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Visual Thinking Often Involves Touch

Visual descriptions can activate other senses.

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Among the senses, vision and touch have a special affinity. In sighted people, vision provides information about the surrounding world on a grand scale; touch, on a smaller, more intimate scale. In combinations unique to each individual, vision and touch collaborate so that people can map their environments and know how to move their bodies.

Skilled storytellers have known for millennia how to describe characters' visual and tactile experiences so they take life in readers' imaginations. Because body and mind are so closely linked, a writer can lead a reader into a character's consciousness by describing her sensations. In *When Fiction Feels Real*, literary scholar Elaine Auyoung points out how often Leo Tolstoy depicts *Anna Karenina's* characters grasping small, round objects (Auyoung 24). These intimate descriptions invite readers to construct an imaginary world using building

materials from their own experiences (Auyoung 31). When a novel opens and readers meet a protagonist for the first time, vision and touch can create a “zooming in” effect. As in the opening of a film, a sensory camera “pans in” from the surrounding world to the intimate space of the character.



Daffodils

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To begin the story of Sophie Caco, a Haitian girl who moves to Brooklyn in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Edwidge Danticat describes a daffodil: “A flattened and drying daffodil was dangling off the little card that I had made my aunt Atie for Mother’s Day. I pressed my palm over the flower and squashed it against the plain beige cardboard” (Danticat 3). Danticat first tells how the daffodil looks, then how it feels as twelve-year-old Sophie presses her hand against it. Danticat’s strategy pulls readers into Sophie’s body, and consequently, into her emotions and thoughts.

Calls to the imagination to blend senses rarely operate in simple ways. In Danticat’s description of the daffodil, “flattened and drying” suggest touch, sound, and smell, and “dangling” brings the flower to life by implying motion. Literary scholar G. Gabrielle Starr has noticed that “motor images are involved in many kinds of imagery that appear primarily to belong to other senses,” and “imagining motion often involves multiple kinds of imagery” (Starr 282). Each reader’s mind combines senses in its own way, but thanks to Danticat’s “dangling” daffodil, by the end of her first sentence, vision, hearing, smell, and touch may all become active. The end of her first paragraph invites taste to join the mix since it refers to a potluck dinner. Readers eager to imagine new experiences will find themselves in Sophie’s body, mind, and world.

Literary scholars who analyze how writers cue the imagination have noticed that visual descriptions are rarely just visual. It may lie in the nature of language or human perception that verbal depictions seldom evoke just one sensory modality. Literary critic Elaine Scarry has noticed that novelists such as Thomas Hardy and Marcel Proust depict shadows moving along walls in order to make readers’ imagined walls “feel” solid (Scarry 14-18). In the imagination, vision implies touch and can’t easily be separated from it. In Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie’s grandmother tells her, “we are a family with dirt under our fingernails” (Danticat 19). These words convey who Sophie is infinitely better than “we are poor” because they encourage readers to envision black crescents and feel the spaces under their nails stuffed with dirt. No two readers will imagine Sophie’s life the same way, because the personal experiences from which they create their imagined sensations vary. Danticat’s

writing has affected so many readers so powerfully because it issues a general call to imagine while anticipating readers with a range of experiences.

Visual descriptions can “pull up” touch because these senses mingle so closely in many people’s lived experiences. Neuroscientists Krish Sathian and Simon Lacey have studied the ways that human brains combine visual and tactile information to create multi-modal sensory representations. In a review of studies on the visual cortex, Sathian and Lacey observe that “the boundaries between sensory modalities appear to be flexible rather than immutable” (Sathian and Lacey 254). Recent studies indicate that the visual cortex isn’t just visual: it can be activated by experiences of touch, such as the reading of Braille by blind people (Sathian and Lacey 256, 258). In their own experiments, Lacey, Sathian, and their colleagues have found that participants who both see and handle objects made of blocks partly covered with Velcro can better recognize those objects after the objects have been rotated than participants who just see or touch the objects (Lacey, Peters, and Sathian 1). These scientists’ work reveals how closely human sensory modalities cooperate to interpret the world, and how easily human nervous systems can adapt themselves to accommodate new inputs from the visual and tactile systems.

Vision, in other words, is never just a vision. In literature, as in lived experiences, vision--or any other sensory modality--calls out to the other senses with which it collaborates in life. As Elaine Auyoung has noticed, a vivid literary description “reflects the tendency for phenomena that are frequently encountered together to become associated in memory” (Auyoung 28). While all human beings blend senses in their own ways, vision and touch stand out as a pair that has evolved to link personal and surrounding worlds. That may be why *Breath, Eyes, Memory* so often blends descriptions of the way the characters’ world looks with the way it feels. As Sophie’s beloved Tante Atie stands in her front doorway, “she ran her fingers along the grilled iron as she looked up at the clear indigo sky” (Danticat 18). As in Danticat’s description of the daffodil, the evoked sensations lead far. Sophie is about to fly away, perhaps forever, and the touch of the iron grille and the clarity of the sky suggest how Atie feels about Sophie’s grounded, restricted life in Haiti and her free, unknown life in the United States. Sophie prepared the daffodil card for Atie, who raised her, but in the opening sequence, Atie will overcome her pain of loss and tell Sophie to take the card to her distant mother instead. Danticat’s novel depicts the way Sophie draws strength from her family’s women, and by blending vision with touch, she starts her story in the first sentence. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* tells its story in its title. By inviting readers into a perceiving body-mind, Danticat’s descriptions lead them to engage a world.

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