

WHAT IS THE OBJECTIVE CORRELATIVE?

The American Painter Washington Allston first used the term "objective correlative" about 1840, but T. S. Eliot made it famous and revived it in an influential essay on *Hamlet* in the year 1919. Eliot writes:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (qtd. in J. A. Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, page 647)

If writers or poets or playwrights want to create an emotional reaction in the audience, they must find a combination of images, objects, or description evoking the appropriate emotion. The source of the emotional reaction isn't in one particular object, one particular image, or one particular word. Instead, the emotion originates in the *combination* of these phenomena when they appear together.

For an example, consider the following scene in a hypothetical film. As the audience watches the movie, the scene shows a dozen different people all dressed in black, holding umbrellas. The setting is a cemetery filled with cracked gray headstones. The sky is darkening, and droplets of rain slide off the faces of stone angels like teardrops. A lone widow raises her veil and as she takes off her wedding ring and sets it on the gravestone. Faint sobbing is audible somewhere behind her in the crowd of mourners. As the widow starts to turn away, a break appears in the clouds. From this gap in the gray sky, a single shaft of sunlight descends and falls down on a green spot near the grave, where a single yellow marigold is blossoming. The rain droplets glitter like gold on the petals of the flower. Then the scene ends, and the actor's names begin to scroll across the screen at the end of the movie.

Suppose I asked the viewers, "What was your emotional reaction after watching this scene?" Most (perhaps all) of the watchers would say, "At first, the scene starts out really sad, but I felt new hope for the widow in spite of her grief." Why do we all react the same way emotionally? The director provided no voiceover explaining that there's still hope for the woman. No character actually states this. The scene never even directly states the widow herself was sad at the beginning. So what specifically evoked the emotional reaction? If we look at the passage, we can't identify any single object or word or thing that by itself would necessarily evoke hope. Sunlight could evoke pretty much any positive emotion. A marigold by itself is pretty, but when we see one, we don't normally feel surges of optimism. In the scene described above, our emotional reaction seems to originate not in one word or image or phrase, but in the *combination* of all these things together, like a sort of emotional algebra. The objective correlative is that formula for creating a specific emotional reaction merely by the presence of certain words, objects, or items juxtaposed with each other.

The sum is greater than the parts, so to speak. In this case, "black clothes + umbrellas + cracked gray headstones + darkening sky + rain droplets + faces of stone angels + veil + wedding ring + faint sobbing + turning away" is an artistic formula that equates with a complex sense of sadness. When that complex sense of sadness is combined with "turning away + break in clouds + single yellow marigold blossoming + shaft of sunlight + green spot of grass + glittering raindrops + petals," the new ingredients now create a new emotional flavor: hope. Good artists intuitively sense this symbolic or rhetorical potential.

T. S. Eliot suggests that, if a play or poem or narrative succeeds and inspires the right emotion, the creator has found just the right objective correlative. If a particular scene seems heavy-handed, or it leaves the audience without an emotional reaction, or it invokes the wrong emotion from the one appropriate for the scene, that particular objective correlative doesn't work. For extended literary discussion, see Eliseo Vivas' "The Objective Correlative of T. S. Eliot," reprinted in *Critiques and Essays in Criticism*, ed. Robert W. Stallman (1949).