6.10: Figurative Language

Figurative Language

Figurative language uses words or expressions not meant to be taken literally. Whether you realize it or not, we encounter them every day. When we exaggerate we use hyperbole: I'm so hungry I can eat a horse; when Rhianna sings about stars like diamonds in the sky she uses simile; when we say opportunity knocked on my door we are using personification. In addition to making our conversations interesting and capturing our intense feelings, figurative language is very important to the making of poetry. It is a tool that allows us to make connections, comparisons, and contrasts in ways that produce insight, raise questions, and add specificity. Earlier we worked to make words more specific. We changed apple, blue and boat into golden delicious, turquoise, and sailboat. The changes made the images more immediate and sharper and offered the reader opportunities to understand the poem. Figures of speech are the next step to adding layers to your poems, to adding even more complexity and meaning.

Types of Figurative Language

Metaphor

Figurative language, often the comparison made between two seemingly unlike things, is almost all image-based and, therefore, a good friend of poetry. In fact, some, like Owen Barfield in his essay on metaphor in Poets.Org, would go so far as to say that poetry is metaphor:

The most conspicuous point of contact between meaning and poetry is metaphor. For one of the first things that a students of etymology—even quite an amateur student—discovers for himself is that every language, with its thousands...
of abstract terms, and its nuances of meaning and association, is apparently nothing, from beginning to end, but an unconscionable tissue of dead, or petrified, metaphors. If we trace the meaning of a great many words—or those of the elements of which they are composed—about as far back as etymology can take us, we are at once made to realize that an overwhelming proportion, if not all, of them referred in earlier days to one of these two things—a solid, sensible object, or some animal (probably human) activity. Examples abound on every page of the dictionary. Thus, an apparently objective scientific term like elasticity, on the one hand, and the metaphysical abstract on the other, are both traceable to verbs meaning “draw” or “drag.” Centrifugal and centripetal are composed of a noun meaning “a goad” and verbs signifying “to flee” and “to seek” respectively; epithet, theme, thesis, anathema, hypothesis, etc., go back to a Greek verb, “to put,” and even right and wrong, it seems, once had the meaning “stretched” and so “straight” and “wringing” or “sour.” Some philologists, looking still further back into the past, have resolved these two classes into one, but this is immaterial to the point at issue.

--Owen Barfield, "Metaphor"

“Nothing in the intellect that was not previously in the senses”

“Nothing in the intellect that was not previously in the senses,” wrote philosopher John Locke. In short, the way we know anything is through the senses—even abstract idea originates through experience gained through our bodies. And in the case of language’s origin, as explained above, it appears that all words, at their invention, referred to something concrete—an object or a specific action that evoked the senses. As we continue to use words, they evolve, for they live their own life. And when we use a word, we invite its history and permutations into its meaning. Of course, this is all way too much to think about at once in the writing process. But it is why writers revise and cross-examine their diction, thinking out what meanings the word may suggest. Language is naturally symbolic in origin, in its fabric. And an art that uses words cannot help but also have more meanings than just the literal. The following types of figurative language are used most often in poetry:

- **Metaphor**—A direct comparison between two unlike things, as in *Hope is the thing with feathers* (Emily Dickinson, “Hope”).
- **Simile**—A comparison that uses like or as, as in *something inside me / rising explosive as my parakeet bursting / from its cage* (Bruce Snider, “Chemistry”)
- **Personification**—Human characteristics being applied to non-human things, as in *irises, all / funnel & hood, papery tongues whispering little / rumors in their mouths* (Laura Kasischke, “Hostess”).

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• **Metonymy**—When one thing is represented by another thing associated with it, as in *The pen is mightier than the sword* (where pen stands in for writing, and sword stands in for warfare or violence).

• **Synecdoche**—When a part of something symbolizes the whole, or the whole of something symbolizes the part, as in *All hands on deck* (where hands stands in for men), or *The whole world loves you* (where whole world represents only a small number of its human population).

When we read such literary devices, our mind lights up a new pathway between the two things and we discover new ways of thinking about the relationship between these two things. We wonder, how is his love a red, red rose? But before we wonder, our senses have already made a connection. As we look closer at the poem, we begin to explore the idea more.

The following is a poem by Laura Kasischke. Can you identify the numerous metaphors and similes?

**Confections**

Caramel is sugar burnt
to syrup in a pan. Chaos
is a pinch of joy, a bit of screaming. An infant sleeping’s
a milky sea. A star

is fire and flower. Divinity
is beaten out of egg whites

into cool white peaks. Friendship

begins and ends in suspicion, unless
it ends in death. Ignite

a glass of brandy in a pan, and you’ll

have cherries jubilee: sex
without love’s sodden nightgown

before your house burns down. Music’s

a bomb of feathers
in the air
in the moment before it explodes
and settles itself whispering
onto the sleeves of a child’s choir robe. And

a candied apple’s
like a heartache—exactly

like a heartache—something
sweet and red tortured to death
with something sweeter, and more red.


The poem begins with a sentence that mimics a metaphor—stating something is something else: *carmel is sugar burnt to syrup in a pan*. It sounds like a metaphor, but it actually isn’t. Carmel actually is sugar burnt to syrup. Rather than a metaphor, the first two lines function as a definition, which sets the stage (note my own figurative language) for understanding how metaphors work in our minds, for whether definition or metaphor, we use the same structure: x is y; our minds equate the one thing with the other. In the poem this happens with carmel to sugar burnt to syrup.

In “Confections,” the opening definition that looked like a metaphor is followed by a true metaphor (or is it?). *Chaos is a pinch of joy, a bit of screaming*. We take this as metaphor, but because we do, it brings us back to the first sentence. If sentence two is figurative why isn’t sentence one? And if sentence one is literal, why isn’t sentence two? Both are structured exactly the same. Kasischke’s poem exposes the slipperiness of language and syntax: how we use them and interpret them. The poem asks us to examine closely the line between imagination and reality and the role language plays in sorting them out, or not.

The next two metaphors are more imagistic that the previous: *An infant sleeping’s a milky sea*. A star is fire and flower. While we couldn’t “see” the abstraction joy and could only hear screaming, we certainly see a milky sea, and we certainly see a star flaring as fire, and flower. The parallel of fire and flower is interesting because they are so different. A flower would not survive if it were ablaze in flames. Yet, Kasischke’s comparison between the star and fire and flower makes sense to us. It plays not on the science of heat, but on the images associated with fire and flowers—they both spread outward. So, we equate the shape and motion of a star with both fire and flower. Of course, like the comparison of carmel to sugar burnt to syrup, a star actually is a fire. Again, the poem engages our ability to hold two things in the mind at once—just as a metaphor does—only with the poem as a whole, these two things are the literal and symbolic nature of language.

**Activity**

Read the poem “Confections” and continue to discuss the effect of the figurative language. Explore the comparisons deeper: how is an infant a milky sea? How is chaos a pinch of joy, a bit of screaming? Explore how figurative language allows us to use concrete language to relate abstract ideas.

Watch the video:*The art of the metaphor* by Jane Hirshfield, animation by Ben Pearce.

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**Contributors**

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