

Imagery is a written description that attempts to capture a sense experience (sight, sound, taste, touch, smell). It is an attempt to help the reader “experience” the events in the text. Writers describe these sense experiences in order to convey or suggest ideas beyond the literal text. This extra layer of feeling is called the **connotation**. The verb form is to **connote**.

For example, if I describe something as “a piece of cloth,” this has almost zero connotation because it does not really re-create a sense experience. If I describe it as a “rag,” however, a reader would start to form more associations (rags are scraps of cloth, so they might connote something that is unimportant, discarded, possibly even dirty).

If I get more descriptive, I can create even more feelings in the reader. Compare “a piece of cloth” to “soaked with blood, the torn rag lay in a warm puddle of gore.” The first image creates little feeling because no mental associations are formed on the part of the reader, but the second image (which is just a more descriptive re-working of a “piece of cloth”) connotes feelings of disgust.



Chris Abani
born 1966

Stabat Mater¹

By Chris Abani (Nigeria, United States)

Through gaps in trees, moonlight
veins night with the remembrance of dawn.
Among ferns stubbling the forest floor
a mother squats, watching the child in
her arms losing its grip on life,
its hacking breath, a suffering hanging on.

Gently she closes her eyes as her fingers
pincer² its nose and mouth,
easing the passage across.
What detail can be true of the remembered life;

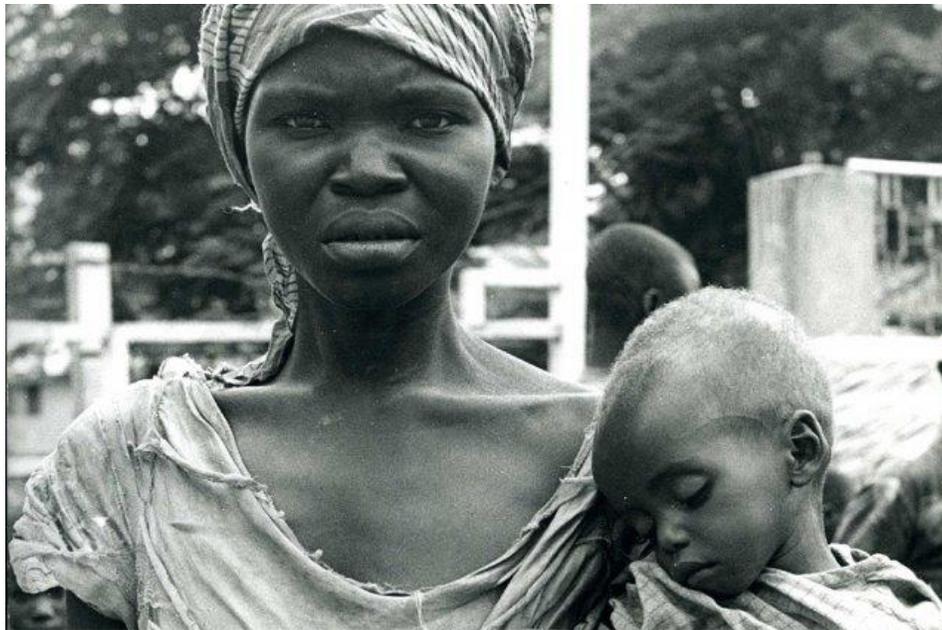
Place, event, lost like a flower's scent
stolen by a bee leaving only the itch of its sting.

¹ The term *Stabat Mater* comes from a Medieval Latin hymn that speaks of Mary's sorrows on viewing the crucifixion of her son, Jesus.

² to pinch



Pietà (1498–1499) by Michelangelo Buonarroti



mother and child in Biafra (late 1960s)

The Image of Mother and Dead Child in “Stabat Mater”

1. For a Christian, what is the idea or image of the grieving Mary meant to suggest (beyond the obvious fact that it is a sad)?
2. How does this poem speak to the sorrows of the mother as she holds her child? How does this event compare to that of Mary at the site of the crucifixion? Explain.
3. In a Christian context, the image of Jesus dying on the cross is meant to connote sacrifice, since in the religion Jesus dies to redeem the sins of believers. Why would Abani refer to the

image of a suffering Jesus to describe people who are not divine? Assuming that Abani is referring to African tragedies like the Biafran War (in which mothers lost children to disease and famine), who is being sacrificed in the poem, and in what sense is it a sacrifice?

4. What are the mother's feelings as she squats in the forest with her child in her arms? What part of the poem reveals the information that allows you to make the inference? Explain.
5. How does the mother react to her dying child? What does she do to ease its suffering? What opinion do you have of this act? Explain.
6. What "detail" (line 10) might the mother be left with at the death of her child? Explain.

Descriptive Imagery in "Stabat Mater"

7. In the first two lines, Abani writes that "moonlight / veins night with the remembrance of dawn," comparing the light in the darkness to something like a body (with blood pumping through the veins below the surface of the body). Why is the night described this way?
8. What is night supposed to suggest to the reader? Moonlight? Dawn? Why, for instance, does the poem occur at night?

Break a Leg

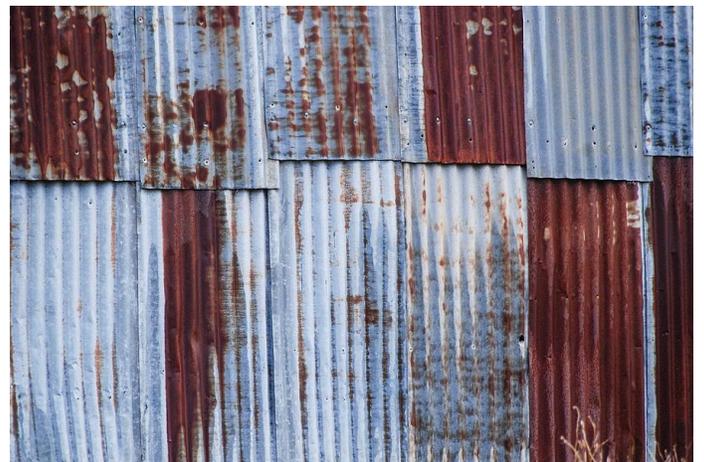
By Chris Abani (Nigeria, United States)

His foot, torn off at the ankle,
Half wrapped in corrugated iron

Held the promise of a gift.
Jesus smiled sadly from the
Photo taped to his gun's stock.
Blood, like the rain, soaked everything.

The medic, impotent,³
Suspicious, like God, lied.

Of the poem "Break a Leg," Abani says in his interview for *Voices in Wartime*: "[It] comes from two places and several photographs taken by an American photographer from Life magazine who was murdered... in the Biafran War.... There is a photograph he took of a young soldier, who has no leg, with an AK-47 with Jesus taped to the stalk of his gun barrel. But also I have an older relative who fought in the war who was 12 years old, a soldier,



corrugated iron
(iron that is pressed into sheets and used as a building material)

³ lacking power or ability

and his whole foot was torn off by a claymore mine. So it was a combination of those kind of moments where you have received a narrative. I have the visual images from books that have been written, analytical books and also family anecdotes and then people you grew up around.”



wounded soldier attended by Igbo medic (Biafra, 1968)

Violent Imagery in “Break a Leg”

9. What is the image of the mangled foot meant to suggest about the nature of violence or war? How is the reader supposed to feel about the image in context of the poem?
10. What is the image of Jesus meant to suggest in context of the poem? What is unusual about that context? Why, for example, is he smiling sadly?
11. Why is the medic compared to God (line 8)? What do the two concepts have in common (in terms of what they suggest or connote) that make the comparison work?
12. What could the medic be lying about (last line)? To whom would he be lying?