

The Lyric Image II: Guided Interpretation

“What I cannot express, I point out with my finger.” - “On Vanity,” Montaigne

In a traditional poem, a title can serve as an interpretive catalyst. A partial list of things a title can do:

- set the tone – “Don’t Let Me Be Lonely” by Claudia Rankine
- give a context – “Harlem” by Langston Hughes—note how the title informs the dream deferred
- give a referent – *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner—title refers to a line from *Macbeth*
- foreshadow – *The Tragedy of Macbeth* by William Shakespeare
- enigmatize – “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” by Wallace Stevens
- polysemize (to introduce multiple possible readings) – *Rent* by Jonathan Larson

A visual poem (which of course can have a title too) can do all of the above *with its images*. “Amazing Grace” by John Newton sets a tone with its title, and a visual poem



can set a tone with glitter. Lewis

Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” has a mysterious title, and finishing the poem, one might not fully know what exactly a jabberwocky is. So too can a visual poem introduce images that remain just beyond the reader’s reach.

Let's think about images that act as **referents**. An image can get the reader to think about something the text never directly asks the reader to engage with. A poem might be about family, but the images include graphs. In poems like those in Monica Ong's *Silent Anatomies*, the great contrast between the emotional vulnerability of a love poem and the cold objective minimalism of a graph creates a kind of foil (a contrast used to intensify or highlight a message or character).

Further Examples:

- Vanessa Angélica Villarreal – “Crossover Album” (Poem from *Beast Meridian*)
- Evie Shockley – “truth in advertising” (Poem from *semiautomatic*)
- Jade Yeung – “Portrait of Trauma as Lite-Brite (in which “I” is any child), ages 0+” (Poem)
- Boderra Joe – “Return to Sender” (Poem from *Desert Teeth*)
- féi iká shumari – “On June 2024 Usú Buys a 3 Year Storage Space For Her Future Grandchildren at a Fertility Center Because Her Trans Daughter is Undergoing a Medical Transition, is Mentally Unstable, and Can’t Afford to Preserve Her Will To Experience Motherhood Someday, Somehow” (Poem)