

IMAGES

One of the major difficulties in literary interpretation is distinguishing between private thoughts and public language. Linguists distinguish between an *idiolect* (your unique, personal language variations) and a *dialect* (the shared language variations of a group). Similarly, we can distinguish between images that have resonance for you personally, and images that are part of a public language. Your unique thoughts and feelings about a poem are called an *impression*, not an *interpretation*.

Imagine that you wrote the following verses:

The mountain was blue like my car
When Uncle Larry bought a chocolate cake.

This may mean a lot to you. It may be the most important moment in your life. But how is your reader supposed to understand it? Your readers can't see inside your head. Who the heck is Uncle Larry? What does a chocolate cake have to do with anything? Now, you could sit with every reader and explain all these images. But soon, you might realize that your lines were not so much poetry as they are shorthand for your own personal memories. A diary in verse.

Poetry, especially poetry that has survived the test of time, is built on words that everyone understands. Obviously, you can't invent your own meaning for the word "chocolate" (for example, you could say it means the sound of meat dropping from a wet plate onto slate, or a household pet that wags its tail). No one would understand what you were saying. After all, why should they bother? Meaning derives from common use. The same is true for images in poems. What they *mean* depends on how they have *commonly been used*—by writers.

A mountain in a poem may refer to a real mountain, just as "the sea" may refer to the actual sea. But images don't really work that way. Good readers, like viewers at an exhibition of paintings, view your poem in relation to all the poems that have gone before it. They see your images in relation to all other similar images in poems and paintings and dances and all the arts. "The sea" invokes seas from Matthew Arnold, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and so forth. It is not a real sea, but an image crafted in the imaginations of generations of artists. It is these images which hover above every future generation of poets. Some of these images are thousands of years old, locked in language and syntax and sound. They have become part of our language, our shared Western culture(s). In contributing to that heritage, a poet ceases to be important as an individual. Only the poet's craft, an artistic ability to craft words, matters to *poetry*. That is what the art demands—not personal thoughts, but a crafted and sincere artwork about something we can all access. It's the personal taken to the level of the universal.

When a poem stirs your own memories, you are not interpreting a poem, you are getting impressions from it. Nothing wrong with that, but it's not literary interpretation. After all, you can get impressions from advertising, movies, bus schedules, editorials, and baseball commentary. But poetry is a pedestal in a museum: whatever you place on it sits in the light of all other artwork around it. And so as a good reader, you must strive to learn our common store of images.