

## IMAGERY IN MATHEW ARNOLD'S POEMS

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this paper, the researcher explores the ways Mathew Arnold has aesthetically embroidered images in his poems. Imagery is an ornament that a poet decorates his poems with, and inspires sensory perception within a reader's mind. Metaphysical poet Mathew Arnold very magically uses words to produce sounds and images. The poet uses all poetic techniques from connotative diction to metaphor, from similes to onomatopoeia, from metonymy to alliteration. He uses nature images, colour images, sound images, etc. His poetic images are realized, and felt in the true sense of aestheticism.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Imagery, Perception, Onomatopoeia, Simile, Metaphor, Symbols*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Descriptive language forms imagery and readers' perception assists in realization of the imagery. Imagery is a literary device and it is used in all forms of literature, particularly in poetry and poetic style of writing. It can imply objects, actions and ideas. The term is often linked with mental pictures but, in truth, it can refer to visual images, auditory sense, olfactory sense, tactile sense, and gustatory sense. An image is a language portrait that helps us to see, hear, feel, think, and generally understand more clearly or vividly what is being said or the impression that the writer wishes to convey. (Croft & Cross 56) Simile, metaphor, personification, onomatopoeia, and many other literary devices are usually applied while creating imagery in literature.

A poet uses words to convey meaning to the readers. All magic is in their words. Words create sounds; words create pictures. He or she can create sensation in their mind. Readers' senses and schemata are also supporting matters in realization of imagery. A poet has to rely less on rhythm and rhyme and more on using comparisons like metaphor and simile. Aristotle says: "But the greatest thing, by far, is to be a master of metaphor. It is one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of similarity of dissimilar. Through resemblance, metaphor makes things clearer." (Pantoja 30). It is through comparisons that the poet enables himself to communicate to the reader the most complex materials in as most powerful and meaningful way. Resemblance in separate entities is a major thing for metaphor. Onomatopoeia involves imitation, e.g. buzz, which resembles the possible actual sound of a bee.

A writer uses simile as well to give vividness and colour to his style of expression. Simile is a valuable means of ornamentation. It is a useful element of expression. Kleiser writes, "Simile is generally regarded as a purely poetic accessory – as an artifice which, according to the realm of poetry, is sometimes divorced from its proper relationship and forced into the association of prose. Simile is always the product either of the fancy or of the imagination, and is therefore a poetic attribute...." (3) For example, a line from Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* "long and lank and brown as is the ribbed sea-land", or Shakespeare's schoolboy "creeping like snail unwillingly to school" are similes.

Stanford mentions that metaphor and simile possess an essential difference. In his words, “The essence of metaphor is that a word undergoes a change or extension of meaning. In simile nothing of this kind occurs; every word has its normal meaning and no semantic transference is incurred. This is a fundamental difference in the verbal sphere. It means that metaphor is primarily a treatment of *language*, simile is primarily a treatment of thought; metaphor, then, logically (but not psychologically as has been shown) belongs to the order of tropes, simile to the order of figures; and this being so, on linguistic grounds they can never be classed together.”(35 )

Symbols are also used for imagery in literature. Shaw defines symbol as something used for, or regarded as, representing something else. More specifically, a symbol is a word, phrase, or other expression having a complex of associated meanings. (367) Perrine suggests that “a literary symbol is something that means more than what it is. It is an object, a person, a situation, an action, or some other item that has a literal meaning in the story, but suggests or represents other meanings as well.” (211)

A poet works for creation of image. Some critics believe that imagery means exclusively metaphorical or figurative language. Without entering into any controversy, we proceed with the fact that sensory appeals in poetry, usually referred to as images and imagery, are an organic part of a poem as a whole. These are not to be considered as mere ornament or decoration. Imagery, as a matter of fact, is the primary means by which the total meaning and impact of a poem are grasped.

A poet brings to the creation of imagery all the poetic techniques from connotative diction to metaphor, from similes to onomatopoeia, from metonymy to alliteration. Often he uses a number of techniques in combination, each contributing its share to the total image. Language is our most flexible and sophisticated medium of expression, but it has its limitation. The limitation of language becomes apparent when we try to communicate emotions and sensations. A poet, more often than not, has to deal in the realm of exactly these – emotions and sensations. Korg says, “Poetry works at the limits of knowledge, seeking to express the inexpressible.” (2) They establish relationship between what is known and what is unknown, between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar, and between what is concrete and what is abstract. Showing the importance of poetic imagery, he says, “The most usual processes of poetic thought are the imaginative comparisons which simile, metaphors and symbols are to express. These images explain an aspect of reality by means of an illuminating parallel with some other and more familiar reality.” (2)

For a poet, the familiar reality is important. It usually comes from tradition and individual talent as discussed by T. S. Eliot in his *Tradition and Individual Talent*. A. E. Housman believes that a poet is both of a moment and of an age. Taking up first the tradition of the Victorian scene, we feel a pulse of the same in Carlyle’s following comments from his essay *The Mechanical Age* that the Victorian age is not:

“an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but above all others, the Mechanical Age. It is the age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of the word not the external and physical alone is now managed by Machinery, but the spiritual also...men are grown mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand.”

It is true that Arnold’s poems are a natural reaction to this spirit of the Age and that is an impulse to withdraw from an inhospitable scene and to present, as an alternative, the world delineating the poet’s private moods and emotions. An escape from mechanical spirit of the Age, however, could not make him sing the romantic tune, “He was very much a literary sensibility which never gives us the flash and surprise of lines of Wordsworth or Keats or Browning, but in him, there is always just enough thought and feeling to transform commonplace into poetry.” (19)

### Imagery in Mathew Arnold's Poems

Arnold revolted against the spirit of the mechanical age as well as his non-confirmation and rejection of romantic subjectivism and he sought refuge in an ancient world. For the same reason, he is described as a Greek among the English poets. His fascination for the Greek legends finds best expression in his narrative poems, chiefly in *Mycerinus*, *Sohrab and Rustum* and *Tristram and Iseult*. Similar expressions are in his other poems such as *Forsaken Merman*, *The Sick King in Bokhara* and *A Tomb among the Mountains*.

Arnold has drawn images from various sources, and a larger number of images are from nature: wind, sea, cloud, fog, moon, night, day, sand, winter, wild and tranquil. There are other images like 'waves', 'pearl', 'beaches', 'marble', 'insurgent Nile', 'earthly', 'stars', 'grovels', 'stems', 'rose', 'greasy', 'showerless spring', 'moving Nile', 'flower', 'rain', 'Atlantic', 'stone', 'dazed air', 'fire place', 'flame', 'heaths', 'quite forest', 'dew', 'boughs', 'sun', 'autumn', 'mountain', 'morning' and 'rain'.

Arnold also presents colour images like 'white', 'green', 'gray', 'red', 'silver', 'clear gold', 'blue, and 'pale', 'black' and 'purple'. Visual images are 'light', 'bright', 'glittering', 'dark', 'dazzling', 'glimmering', 'settings', 'glancing', 'lightening', 'flame wide', 'bloom' and 'deep'. The tactile (touch or feel) images are 'cold', 'warm', 'silk' and 'pillow'. Gustatory or taste-related images are 'salt' and 'sweet'. Images related to suffering are 'pain', 'gloom', 'fever', 'sad', 'sick', 'dull', 'wounded', 'wasted', 'withered', 'weary', 'shady', 'weeping', 'unquiet', 'torn', 'wrath', 'dying', 'sigh', 'torment', 'languid' and 'lonely-alone'. Many other types of images are also used. Animal images are 'whale', 'dog', 'lion', 'falcon', 'fox', 'snakes', 'and eagle'. Body images are 'hair', 'head', 'eyes', 'tongues', 'voice', 'heart', 'hand', 'arms', 'limbs', 'ears', 'wrist', 'fingers', and 'feet'. Acoustic images are 'humming', 'whizzing', 'roar', and 'sigh'. Images related to joy and pleasure are 'feel of joy', 'youth', 'laughter', 'youthful bride', 'youthful wife', and 'smile'.

A certain range of images recur in each narrative poem of Mathew Arnold. The theme that Mathew Arnold is handling raises in his imagination some picture or symbol which is again and again in the form of a simile or a metaphor throughout the poem. He was possibly very conscious of symbolic vision. Coleridge says, in this regard, that images "become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion." (183)

The iterative imagery, which runs not only through Arnold's narrative poem, but all through his narrative poetry, is a kind of his extension of creative and modifying impulse. Such an undertone of major common images contributes to the richness and meaning of the poem.

In the *Forsaken Merman*, *The Sick King in Bokhara*, *Mycerinus* and *A Tomb Among The Mountains*, recurring images contribute chiefly to the atmosphere and background of their themes, whereas in *Tristram and Iseult*, and *Sohrab and Rustum* the part played by the recurrent images is more important. They sometimes symbolically emphasize or interpret certain aspects of thought, sometimes supply only decoration and atmosphere, sometimes if they seem grotesque or even repellent, at others are drawn with an earthly beauty of form and colour.

The *Forsaken Merman* is a poem of the poet's passionate boarding on Margaret's disappearance. In the background of a seascape the poet sings to the little children about the cruelty of Margaret. Finally, the poem shows the poet's spiritual attachment such as 'great words', 'windy hill', 'cold blowing airs', 'humming town', 'whizzing wheel',

‘the hoarse mind’, ‘winds howling’, and ‘waves roar’. The disappearance of Margaret brings about a storm in the poet’s heart. The ‘howling wind’ outside corresponds to the inner howling of fretting of ‘wild horses’, quivering and gleaming of ‘spent light, a sorrow-clouded eye’ and a ‘long, long sigh. Associated image of sea-beats, sea snakes, great whales and wild horses express the world of passion.

The poem ends with a spiritual serenity. It is established by images like ‘clear green sea’, ‘red gold throne’, ‘soft mind’, ‘clear falls the moonlight’, ‘sweet airs’, and ‘glistening beaches’. The situation created thus echoes Milton’s “Calmness of mind, all passions spent”. (Samson Agonistes) The ‘howling winds’ fall asleep and become sweet. Passion subsiding, his heart becomes a ‘clear green sea’; clear fall the moonlight. Thus sea with its two main manifestations- wild and serene-is the chief imagery which is integral to the theme of the poem.

The Sick King in Bokhara narrates the mental agony of a Mughal King. It also presents a contrast between two views – social and individual. Tradition compels the king to stone the Mullah to death but his personal feeling compels him to honour the dead man with a state burial. He orders his body to be laid in the grave specially prepared for himself. Lastly, this poem presents a problem concerning criminal psychology. The Mullah is a criminal. He, in time of drought, finds some waters which he does not share with his family. The members of his family discover his hidden supply and drain it. He curses his mother and brothers. Thus he commits breach of the blood-bond. He demands to be killed. The doctrine of the criminal’s search for his own punishment recalls the heroes of Dostoevsky who insists on retribution.

Images used in this poem are not integral to the theme. No obvious pattern of imagery seems at work. Yet, the images are not merely decorative: they come handy to the poem in expressing the king’s agony. The sickness of the king is brought into focus by ‘grief’, ‘head is burning’, ‘alone’, ‘fever’, ‘wind’, ‘winter rain’ and ‘burning dust’. The Mullah’s agony has been powerfully expressed by a single line “I howl in the next world”.

Mycerinus presents religio-philosophical problem. It is the problem of Job in the Bible. Mycerinus is a just and virtuous king. He is to die within six years. His unjust father, however, lived to a ripe old age. His virtue is, as if, to be rewarded with an early death. It shows a divorce between divine power and human values. Mycerinus retires into the cool groves of Nile. His silent knowledge calms him, consoles him and sustains him. The world of Mycerinus is that of frozen apathy. This theme has an apparent relevance to the Age of Matthew Arnold.

It is through the use of images that this world of frozen apathy is realized in this poem. Cold hearts, thankless tongues, dread voice, dull pomp, grey hairs, tormenting heart, vain dreams, duped soul, languid pleasures, feverish time, tranquil gloom, sad tranquillity and cold winds are the characteristics of this world. It is contrasted with the serene world of nature – of the Nile. This world is characterized by mild dusk, murmur of the moving Nile, still Night silver arrow of the moon, golden goblets foamed with wine, twinkling grove, rose-crowned, flower, thrones of dazzling sheen, stillness, of the night and many facts of stars. This world provides silent knowledge. Its austere powers counteract the blind divination of the supreme will. Thus, Arnold has used here a pattern of imagery which reveals the theme of the poem. The contrasting images of colour and movement are integral to the theme.

Tristram and Iseult is not the saga of the suffering of any of its three characters but is in fact of the despair of the poet himself. He speaks of the condition of human life that deadens the human spirit and thereby kills in us the bloom, the youth, the spring – leaving the fierce necessity to feel but dissipating from us the power to do so.

This poem exhibits Arnold's period of profoundest melancholy. It is not the cosmic melancholy but the personal melancholy of Arnold. He is haunted by frustration, weariness and boredom. On all sides, life is threatened. The end of his youth and love affairs has brought no peace but a dead unfeelingness.

Arnold has used a large number of images to present his 'despair'. Loud howls the wind, wild is the sea – coast, white the snow. Grey is the Atlantic sea; Cold is the spring; Pale is the moonlight; Knight is pale; Grass is pale; Light is pale; Queen is pale; Hair is grey, raven and matted; Brain is clouded; Moon is fading; Sea is lonely; December night is rough; Fatigue is deep; Distress is deep; Fire is in the brain. It is a dying fire. Hour is darker. Pillow is snowy. The world is fever wasted. These images, as we see, are not only able to enhance the element of despair but are also central to the theme of the poem.

In *Sohrab and Rustum*, Mathew Arnold expresses his personal emotion at the passing of the spring and youth. The spirit of Homer – from whom Goethe had learned what a hell this life is – broods over Sohrab and Rustum. The pathos of the young man doomed to an early death is the recurrent theme of the poem.

“Unwillingly the spirits fled away  
 Regretting the warm mansion it left  
 And youth and Bloom and this delightful world,”

The brooding pity of lines like these is self pity. Like 'despair of Tristram', it refers not to be lives of the characters but to the life of the poet. Arnold himself is the 'foil'd circuitous wanderer.' The death is symbolic of his father's attempts at suppressing his leading motive in the imagery of *Sohrab and Rustum*'. It is this very pathos of the young man doomed to an early death. Arnold has used here a pattern of recurring images of sea, wind, white, grey, cold, pale, cloud, light, bright, blood and winter. Sea symbolizes the flux of life. Men are swimmers in the sea:

“For we are all, like swimmers in the sea,  
 Poised on the top of a huge wave of fate  
 Which hangs uncertain to which side to fall”

The above lines spoken by Sohrab exhibit the true nature of life as seen by Arnold. The image of the sea has been repeated in the poem five times.

Major stray images too play a significant role in the poem. Sohrab has a 'lion's heart', Rustum is a 'falcon on his wrist'. He is a 'young fox'. Face is 'glancing snake'. Rustum is a 'breeding eagle' who has been killed by a hunter. These animal images help the poet to show the gloom of a young man destined to death. Heaven's conscious hands are brought to light with the help of these images.

Major images in *A Tomb Among The Mountains* are– still mountain–air, horn and hound, autumn mornings, crisp woods, Jaded Hunters, bloody freight, a flood of light, setting sun, colours bright, brodered pillows, cold white marble beds, warms rosy tints, autumn nights, pensive light of the moon, wind, mountain pines, heavenly palaces, glimmering verge of heaven, and the eternal rain of love.

In this poem Mathew Arnold creates an atmosphere of peace and serenity wherein sleep the princely pair. The

recurring tone of melancholy is made obvious by the images like the setting sun, the pensive light of the moon, still mountain air, cold white marble beds and autumn nights.

## CONCLUSIONS

We can observe that Matthew Arnold's images in his narrative poems are not decorative. They are functional. They are not only integral to the themes but they also act on our imagination with a great cumulative force and effect. The undertone of major common images helps to develop the theme and gives richness to it. The recurrent theme in all the poems is the flux of life characterized by a melancholy.

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