

Introduction to Metaphors: Poetry in Motion

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Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else. [1]

—Aristotle, *Poetics*, c. 335 b.c.

A metaphor is a figure of speech, like understatement, hyperbole, or personification. It describes one thing in terms of another to identify a likeness between them. Merriam-Webster explains that “metaphor is an implied comparison ... a fusion of two objects, resulting in a new entity that has characteristics of both.” [2]

Metaphor is a compact and highly effective way to illustrate concepts, emotions, and other things that are otherwise be difficult to grasp.

Tom’s rage was a consuming fire, destroying everything and everyone around him.

We can’t know what rage feels like to another person, but we do know the power and fury of fire.

They were two peas in a pod.

We can’t really understand how close two people are, but we can easily visualize two peas nestled next to each other in a pod.

Sunlight flooded the room as she opened the dusty drapes.

Sunlight is composed of photons, so it can’t really “flood,” but we instantly grasp the comparison to a rushing torrent of water. We can also see the dust motes glinting as the float in the air.

Everyday language is full of metaphors, but most of us don’t realize it; we unconsciously apply figurative language like this in our speech. Metaphor makes our sentences and our ideas more relatable. “My heart was torn to pieces,” you say, so the person you are talking to can empathize with the degree of pain you felt.

Because metaphor is not a literal comparison, it may appear nonsensical at first, especially when the historical basis for the comparison is no longer understood. Phrases like “the apple of my eye,” “a chip on his shoulder,” and “beyond the pale” have been used for centuries (or even millennia). While we may not recognize the original analogy, they have become engrained in modern language. Their longevity attests to the accuracy of the original comparison—and tells you a great deal about the power of metaphor.

Metaphor and Persuasion

Metaphor can create a powerfully persuasive tidal wave of emotion and insight. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his “I Have a Dream” speech on August 28, 1963—amidst great turbulence and social upheaval—to call for justice and an end to oppression. As he stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and addressed a crowd of 250,000 people he did not simply say, “I want justice and an end to oppression.”

Instead, he gave one of the most powerful speeches in American history, filled with potent, compelling metaphor that conveyed his desire to “transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.” He used metaphor to convey the pain of existence in the “dark and desolate valley of segregation.” He shared his dream that “one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.” [3]

In his memoir *No Name in the Street*, writer James Baldwin said of King’s speech, “That day, for a moment, it almost seemed that we stood on a height, and could see our inheritance; perhaps we could make the kingdom real.” [4]

That’s the power of metaphor.

Metaphor in Poetry

Metaphor is the heart and soul of poetry. (Did you notice the metaphor in that sentence?) Poems are by definition short forms of communication, so the compact nature of metaphor allows much meaning to be conveyed in a small space. Let’s take a look at the poem “Fog,” by Carl Sandburg.

*The fog comes in
on little cat feet.
It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.* [5]

—*Chicago Poems*, 1916

Could you describe how fog looks, feels, or moves? Maybe. But it would take a lot more than the twenty-one words Sandburg uses.

William Shakespeare, the greatest writer in the English language, wrote his plays in the rigid discipline of iambic pentameter. His masterful command of metaphor is on full display as Macbeth’s grandiose dreams shatter and he crumbles into despair near the end of Act 5.

*To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,*

*And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.* [6]

—*Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5

As in poetry, metaphor is a major component of song lyrics. The 1985 song “Human Nature,” written by Steve Porcaro and John Bettis and performed by Michael Jackson on his *Thriller* album says:

*Looking out
Across the nighttime
The city winks a sleepless eye.
Hear her voice
Shake my window
Sweet seducing sighs.* [7]

Types of Metaphors

Just as there are different types of people and different types of literature, there are different type of metaphor.

Implied (or implicit) metaphor subtly compares two objects or ideas but mentioning only one of them. [8]

“Don’t you dare speak to me,” hissed Susan.
Susan is compared to an angry snake.

John bolted across the room to catch her as she fell.
John is compared to a horse bolting from its stable.

Because most people instinctively know the hiss of a snake or the speed of a bolting horse, the implied metaphor communicates the intended comparison.

Sustained (or extended) metaphor is developed over multiple lines or verses. [9] In Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken,” the metaphor of life as a choice of pathways is extended over four stanzas. Here are the first two; you can read the [rest of the poem](#) here.

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood*

*And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same. [10]*

—*Mountain Interval*, 1916

Dead metaphor (or cliché) is one that's been so overused it's lost the power to evoke an image or comparison. Here are some examples.

- It's raining cats and dogs!
- She has a heart of gold.
- Avoid it like the plague.

These are expressions common in everyday speech. In text, however, clichés and dead metaphors rarely elicit profound understanding. They're a hallmark of uninspired writing. Good authors work hard to convey their insights with original, compelling metaphor and comparisons.

Mixed metaphor is a combination of two or more metaphors. [11] It often produces a humorous effect, which may or may not be intended.

It's not rocket science; we just have to wait for the other shoe to drop before we see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Metaphor vs. Simile

Simile is another figure of speech that compares two different things. Unlike metaphor, however, simile is a direct comparison, usually with "like" or "as." Robert Burns's famous 1794 song "A Red, Red Rose" begins with a classic example of a simile.

*O my Luve is like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June;
O my Luve is like the melody
That's sweetly played in tune. [12]*

Here's another way look at it: A simile states something is *like* something else. A metaphor, like Elton John's tribute to the late Princess Diana, says something *is* something else.

*Goodbye England's rose,
May you ever grow in our hearts.
You were the grace that placed itself
Where lives were torn apart. [13]*

Both sentences express a woman's beauty, but Burns explicitly likens it to a rose. Bernie Taupin, who wrote the lyrics to the song, calls Diana herself "England's rose."

What Is an Example of a Metaphor?

Metaphor and simile have the same purpose: to illustrate one thing by comparing it to another. Similes are easier to write, certainly—they require less thought and effort. Because metaphors literally change one thing into another, however, they create more powerful, evocative images.

The beauty and figurative language of metaphor can add color and meaning to your words, light up your text, and help you communicate in a creative, thought-provoking way.

Metaphor also conveys more information than the words it uses, and suggests comparisons beyond the verbal. Let's look at some of the examples we've read in this article:

- An oasis of freedom and justice
- The fog comes on little cat feet
- Life's but a walking shadow

When we read these, we attribute all the qualities of an oasis to freedom and justice—refreshment, restoration, sustenance—even though they're not mentioned explicitly. We recognize the feline traits of silence, stealth, and impenetrability in fog. We see life as the tragically insubstantial projection of human effort.

The world's greatest writers use metaphor to convey emotion, imagery, and meaning. Their language comes alive in poetry, literature, and public speaking. If you want to master metaphor, there's no better way to learn than by studying their works. You can start by using a metaphor the next time you write something: a novel, a love letter, or a note that asks your spouse to water the plants. Don't be afraid—it won't bite.

Share your favorite metaphor in the comments below!

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