

#Flashwrite Teen Poetry MOOC 2016

CLASS ONE • Video Transcript

>> Hi guys, welcome back. We're going to talk a little bit now about an aspect of craft for poetry that is essential to making sure we connect to an audience, and that's imagery. The poet William Carlos Williams once famously wrote, no ideas but in things. Now we're not going to dive in to the various things he may have meant by that.

But we're going to use it as a springboard to talk about what imagery can do. So first and foremost, the big question is what is imagery? Imagery really is anything in the poem that connects to the five senses. So we're talking here about sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste.

What we're trying to do with imagery is using detailed specific language to create, for lack of a lack of a better term, mental pictures. So how do we use it? We have to choose the right words to make sure that we can represent these objects and actions in the best way. Well, what does that mean?

So been thinking a lot about how to describe this on a video chat with you individually. And here's what I've been thinking about. Try to imagine if you can, the last concert you went to. When you were there, there was an energy in the room. People were brushing up against you, and you could smell the leather jackets and smoke from the people that were outside and now inside.

And you could hear this sort of waterfall-like sound of conversation coming from all around you. And you were very aware with that energy and with that anticipation of what was going on until the lights dim, right? And then the band came out. And they started to play. At some point, I venture to guess, while that concert was being performed in front of you, you became unaware of those surroundings.

You were lost in the music, the set design, all the things that were happening, you were there so present that when, for instance, the guy next to you taps you on your right shoulder to squeeze by so he can use the bathroom, you're sort of shocked back into existence.

That experience of being somewhere so complete that you're lost in it is what you want to try to do when you're using imagery in a poem. That may seem hard, and I'm not going to tell you it's easy. But there are things we can do to allow imagery to function at its' best, in a poem.

When you're thinking about using imagery, and we'll go back to this concert idea for a second, imagine that you're now back in that moment, that memory. You're back at that concert and instead of just having your brain, you also have a video camera. You all know that a video camera can't capture everything so as a director you have to take that camera lens and you have to focus it in on something specific.

One of the members of the band, or the person next to you in the crowd. Or you zoom it out and try to get a wide picture. But it's up to you as a director to focus the attention so the audience sees what you see. That's what we're trying to do with imagery, make it so real that it feels like I was there, and make me see the experience through your eyes by the lens that you're providing for us.



You can all, I imagine, because I'm sure you're wonderfully smart, you could all come back from that concert and tell me all about it. Right, you could tell me, probably, the name of the members of the band, and what songs they played, maybe even in what order. And you could even talk about the pyrotechnics and maybe you could tell me about how many people were in the audience.

But telling you those things does not bring it back to life. How do you bring it back to life on a page? You show it to me. And that's where imagery becomes essential. So when you're thinking about imagery, you want to use active verbs. You want to think really small.

And you don't want to be afraid to describe something in new ways, to look at it differently. Good images call attention to specific feelings that through objects, and through the focused attention on something in the distance or something right there, you actually end up creating that emotional connection with the reader.

Now, maybe some of you are going, I already know what imagery is. Congratulations. Or maybe some of you're going, okay, that sounds kind of hard. You want me to in my mind go back to a scene and then try to describe it using active verbs. But I don't remember everything and what am I supposed to do?

Okay, first of all, it's not very hard but as poets we do have to keep our five senses on alert. When we're out walking, when we're talking to friends, and we're seeing and watching television and you notice a certain kind of light coming in through the window - take note of it.

Write it down in your notebook. You can use it later. But you have to be aware of the things that you hear, see, smell, touch, taste, etc. I can talk to you about these ideas for a long time. But just like I'm asking you to do, I think it's going to be best if I show you some examples of how imagery works in poetry.

So that you can start to A, recognize it, and B, try to work a little harder in your own work to ensure that the imagery is being used in the most successful way possible. So we're going to start by looking at a couple poems and I want to begin with a piece called "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" by a wonderful poet named James Wright.

I'm going to read the poem and then I just want to call attention to a few things that are happening. "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota:"

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.
Down the ravine behind the empty house,
The cowbells follow one another
into the distances of the afternoon.
To my right,
In a field of sunlight between two pines,
The droppings of last year's horses
Blaze up into golden stones.

I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
 A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
 I have a wasted my life.

Woah! Where did that come from? Here's a writer who seems to be lying in a hammock, seems to be looking around at what's going on around him. And then, suddenly, there's this discovery at the end. How does he get there? Well, if James Wright wasn't aware of his senses, I'm going to argue he wouldn't have gotten there at all.

If we go back and look at the imagery, watch how it builds. We begin with a location. We know he's in a hammock based on a title. And then the speaker says, over my head, I see a bronze butterfly. It's not just a butterfly, it's a bronze butterfly.

Adding adjectives and adverbs and using really striking and vivid verbs, as he does later, help us see. So when we say bronze butterfly, we think often of a butterfly being transformed into something that flies away and invokes freedom. But, when it's bronzed, it seems almost like it's a statue, like it can't move.

Something beautiful that's frozen. But that bronze butterfly is also asleep. It's not just asleep. It's asleep on a trunk. Not just a trunk on a black trunk. So there's darkness. We're getting that feeling through the imagery. James Wright never has to say as the poet, or allow his speaker to say there's darkness here.

There's something that might not be beautiful. The imagery are giving us that feeling. And it says, as it goes on, blowing like a leaf in green shadow. And then we have down in the field there's an empty house. You see how we're adding to a lot of these stock images, we're giving small quick descriptions that allow us to see them more clearly.

And through all of these descriptions we're also not forgetting sound. What happens next, the cowbells follow one another. We can hear the sound of the bells trailing off to the distance of the afternoon, and then to his right, we have this beautiful specific image, in a field of sunlight between two pines.

Now right there, we might not all be thinking of the exact same field or the exact same pine trees in the exact same state, at the exact same location, or on the exact date. But I bet, if I gave everyone watercolors or some crayons, whatever we have, we could draw that image.

We can see the pines to what light looks like slashing through trees. So we're brought to the poem and into the poem. And then there's a really curious moment. Between that field of sunlight and the two pines, he sees the droppings of last year's horses. He's literally looking, pardon my language, at horse shit.

And what does he see when he looks at the horse shit? He sees that even the horseshit is blazing up into golden stones. Blazing, the idea of fire, the idea of energy. But it's golden stone. So there's, again, this a little bit of a juxtaposition. Is it terrible? Is it horseshit?

Or is it beautiful? Then he leans back and he says, I see the hawk floating overhead. If you know anything about chicken hawks, you know that they're a bird of prey that can, in times, swoop down and attack other animals. Maybe looking for something that's decaying or dying. And after all that there's the discovery.

What does he discover as a speaker? That he's wasted his life. What does that mean? Maybe it means that by sitting down for a second and taking stock of all that's beautiful in the world and all the things that are continuing to move on. That this person feels like he hasn't taken advantage of the world around him.

That he hasn't focused as much time as he could on the beauty of nature, on the movement of animals, on the way in which we as humans live in the world. And because of that, he suddenly feels as an older man, he's wasted something. Now does James Wright want us all to walk out of here and go, man life is terrible?

I don't know, you could interpret it that way maybe, but another way to interpret it is, that by coming to that discovery and showing us just how much beauty is out in the world, what do we then do? I don't know about you guys, but when I walk out of here in a couple of minutes I'm going to look outside and I'm going to see that tree differently.

I'm going to see the bus that just drove by in a new light. Because James Wright has reminded me and called attention through imagery, to a feeling that we don't want to go through life forgetting what we're doing here. And that is to live. Imagery, very specific language, leading us to a discovery.

>> Let's look at a poem by Marie Howe. This is called "What the Living Do." And in the James Wright poem you watch this imagery build, one scene unfold in front of you. In Marie Howe's poem, you're going to see the imagery sort of move a little differently. It's going to be a little quicker, it's going to move in and out of these scenes, but it's going to lead to the same idea.

This discovery by a poet, by a speaker, of something they didn't know had they not spent time focusing on the world around them. "What the Living Do:"

Johnny, the kitchen sink has been clogged for days, some
utensil probably fell down there.
And the Drano won't work but smells dangerous, and the crusty
dishes have piled up

waiting for the plumber I still haven't called. This is the
everyday we spoke of.

It's winter again: the sky is a deep, headstrong blue, and the
sunlight pours through

the open living room windows because the heat's on too high in
here and I can't turn it off.

For weeks now, driving, or dropping a bag of groceries in the
street, the bag breaking,

I've been thinking: This is what the living do. And yesterday,
 hurrying along those
 wobbly bricks in the Cambridge sidewalk, spilling my coffee
 down my wrist and sleeve,

I thought it again, and again later, when buying a hairbrush:
 This is it.

Parking. Slamming the car door shut in the cold. What you
 called that yearning.

What you finally gave up. We want the spring to come and the
 winter to pass. We want
 whoever to call or not to call, a letter, a kiss--we want more and
 more and then more of it.

But there are moments, walking, when I catch a glimpse of
 myself in the window glass,
 say, the window of the corner video store, and I'm gripped by a
 cherishing so deep

for my own blowing hair, chapped face, and unbuttoned coat
 that I'm speechless:
 I am living. I remember you.

So that's the poem. And if you go back and you study it and you look at what's happening, very similar to James Wright, we begin in a scene. Now, we also get an address, in this case, Johnny. Now, I'll give you a little background on the poem. It shouldn't matter, necessarily, but Marie Howe wrote this book *What the Living Do*, after her brother passed away from HIV.

So this address is certainly to a person, but whether or not we are that person, or have had that exact experience, it seems much broader than that. One personal experience can be broadened out and give us all a chance to learn something about ourselves. So we start in the kitchen.

The kitchen sink has been clogged for days. But it goes further, it makes it specific. There's a utensil down there. They're not just dishes next to the sink, they're crusty dishes. Then the poem shifts a little bit and moves towards some windows. And it says in the third stanza that the living room windows are open, but it doesn't stop there.

It's because the heat's on too high in here, and I can't turn it off. So now we get a feeling. We saw a lot in the James Wright poem about what we can see, right, the images. But here we have this clang of the utensil in the sink that we can hear.

We see the window open, but we feel that heat, the sweating that it would take to, in the middle of winter open a window, cuz it's so steamy. So we're starting to feel it. And then we go on and we see even more about what is happening. She hurries along the street, she spills coffee down her sleeve, she drops a bag of groceries, the bag breaks.

And I want to call your attention, as she moves and moves and moves through the poem, to the second to last stanza. Here she says, we're thinking about the living do and these are the things we do and these are things we do. And then she says, but every once in awhile I catch myself in a window glass and then she specifies it.

Say, she says, the window of the corner video store. So now we're not only placed by maybe I see a reflection, but it's this reflection in the corner video store. And then from there the image grows even more and I'm gripped, she says, by cherishing so deep from my own blowing hair.

We can see hair blowing. Doesn't have to say my auburn hair. Right, we understand you can use selective imagery to make sure we see it. My hair that's blowing. My chapped face - while we record this it happens to be winter. So that feeling of chapped face and wind is very present.

But I know even in the summer when I read this poem, I still see it and again I feel it. So the chapped face, the unbuttoned coat. What does that lead her to see? She's speechless. Why? Because she is alive as a speaker. And what does the living allow itself to do here, the speaker?

It allows themselves to remember. By living, the discovery is we can carry the memory of those we love who pass away. We start in a kitchen, somewhere many of you were in at some point today. And that description of the kitchen leads to the memory of a person, leads to a discovery of the self, about the world around her.

That's what imagery can do. And that move from deep description and detail, imagery, to a discovery is what you guys will be practicing this week. Read closely the poems that are below. And when you try to write your poem, think about that move of how description can lead to a discovery of yourself.

Remember your stories matter, your voices matter, the things you experience matter. And if you can show it to the reader in a clear, new, fresh, exciting way, you will allow them to feel like they've had that experience with you. And they will be moved to act, to respond, to feel in the ways you want them to.

Thanks.

>> Hi guys. To continue the discussion about imagery, I wanted to refer back to something mentioned in the previous video, and that's the idea of thinking small. First and foremost, when you're working with imagery, I want you to keep in mind something that is essential to the craft of poetry.

And that is, as we've talked about before, good writing and good imagery can lead a reader to a specific feeling and help them understand something new about the poem that they wouldn't be able to had you not chosen that particular image, detail, or description. So when we talk about thinking small, think about funneling down or unpacking.

If we think back to "Lying in a Hammock..." by James Wright, we're not just in a hammock. We're in a hammock and we see some things. We see the bronze butterfly. It's not just a butterfly, it's the bronze butterfly. And it's asleep on the black trunk. Later there's the line about the droppings of last year's horses.

These images and the decisions that the poet makes, I'll argue, help us understand something. So let's go back to top and think about the word butterfly. What does a butterfly imply? Well, I think there's regrowth, sort of a regeneration. Rebirth, its idea of freedom. Most importantly, with a butterfly, there's the idea of transformation.

Something that starts out as one thing, spends time, and then becomes something totally different. By starting the very first line with a butterfly, and ending with the line, I have wasted my life, the poet has allowed us to start, without us maybe even knowing, to feel at the beginning like there's going to be some kind of freedom.

And the reason then, why that specificity works so well is because in the end, it's cut away and turned in the opposite direction. We don't see that transformation at the end. The fact that the writer, the poet in this case, notices that, allows us to see something new.

Because we recognize at the end, that what he was making us feel like we were going to see, this transformation of the self, didn't occur. And that's the discovery. The same thing can be said later, it's not just a house, it's an empty house. Now again, maybe that doesn't seem like a large important detail, but when you're narrowing down on what to focus on and what to unpack and to really funnel down on what the image means.

The word empty in front of that house has a lot of implications. Did somebody die? Did somebody move away? Did somebody not live a life full enough to even have stuff to put in the house? The fact that it's empty, that one word, starts to make us realize that this butterfly idea we had in the first line might not actually be where the poem is taking us.

Finally then, let's look at the line, the droppings of last year's horses. If we imagined being the poet lying in a hammock and looking around, there are any number of things we could choose to describe. Yes, we've seen the trees. And yes we've seen the butterfly. And we even talk at some point about a cow bell as trailing off.

But when we choose horse droppings, that's really, really important. Because what we see there is even something that is supposed to be terrifically ugly. Something that is supposed to literally be the lowest thing that we would ever want somebody to describe as beautiful. Even that is not described horse shit, it is described as the droppings of last years horses.

And what do they do? They blaze up into golden stone. Everything else, aside from the self as the speaker in this poem, is beautiful. And if he had chosen something that was already beautiful to describe, if he had said, and the small gold ring I see bursting from a dirt pile.

We already know a gold ring can be beautiful. It wouldn't have the same emotional resonance. There's something to say when we unpack, about making choices that, A, yes, maybe they surprise the reader. But, B, and equally as important, they lead that reader to the feeling you want. One thing I want you to remember and how I'll leave this quick conversation, is that you are in charge of taking the reader where you want them to end up.

If you start a poem with a butterfly, and you don't want me to feel free and transformed and beautiful, then it's up to you to slowly or quickly, however ever you want to do it, shift that around. And by saying black trunk, the leaves are blowing, there's a ravine behind the empty house,

the cowbells are trailing off. The noise is leaving, right? We're starting to get a feeling. And I venture you got this when you read the poem, that things are not what they seem. And there's a darkness. There's a somber tone here. Had all of those images been described differently, had the choice been different, the end result, not only our feeling would be the same, but the turn, I've wasted my life, would not have impacted all of us the way that it did, based on the choices.

There's no right way to choose, and sometimes you're going to have to rewrite and rewrite a line. But keep thinking small, keep breaking down, not only what you see, and can you see more, but also what does it mean? If I say butterfly, what implications go with it? And if that's not the right word or the right image or the right insect, whatever it is, you go to another one and you try to find out if you unpack and unpack, what will the reader take from it?

Thanks.