespeare wrote his plays for a theatre without electricity or elaborate sets, he used imagery to conjure vivid pictures for the audience with words. Sometimes the images are quite involved.

Choose an image

Here are some passages from Shakespeare's plays that have rich, complex imagery. Choose the passages that interest you and let your imagination wander as you explore them.

Thou rememberest
Since once I sat upon a promontory,
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
That the rude sea grew civil at her song
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres,
To hear the sea-maid's music.

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine:
There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,
Lull'd in these flowers with dances and delight;
And there the snake throws her enamell'd skin,
Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in

A lioness hath whelped in the streets;
And graves have yawn'd, and yielded up their dead;
Fierce fiery warriors fought upon the clouds,
In ranks and squadrons and right form of war,
Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol;
The noise of battle hurtled in the air,
Horses did neigh, and dying men did groan,
And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets.

Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,
Having some business, do entreat her eyes
To twinkle in their spheres till they return.
What if her eyes were there, they in her head?
The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars,
As daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaven
Would through the airy region stream so bright
That birds would sing and think it were not night.

Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day;
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale! Light thickens; and the crow
Makes wing to the rooky wood:
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse;
While night's black agents to their preys do rouse.
Thou marvell'st at my words: but hold thee still;
Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

No right answer

Because imagery inspires a response in you, there's no right way to interpret it. As you explore this imagery, be curious about what you discover and about what these discoveries mean to you. The first step is to figure out what's being said. Take your time and try to unpack the meaning in each line. The list below can help with some of the more unusual words.

Words and phrases that might be new or have an unexpected meaning

- **promontory** – a high point of land that juts out into a body of water, like the ocean
- **uttering** – making a sound with one's voice
- **dulcet** – sweet and soothing
- **harmonious** – tuneful and full of harmony
- **civil** – courteous and polite
- **bank** – land next to or sloping down towards a river
- **thyme** – a low-growing, fragrant plant used as an herb in cooking
- **oxlips** – woodland plants with yellow flowers
- **over-canopied** – covered, like with a canopy draped overhead
- **luscious** – richly lush and pleasing
- **woodbine** – another name for honeysuckle, a fragrant climbing plant
- **musk-roses** – a rambling rose with large, white musk-scented flowers
- **eglantine** – another name for sweetbriar, a wild rose with fragrant leaves and flowers
- **weed** – in Shakespeare, this sometimes refers to clothing
- **whelped** – given birth to cubs
- **yielded up** – given up, released
- **ranks and squadrons** – two ways soldiers are organized on a battlefield
- **entreat** – request or persuade
- **spheres** – specific place in the sky
- **airy region** – the air
- **seeling** – a term from falconry, it means screening or concealing
- **scarf up** – cover up or blindfold
- **pitiful** – for Shakespeare this often meant feeling pity, so compassionate
- **rooky** – filled with rooks, which are a type of crow
- **rouse** – get up and come out
- **petty** – small-minded, of little importance
- **pace** – how long it takes to do things
- **player** – stage actor
- **struts** – walks with large, confident steps
- **frets** – expresses worry or distress
- **fury** – wild or violent anger
- **signifying** – meaning

Make it yours

Shakespeare wrote plays, and the whole point was to create an experience for the audience through collaboration with many other artists. So a great way to explore, understand, and appreciate Shakespeare's language is through your own creativity. Choose a passage from the first page, then choose activities from the list below to collaborate with Shakespeare to make something new.

Performance

Create a short performance piece of your selected passage. Decide how you might use your body and/or voice to convey the images, and if you'd like to have your performance supported by staging, lighting, costuming, props, etc.

Create a dance or movement piece inspired by the images in your chosen passage. Think about things like staging, lighting, costuming, music, etc.

Share your performance, either with an audience or by asking someone to film it for you.

Art

Create a drawing, painting, sculpture, still life, photograph, or film that expresses what the images mean to you. Decide how you would like to share your creation.

Music

Express what the passage means to you through music. Choose a song or piece of music, build a playlist, or even compose an original piece that conveys your feelings about the images in the passage. Decide how you'd like to share what you've created.

Creative Writing

Write your own poem or story inspired by the passage. Perhaps your title might be one of the images it contains.



Reflect

- What discoveries did you make as you explored the text?
- Why did you make the creative choices that you made?
- What did you learn about these images? About this language? About yourself?

So, where's that from?

See below to learn who speaks these passages in which play.

**Thou rememberest
Since once I sat upon a promontory,
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back...**

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon describes the moment just before Cupid's arrow missed its mark and gave a flower magical powers.

**I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows...**

Later in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Oberon describes the place where the fairy Queen, Titania is sleeping.

**A lioness hath whelped in the streets;
And graves have yawn'd, and yielded up their dead;
Fierce fiery warriors fought upon the clouds...**

In *Julius Caesar*, Calpurnia describes bizarre things someone claims to have seen the night before.

**Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,
Having some business, do entreat her eyes
To twinkle in their spheres till they return...**

In *Romeo & Juliet*, Romeo imagines that Juliet's eyes and two stars have traded places.

**Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day...**

In *Macbeth*, the title character welcomes night, hoping it will hide things like murder from compassion and pity.

**To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day...**

Later in *Macbeth*, the title character reflects on life and its meaning after having made choices that disregard conscience and remorse.