

Before You Read

The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter by Ezra Pound

LITERARY FOCUS: IMAGERY

Which of the following sentences helps you visualize the scene: "We huddled around the campfire, which hissed and crackled in the crisp night air" or "We sat in front of the campfire at night"? The first sentence uses imagery to create a vivid picture of the campfire scene. **Imagery** is language that creates vivid sensory impressions and suggests emotional states. Most images appeal to our sense of sight. However, images may also appeal to our senses of taste, smell, hearing, and touch. Imagery can also suggest emotional states, such as happiness, sadness, or anger.

Ezra Pound based "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" on a poem by Li Po (701–762), in tribute to the great Chinese poet. As you read the poem, notice how simple words are used to evoke vivid images.

READING SKILLS: PARAPHRASING

A **paraphrase** is a restatement of the author's ideas in your own words. Unlike a summary, which is short and includes only the most important details, a paraphrase is often as long as or longer than the original text and restates all the details. Paraphrasing is a useful skill that can help you explain complicated ideas or clarify your understanding of difficult passages. Here is a paraphrase of a poem by Emily Dickinson. Notice that the paraphrase is longer than the poem.

Poem	Paraphrase
Fame is a bee.	Fame is like a bee because it can bring joy (the bee's "song"); it can hurt (a bee's sting); and it can disappear, just as a bee can fly away.
It has a song—	
It has a sting—	
Ah, too, it has a wing.	

REVIEW SKILLS

As you read "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter," look for the following literary device.

SYMBOLISM

The use of a person, place, thing, or event to stand both for itself and for something beyond itself.



Literary Skills
Understand the use of imagery.

Reading Skills
Paraphrase to clarify difficult passages of a text.

Review Skills
Understand symbolism.

The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter

Ezra Pound

IMAGERY

In lines 1–6, what feelings are evoked by the **images** of the children playing?

INTERPRET

Re-read lines 7–9. How would you describe the speaker's early relationship with her husband?

INTERPRET

Re-read lines 11–14. The speaker's desire to be with her husband, even after death—"my dust to be mingled with yours"—is a **symbol** of her eternal love. What does her lack of interest in climbing the lookout tower represent? (**Review Skill**)

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
Played I about the front gate, pulling flowers.

You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.

5 And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.

I never laughed, being bashful.

Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.

10 Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,

I desired my dust to be mingled with yours

Forever and forever and forever.

Why should I climb the lookout?

15 At sixteen you departed

You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.

The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.

20 By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!

The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.



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Figure Crossing a Bridge from *Album of Eight Landscape Paintings* by Shen Chou.
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The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
 Over the grass in the West garden;
 25 They hurt me. I grow older.
 If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
 Please let me know beforehand.
 And I will come out to meet you
 As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

—Li T'ai Po

PARAPHRASE

Paraphrase, or describe in your own words, what happens in lines 15–17.

IMAGERY

How does the imagery in line 18 reflect the speaker's own feelings?

INTERPRET

In lines 23–25, why does the speaker say the paired butterflies hurt her?

INFER

Why does the speaker want to go and meet her husband?

The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter

Reading Skills: Paraphrasing Paraphrasing can help you understand what a poet is saying. In the chart below are three passages from “The River-Merchant’s Wife: A Letter.” In the right-hand column, paraphrase each passage in your own words.

Passage from Poem	Paraphrase
<p>At fourteen I married My Lord you. I never laughed, being bashful. Lowering my head, I looked at the wall. Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back. (lines 7–10)</p>	
<p>At fifteen I stopped scowling, I desired my dust to be mingled with yours Forever and forever and forever. Why should I climb the lookout? (lines 11–14)</p>	
<p>The paired butterflies are already yellow with August Over the grass in the West garden; They hurt me. I grow older. (lines 23–25)</p>	

COMPARE & CONTRAST

Pause at line 139. How was Robert Frost's poetry different from Eliot's and Pound's poetry?

Frost used ordinary speech and traditional forms. Eliot and Pound wrote experimental symbolist poems.

IDENTITY CAUSE & EFFECT

Re-read lines 142–151. How did African American poetry during the Harlem Renaissance influence American culture?

The African American poetry caused many people to admire black talent.

INTERPRET

Re-read lines 152–157. What still seems “modern” about Modernism?

Possible answer: Most people today still struggle to answer the basic questions posed by the modernists.

Voices of American Character

130 Meanwhile other American poets rejected modernist trends. These poets stayed at home and said what they had to say in plain American speech. Their individual accents reveal the regional diversity of American life and character. Of these poets the greatest was Robert Frost (page 249). Frost's poems were written in ordinary New England speech. He had a gift for taking the most conventional poetic forms and giving them a twist all his own. Frost's ability to bring his own personality to verse resulted in a poetic voice that was unique and impossible to imitate.

The Harlem Renaissance: Voices of the African American Experience

140 In the early 1920s, a group of black poets focused directly on the unique contributions of African American culture to America. Their poetry based its rhythms on spirituals and jazz, its lyrics on songs known as the blues, and its diction on the street talk of the ghettos. African American lyric poets, especially Langston Hughes (page 259), brought literary distinction to the broad movement of artists known as the **Harlem Renaissance**. When African American poetry, along with music, became part of the Jazz Age, it helped usher in a new appreciation of the role of black talent in American culture.

The American Dream Revisited

150 The writers of the modernist era—some of the best that America has produced—experimented boldly with forms and subject matter. But they were still trying to find the answers to basic human questions: Who are we? Where are we going? What values should guide us on the search for our human identity?

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Before You Read

The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter by Ezra Pound

LITERARY FOCUS: IMAGERY

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Exra Pound based “The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter” on a poem by Li Po (701–762), in tribute to the great Chinese poet. As you read the poem, notice how simple words are used to evoke vivid images.

REVIEW SKILLS

As you read “The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter,” look for the following literary device.

SYMBOLISM

The word or words in a poem, place, thing, or event stand both for itself and for something beyond itself.

READING SKILLS: PARAPHRASING

A **paraphrase** is a restatement of the author's ideas in your own words. Unlike a summary, which is short and includes only the most important details, a paraphrase is often as long as or longer than the original text and restates all the details. Paraphrasing is a useful skill that can help you explain complicated ideas or clarify your understanding of difficult passages. Here is a paraphrase of a poem by Emily Dickinson. Notice that the paraphrase is longer than the poem.

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills
Use the use of imagery.

Reading Skills
Paraphrase to clarify difficult passages of a text.

Review Skills
Understand and symbolize.

Poem	Paraphrase
Fame is a bee.	Fame is like a bee because it can bring joy (the bee's “song”); it can hurt (a bee's sting); and it can disappear, just as a bee can fly away.
It has a song—	
It has a sting—	
Ah, too, it has a wing.	

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The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter

Ezra Pound

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
 Played I about the front gate, pulling flowers.
 You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
 And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
 Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
 I never laughed, being bashful.
 Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
 Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.
 At fifteen I stopped scowling,
 I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
 Forever and forever and forever.
 Why should I climb the look-out?

At sixteen you departed
 You went into far Ku-to-yeu, by the river of swirling eddies,
 And you have been gone five months.
 The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.
 You dragged your feet when you went out.
 By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
 Too deep to clear them away!
 The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.

IMAGERY

In lines 1–6, what feelings are evoked by the images of the children playing?

The images evoke feelings of innocence and youthfulness.

INTERPRET

Re-read lines 7–9. How would you describe the speaker's early relationship with her husband?

She is respectful, calling her husband "My Lord." She is bashful.

INTERPRET

Re-read lines 11–14. The speaker's desire to be with her husband, even after death—"my dust to be mingled with yours"—is a symbol of her eternal love. What does her lack of interest in climbing the look-out tower represent? (*Review Skill*)

Her lack of interest in the outside world shows her happiness in her marriage.

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Part 1

Collection 5: The Moderns



Figure Crossing a Bridge from *Album of Eight Landscape Paintings* by Shen Chou.
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The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
 Over the grass in the West garden;
 25 They hurt me. I grow older.
 If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
 Please let me know beforehand.
 And I will come out to meet you
 As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

—Li T'ai Po

PARAPHRASE

Paraphrase, or describe in your own words, what happens in lines 15–17.

When the speaker was sixteen, her husband went to a faraway town. He has been away from her for five months.

IMAGERY

How does the imagery in line 18 reflect the speaker's own feelings?

Both the monkeys and the speaker are sad.

INTERPRET

In lines 23–25, why does the speaker say the paired butterflies hurt her?

They are together, while she and her husband are apart.

INFER

Why does the speaker want to go and meet her husband?

She misses him.

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The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter

SKILLS PRACTICE

The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter

Reading Skills: Paraphrasing Paraphrasing can help you understand what a poet is saying. In the chart below are three passages from "The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter." In the right-hand column, paraphrase each passage in your own words. **Sample paraphrases appear below.**

Passage from Poem	Paraphrase
At fourteen I married My Lord you. I never laughed, being bashful. Lowering my head, I looked at the wall. Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back. (lines 7–10)	I married you when I was fourteen years old. I was shy and didn't laugh at anything. I hung my head and felt trapped inside the wall. I didn't respond when you called me, no matter how often you called.
At fifteen I stopped scowling, I desired my dust to be mingled with yours Forever and forever and forever. Why should I climb the lookout? (lines 11–14)	When I was fifteen, I stopped frowning. I loved you and wanted to be with you always, even after death. I have no interest in the world outside of our love.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August Over the grass in the West garden; They hurt me. I grow older. (lines 23–25)	A pair of butterflies, who are flying over the grass in the West garden, have already turned yellow in August. It upsets me to see them together. They remind me that I am growing older without you.

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Before You Read

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by T. S. Eliot

LITERARY FOCUS: DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE AND STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

A **dramatic monologue** is a poem in which one character speaks directly to one or more listeners. In Eliot's poem the words are spoken by a man named Prufrock. In a dramatic monologue, you learn everything about the setting, the situation, supporting characters, and even the speaker's own personality from the speaker's words. Like people in real life, speakers in dramatic monologues give their own spin to the events and circumstances around them. As you read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," you will begin to see the world as Prufrock sees it. Is it the way you see the world?

One reason that Eliot's poem may seem difficult at first is that it uses a **stream-of-consciousness** technique. With stream of consciousness, the writer tries to imitate the natural flow of a character's thoughts, memories, and reflections as the character experiences them. In attempting to capture the random movement of a character's thoughts, the logical connections and transitions of ordinary prose are often left out. Instead, the character jumps from one idea or association to another, as one thought suddenly triggers another, seemingly unrelated, one.

READING SKILLS: IDENTIFYING MAIN IDEAS

The **main idea** of a passage or a work of literature is its most important message, opinion, or lesson. Identifying the main ideas will help you better understand the meaning of a selection. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," look for main ideas about war (the poem was published during World War I), people, and life.



May Evans Picture Library.

REVIEW SKILLS

As you read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," look for the following:

CHARACTER TRAITS

The poet includes a character's work of literature displays, such as values, habits, likes, and dislikes.

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills Understand the dramatic monologue and stream-of-consciousness.

Reading Skills Identify / main ideas.

Review Skills Determine character traits from what characters say about themselves.

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

Selection: _____ Author: _____

Imagery

Imagery is the use of language to evoke a picture or a concrete sensation of a person, a thing, a place, or an experience. Images appeal to one or more of the five senses—sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste.

DIRECTIONS: Fill in the chart below with examples of images that appeal to the senses. (Not all selections will have images that appeal to all senses.)

Imagery that appeals to . . .
Sight
Hearing
Smell
Touch
Taste

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