

A Blessing

By James Wright

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
That we have come.

They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more,
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.

Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

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In these opening 10 lines, the poet uses imagery to establish the setting for the poem. Consider these lines “just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota”, “twilight bounds softly forth on the grass”, “out of the willows”, and “we step over the barbed wire into the pasture/where they have been grazing all day, alone”. Here we see the pasture just off the highway at dusk. We see two ponies that have emerged from the willows and are now alone in this pasture. The poet shows us these elements of the setting to help us see and feel the solitary nature of these ponies.

The poet also uses imagery when he writes “they ripple tensely”. He appeals to our senses of touch and sight with the word “ripple.” We have all probably felt the “ripple” of excitement that moves through us at times, and likewise, we have seen the “ripple” effect of a stone skipped on the water. The ponies’ excitement here is so great that the poet wants us to both see it and feel it. This is the power of good imagery. Wright doesn’t have to tell us that they are really, really excited—he shows us. If imagery is strong enough, poets can show without telling.

The poet shifts his focus from the setting to the ponies in these next 11 lines. The opening image here, “they bow shyly” as wet swans is one of the strongest and loveliest images. Wright might have written, “they bow shyly as wet pigeons/chickens/hawks”, but this would not create the picture of grace and beauty that “swans” do. This simile, then, shows grace and beauty without telling. The next few lines are also good examples of showing. We see that one pony is slender, that she nuzzles the narrator’s hand, and that she is black and white with a mane that “falls wild on her forehead.” The narrator doesn’t tell us that this pony is beautiful and that he is moved by her; he shows us, and we can infer this beauty and emotion from this imagery.

In the last two lines here, he uses a powerful simile: “that is delicate as the skin over a girl’s wrist.” How soft is the pony’s ear? He could tell us with words like “very soft.” Instead, she appeals to our sense of touch with this image.

Robert Frost once wrote, “poems should begin in delight and end in wisdom.” This poem follows this poetic recipe well, for up until these two final lines, Wright has given us “delight”. That is, he has helped us see and feel what the narrator did when he was in the pasture with the ponies. Frost’s “delight” is imagery—an appeal to our senses. We are drawn into contemporary poems when poets use this type of imagery, allowing us to experience, through words, what the poet has. From our experiences, we often draw conclusions (or “wisdom”). We felt or saw this, and now we know something we did not before. In these final lines, then, Wright gives us his conclusion or “wisdom”: “suddenly I realize/that if I stepped out of my body I would break/into blossom.”

Putting it all together: How do poets use imagery (showing) to lead readers to the message of their poem (which is usually not directly stated)?

In contrast to an essay in which the writer begins with a thesis statement (the conclusion/wisdom), the poet ends with this. But what does this mean? This metaphor (his body compared to a flower that can blossom) is a good example of an image: an appeal to our sense of sight. We can see the splendor of a bud that bursts into bloom. But a man?

Of course, this is figurative—not literal—language that Wright leaves us with here. The narrator is not literally a flower, but this comparison may prompt these questions: What does it mean when a body “blossoms”? What are we supposed to know and feel here at the end of the poem?

I’ve never had a student (young or old) who has not been able to identify that the ending of this poem makes them feel good. That is, they feel that this has been a good experience for the narrator because the imagery throughout has led them to this awareness. So what is the “wisdom”, what does Wright want us to know?

We can add up the imagery—*much like a mathematical equation*—and end up with something like this:

“they ripple tensely” and “can hardly contain their happiness/ that we have come”

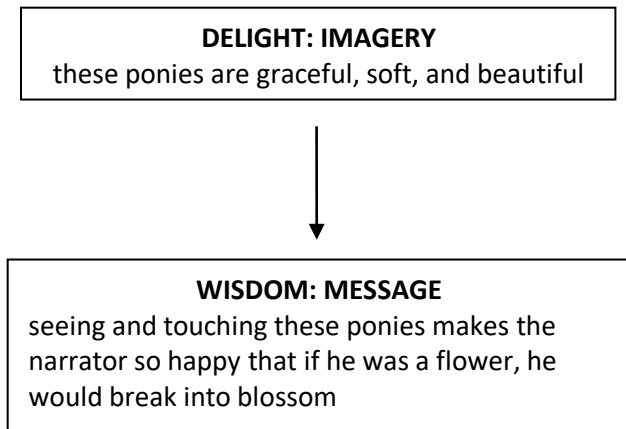
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they bow shyly as wet swans” and

“the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear/that is delicate as the skin over a girl’s wrist”

=

“my body would break into blossom”



Final considerations: You might use this poem to help your students learn that poets use imagery to show rather than to tell or interpret for readers. In addition, you might help readers to understand the “recipe” or structure for contemporary poetry: delight or imagery first, followed by wisdom or meaning last. This meaning is generally one that readers must infer from the imagery the poet has provided. Occasionally, poets tell in their final lines (e.g. sonnets), but often they suggest through a series of images.