

An Analysis of the Usage of Sensory Details in New York School Texts.

The differences in the distributions of sensory details between Ted Berrigan's *The Sonnets* and Joe Brainard's *I Remember* reveal significant details about the themes and structure of the two works.

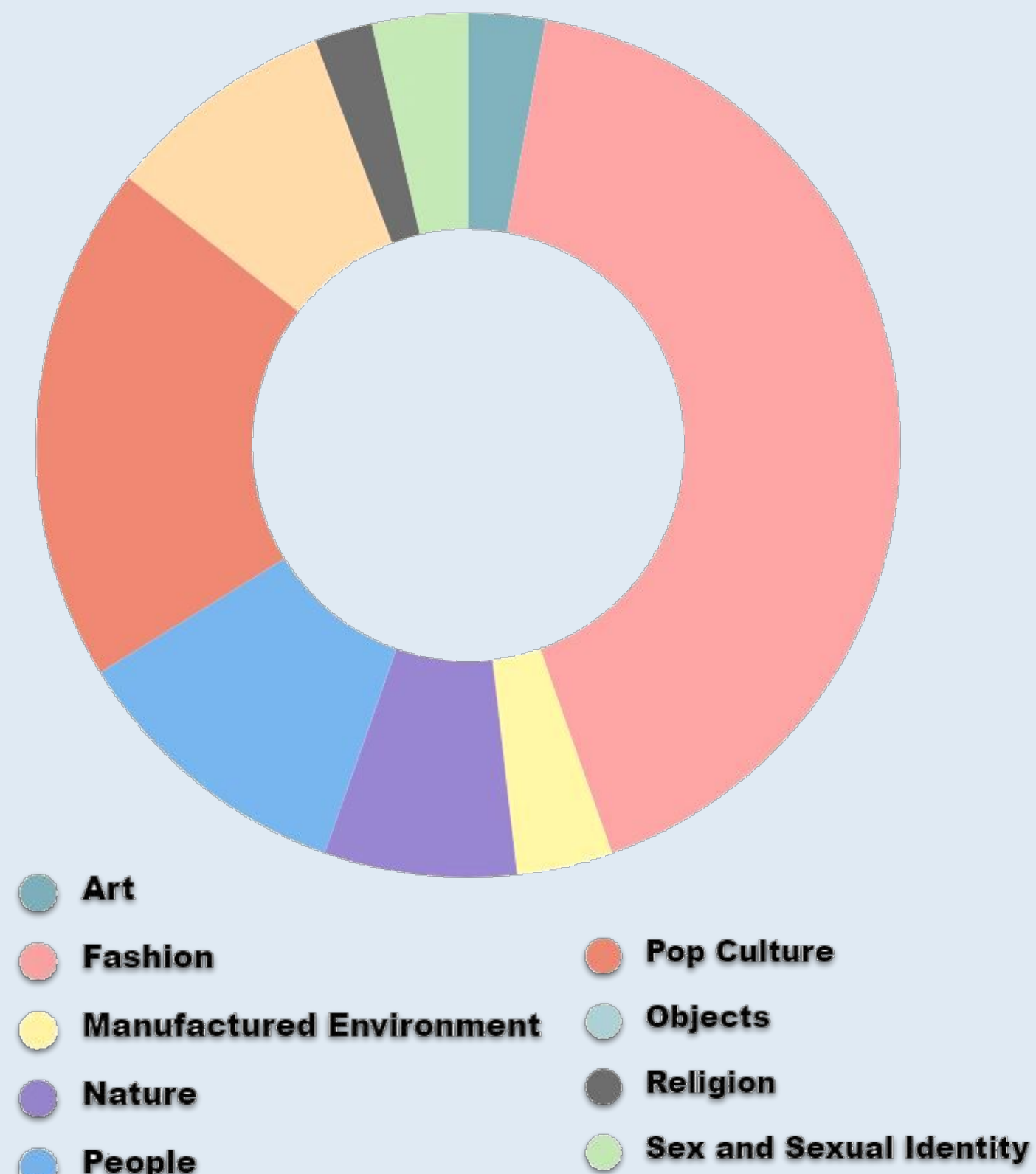
Major Senses in *I Remember*

The most frequently occurring sense in *I Remember* is the sense of sight. This can be explained by the fact that sight is ultimately viewed as the most important of our senses. Our brains are structured in a way that is designed to process visual information more so than any other kind. Humans have a variety of “brain structures specializing in faces, places, and words”; in fact, there are around “30 cortical areas [that] participate in visual processing” (Sherman 2). However, *I Remember* is also heavily composed of several references to the sense of touch, smell, and taste. The references to touch in this case pertain to sexual memories that Brainard experienced, and these memories are ones that humans tend to remember clearly. One such memory that Brainard is able to look back to with great detail is his experience with the meat packer who “unzipped his blood-stained white pants and pulled out an enormous dick” (Brainard 11). Studies have shown that taste and odor often trigger certain memories in a human, and this is due to the role that the insular cortex and the amygdala play in our brain. These two structures, essential for learning and memory, “have been associated with the differences in learning induced by the diverse degrees of emotion during taste/odor memory formation”, explaining why eating a certain food or smelling a certain scent might bring back past experiences (Miranda 1). *I Remember*, as a memoir, is entirely composed of past experiences from Joe Brainard’s life, explaining why taste and smell are so prevalent throughout the book. For example, Brainard is able to clearly recall “the first time [he] ate beefsteak tartar eating lots of crackers and butter with it” and “the smell (not very good) of burning pumpkin meat inside jack-o'-lanterns” as the specific tastes and scents can still be clearly processed through memory alone (Brainard 89, 107). Because *I Remember* is so memory-oriented, the senses of taste and smell play a significant role in the work compared to in *The Sonnets*.

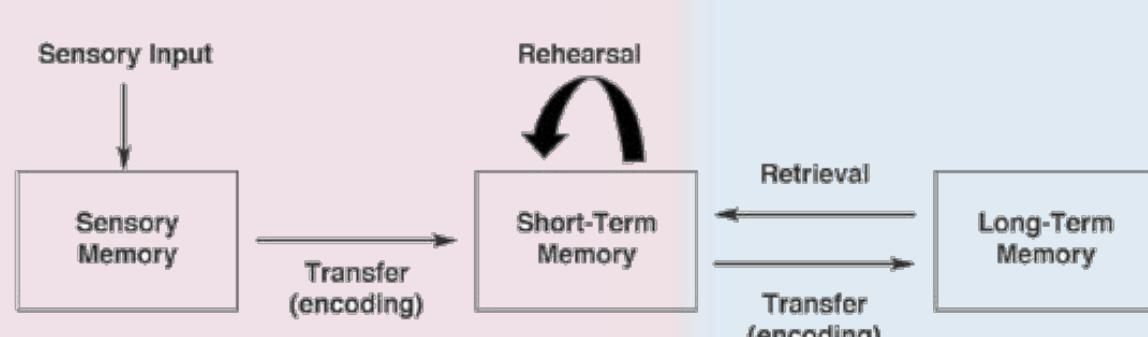
Breakdown of Sight in *I Remember*

In *I Remember*, the largest categories of sight in terms of numbers of mentions were found to be fashion and culture. As *I Remember* is essentially a memoir of Brainard’s life, it makes perfect sense as to why fashion and pop culture are the most prevalent. A memoir is written by recalling memories from an author’s life, meaning that it is largely confined to the timeframe of the author’s life. Thus, a reader of a memoir can expect to see several references to the different media, art, film, and fashion the author had experienced in their lifetime. Humans in general are heavily influenced by the material world around them, and readers can see this when Brainard recalls “boat neck sweaters” (Brainard 88). In addition, pop culture dominates the lives of people, especially younger individuals who want to stay up to date on the most current trends in society. One such mainstream trend from Brainard’s life is the “21-inch television screen” that he mentions (Brainard 123). Thus, memories from certain phases of people’s lives are predominantly about fashion and pop culture, and this is evident as both of these categories play a role in the construction of the book. From this, Brainard provides a peek into what society was like during all the stages of his life with *I Remember*.

Proportions of Categories of Sight in *I Remember*



How Memory Works With Sense:



Proportions of the senses in *I Remember*:

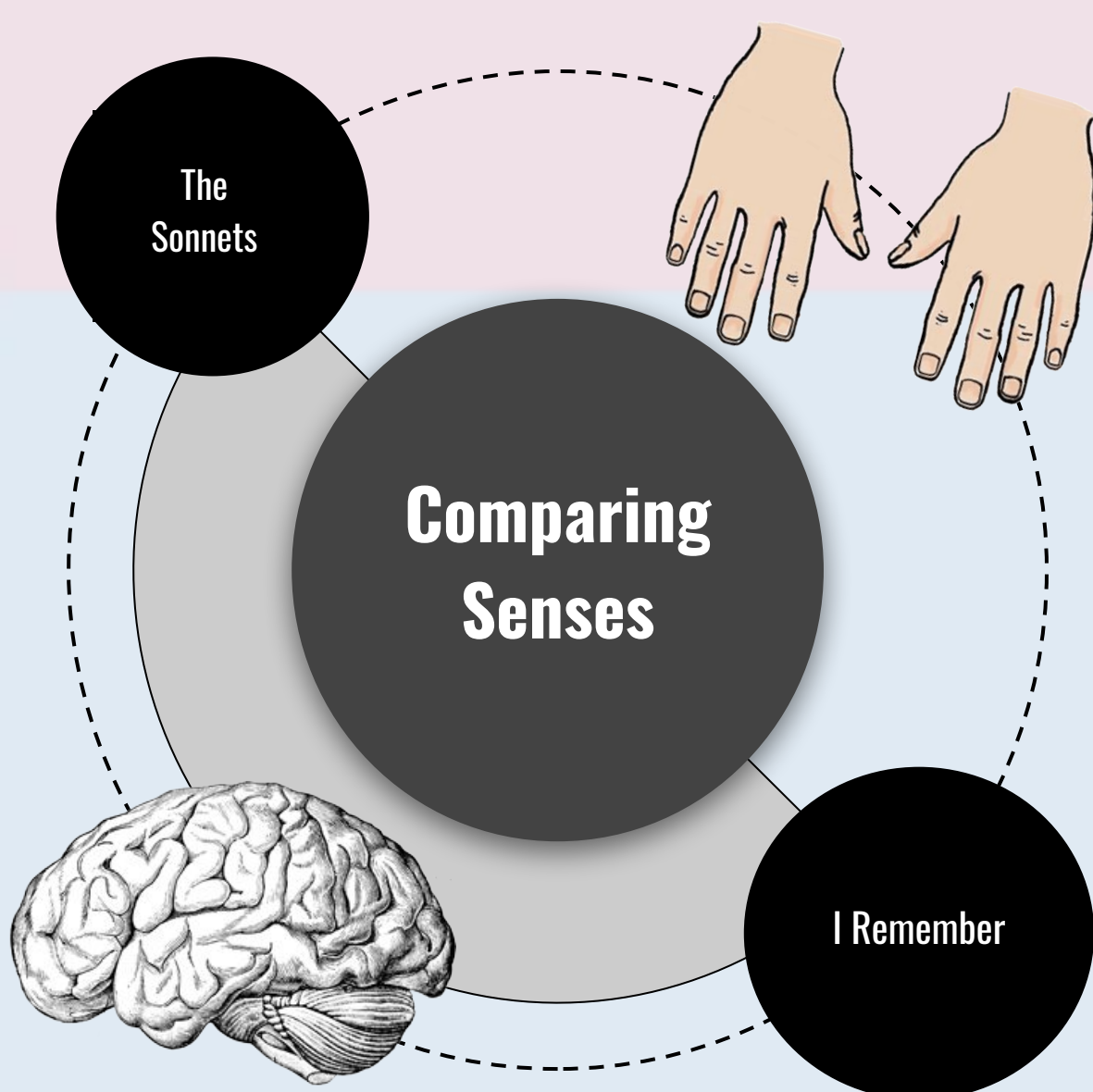
48.3%

12.8%

13.9%

20.1%

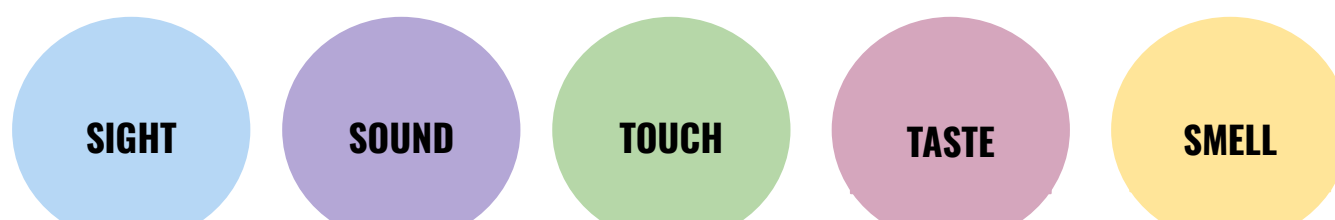
4.9%



The *Sonnets* and *I Remember* are both similar in that the paramount sense in each text is sight. This is fairly understandable, since humans tend to rely on vision more than on other senses in their daily lives. In *The Sonnets*, as mentioned under the breakdown of the visual sense, the use of sight was motivated by the idea of creating a work of literature that represented a collage, which was a visual aesthetic. In *I Remember*, the visual sense was used as a tool to reconstruct Brainard’s memories and transport the reader to the time and place that Brainard was referring to in his work. When analyzing the usage of the other senses in the two books, it appeared that the proportion of senses varied between them. Since *I Remember* is essentially a unique version of a memoir, the senses of smell and taste are much more prevalent than in *The Sonnets*. The *Sonnets*, as a collage, is not themed around memories and experiences, but more so around artistic components, language, and the idea of a compilation of texts rather than a creation of texts. As a result, *The Sonnets* is heavily dominated by the senses of sight, sound, and touch, while *I Remember* has a more balanced distribution of sensory details.

The two largest proportions of senses for *I Remember*, besides sight, were taste and touch.

KEY



The graph shows the proportion of the usage of each sense in each book.

The two largest proportions of senses for *The Sonnets*, besides sight, were sound and touch.

48.4%

20.9%

23.3%

6.6%

0.5%

Proportions of the senses in *The Sonnets*:

Major Senses in *The Sonnets*

The article “Collage Techniques” states that a collage is a visual representation of a particular context. It can aid in determining a color palette of an idea or concept, and it can present a particular atmosphere that one wants to capture (Collage Techniques 1). The primary steps of constructing a collage — grouping ideas and concepts, deciding the orientation of the ideas, and structuring the composition — can all be applied to how *The Sonnets* was composed (Collage Techniques 3). *The Sonnets* is ultimately a collage constructed to appeal to the visual and auditory aesthetics, which explains why the senses of sight and sound are heavily featured throughout the work. For example, Berrigan visually engages the readers by depicting an image of “withered leaves fly higher than dolls can see” (Berrigan 41). He also experiments with sounds, such as in “Mess Occupations” when he writes, “Daughter prefers to lay ‘em on a log and tear their hair”, while imitating the French language (Berrigan 36). Since *The Sonnets* functions as a work that intends to create a more visual perception, elements of sight that allude to art are also prominently used, such as his exceptional description of a tree as “sensual, solid, still, swaying alone in the wind” (Berrigan 16). In addition, there are various references to the sense of touch, such as the usage of “hands”, that are used to point to the fact that Berrigan intended for *The Sonnets* to be built, *not* composed: “hand is writing these lines”, “hands point to a dim frieze”, and “hands which play” (Berrigan 1, 21). All of these references create a strong visual of Berrigan physically touching the pieces and structuring them into a collage. Collages are created by physical hands in order to create a visual work, and *The Sonnets* is just a unique take on the idea of a collage.

Breakdown of Sight in *The Sonnets*

In *The Sonnets*, references to sight are much more bound to nature and people due to the fact that Berrigan’s construction of his work revolved around putting pieces together to build a collage that plays to the visual aesthetic. Throughout *The Sonnets*, Berrigan incorporates fragments of images and pictures to allude to works of art. Artists and authors often turn to the natural environment and humans as the primary themes of their works; they tend to thoroughly visually depict the environment and people to set a certain scene and convey a certain message to the audience. For Berrigan, the images send the message to readers that *The Sonnets*, as a collage, was composed of several pieces. Likewise, Berrigan’s decision to include visual descriptions of people and places, such as “smoky man names burnished dull black” and “trees [that] stand stark-naked guarding bridal paths” corresponds with his motive to construct a collage made up of visually aesthetic pieces through poetry (Berrigan 13, 67). Often in collages, pictures and other images are used to serve to portray an idea or concept, but in an interesting way. Berrigan’s visual descriptors of the people and places in *The Sonnets* corresponded with his motive to create a collage from this literature since collages serve as a visual aid. This is the reason why a lot of sensory details are linked to vision, especially the aesthetic vocabulary that describes nature and people.

Proportions of Categories of Sight in *The Sonnets*

