

Pictures in your head—the secret of beautiful poems

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Vivid language gives readers the opportunity to see, hear or feel things through their imagination and thus to experience a quasi-sensual dimension when reading. Credit: public domain

A new study by New York University and the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics shows that vivid pictorial language has the greatest influence on the aesthetic appeal of poetry. The results improve our understanding of aesthetic preferences in general.

The impact of poetic language has so far been measured primarily based on objective criteria such as verse and rhythm. However, aesthetic perception also includes subjective assessment. A team of scientists from New York University and the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics has now used poems as an example to identify subjective factors that shape our aesthetic preferences. The result shows: the more a poem evoked vivid sensory imagery, the more a person liked it.

More than 400 participants evaluated poems of the genres Haiku and Sonnet. After reading each poem, they gave an assessment based on four subjective criteria: vividness of the imagery (e.g. "like a spreading fire"), valence (positivity or negativity of the theme), emotional arousal and aesthetic appeal (i.e., how much a person likes the poem).

Edward Vessel, scientist at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics, who conducted the study together with Amy Belfi and Gabrielle Starr (New York University), explains: "We suspect that the reason for the strong influence of sensory imagery is its ability to convey meaning. Vivid language gives readers the opportunity to see, hear or feel things through their imagination and thus to experience a quasi-sensual dimension when reading it." The second strongest influencing factor for the aesthetic appeal of a [poem](#) was positive valence. However, the degree of emotional excitement had no strong relationship to the perceived attractiveness.

"Because the influence of intense mental images in our study was so high, we think that this factor may influence our preferences in other aesthetic genres as well", Vessel presumes. Further studies will show to

what extent, for example, the attractiveness of pieces of music is linked with the ability to create images in our heads.

More information: Amy M. Belfi et al, Individual Ratings of Vividness Predict Aesthetic Appeal in Poetry., *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* (2017). [DOI: 10.1037/aca0000153](https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000153)

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