Poetry Analysis
# Table of Contents

What is Figurative Language? 3

Figurative Language #1 4
Figurative Language #2 5
Figurative Language #3 8

Imagery 10
Denotation and Connotation 11
Musical Devices 13
Lyric Poetry 13
What is Figurative Language?

Figurative language often provides a more effective means of saying what we mean than does direct statement. What are some of the reasons for that effectiveness?

First, figurative language allows us the pleasure of imagination. It’s fun to imagine likenesses between unlike things. We all like to imagine faces or animals in the clouds.

Second, figures of speech are a way of bringing additional imagery into verse, of making the abstract concrete, of making poetry more sensuous. It multiplies the sense appeal of poetry.

Third, figures of speech are a way of adding emotional intensity and attitudes to otherwise mere information.

Fourth, figures of speech are a means of concentration, a way of saying a lot in a short time. Like words, they can be multidimensional.

Obviously, one of the necessary abilities for reading poetry is the ability to interpret figurative language. Every use of figurative language involves a risk of misinterpretation, though the risk is well worth taking. It will take practice and imagination to get good at it.

Theme

A theme, in literature, is a broad idea in a story/poem, that is usually implied rather than explicitly stated. It could be a message or a lesson, usually about life, society or human nature. It is the deep meaning hidden within the text.

Most themes can be boiled down to a single word or phrase, such as love, revenge, or pursuit of happiness.

Sometimes there are major themes and minor themes within the same piece of writing.
# Figurative Language #1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Simile</th>
<th>The comparison of two unlike things by the use of some word such as <em>like</em>, <em>as</em>, <em>than</em>, <em>similar to</em>, or <em>resembles</em>. The comparison is <em>expressed</em>, not implied. For example, “He was as quick as lightning!” A bit of an exaggeration, but it is a comparison.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>Also a comparison of two unlike things, but the comparison is <em>implied</em>; that is the figurative term is <em>substituted</em> for or <em>identified with</em> the literal term. For example, “The fog crept in on little cats feet.” The fog is compared to the quiet feet of a cat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personification</td>
<td>Giving the attributes of a human being to an animal, an object, or an idea. It is actually a type of metaphor, in that it is an implied comparison in which the figurative term of the comparison is always a human being. For example, “The clouds cried like a baby.” Clouds are not alive, so they cannot cry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apostrophe</td>
<td>Addressing someone absent or something nonhuman as if it were alive and present and could reply to what is being said. For example, “Well, Einstein, what do you think of my new discovery?” Einstein is dead...and you should be worried if you get an answer!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metonymy</td>
<td>The use of the part for the whole. For example, “He owned 15 head of cattle.” Obviously, he owns the whole cow, and not just their heads. Also, the use of a closely related idea for the idea itself. For example, “the leather” might be used in place of the word “football.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Her Legs* by Robert Herrick

Fain would I kiss my Julia’s dainty leg,
Which is *as white and hairless as an egg.*

**Question**

What figurative language is being used here?
Figurative Language #2

Symbol • Allegory

| Symbol | Something that means *more* than what it is. Image, metaphor and symbol shade into each other and are sometimes difficult to distinguish. In general, however, an image means only what it is; a metaphor means something other than what it is; and a symbol means what it is and something more too. |
| Allegory | A narrative or description which has a second meaning beneath the surface one. Although the surface story or description may have its own interest, the author’s major interest is in the ulterior meaning. Think of it as a giant symbol, that runs through an entire story or poem—something like a theme. Allegory is less popular in modern literature than it was in medieval writing, and is much less often found in short poems than in long works. It has sometimes, especially with political allegory, been used to conceal meaning rather than to reveal it (or rather, to conceal it from some people while revealing it to others). |

*The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost

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,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Questions

1. Does the speaker feel that he made the wrong choice in taking the road “less traveled by”? If not, why does he sigh? What does he regret?
2. Why does the choice between two roads that seem very much alike make such a big difference many years later?
3. Does it surprise you that this poem is often used at graduation ceremonies?
4. Have you heard the expression “The Road of Life”? As this poem is a narrative, it falls into the category of “Allegory”. What is the hidden story here?
**Questions**

1. Could the poet have made the white rose a symbol of passion and the red rose a symbol of love? Why or why not?

2. In the second stanza, why does the speaker send a rosebud rather than a rose?

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**A White Rose by John Boyle O'Reilly**

The red rose whispers of passion,
   And the white rose breathes of love;
Oh, the red rose is a falcon,
   And the white rose is a dove.

But I send you a cream-white rosebud,
   With a flush on its petal tips;
For the love that is purest and sweetest
   Has a kiss of desire on the lips.

---

**To The Virgins, To Make Much of Time by Robert Herrick**

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
   Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today
   Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the Sun,
   The higher he’s a-getting,
The sooner will his race be run,
   And nearer he’s to setting.

That age is best which is the first,
   When youth and blood are warmer;
But being spent, the worse and worst
   Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time;
   And while ye may, go marry;
For having lost but once your prime,
   You may forever tarry.

---

This poem, by Robert Herrick was written in the 1600’s. I was a bit shocked to hear such a poem from a time that I had imagined as prim and proper. This is not a love poem. It is about SEX! GASP! Here’s a more modern version (excerpted): **Let's Get It On by Marvin Gaye**

*I've been really tryin', baby...Tryin' to hold back this feelin' for so long...And if you feel like I feel, baby...Then come on, oh, come on...Whoo, let's get it on...There's nothin' wrong
With me lovin' you...And givin' yourself to me can never be wrong...Stop beatin' 'round the bush.*

Don’t even get me started on his “Sexual Healing” song!
Questions

1. The first two stanzas might be interpreted literally if the third and fourth stanzas did not force us to interpret them symbolically. What do the rosebuds symbolize (stanza 1)? What does the course of a day symbolize (stanza 2)? Does the poet fix the meaning of the rosebud symbol in the last stanza, or merely name one of its specific meanings?

2. How does the title help us interpret the meaning of the symbol? Why did Herrick use virgins instead of maidens?

3. Why is such haste necessary in gathering the rosebuds? True, the blossoms die quickly, but they are replaced by others. Who really is dying?

4. Why did the poet use his wording rather than the following alternative: blooms for smiles, course for race, used for spent, spend for use?

“Roses are ancient symbols of love and beauty. The rose was sacred to a number of goddesses (including Isis and Aphrodite), and is often used as a symbol of the Virgin Mary.” -- From Wikipedia

The poem is in the genre of “carpe diem”, which is Latin for “seize the day.” One interpretation of the phrase might be a word of caution, such as “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we may die,” that is, make the most of your current situation because life is short and time is fleeting. Horace, who wrote the phrase is also responsible for the phrase “time flies.”

Also, the phrase “non-collige virgo rosas” or “gather, girl, the roses” appears in a poem over 2000 years ago. It encourages youth to enjoy life before it’s too late.

So, the thoughts and phrases in this poem are not terribly new. Authors are often influenced by writings of others, and sometimes incorporate or expand on those ideas in their own work.

The next time that you say “Time flies when you are having fun...”, you will understand that the saying is thousands of years old, is still in use today, and came from poetry!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paradox &amp; Oxymoron • Overstatement/Hyperbole • Understatement • Irony</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paradox</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Understatement</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Verbal Irony</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tragic Irony</strong></td>
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<td>Situational Irony</td>
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<td>Historical Irony</td>
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**Ozymandias by Percy B. Shelley**

I met a traveler from an antique land  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,  
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that it sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive (stamped on these lifeless things),  
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;  
And on the pedestal these words appear:  
“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings;  
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

**Questions**

1. What figurative language is used in line 8?  
2. Describe Ozymandias as a character.  
3. Find 2 examples of irony.  
4. What is the theme of the poem?  
5. Explain the irony (or paradox) found in this poem.

**Earth by John Hall Wheelock**

“A planet doesn’t explode of itself,” said drily  
The Martian astronomer, gazing off into the air—  
“That they were able to do it is proof that highly  
Intelligent beings must have been living there.”
Imagery

Imagery may be defined as representing the senses (sound, sight, smell, taste and touch) through descriptive language.

Experience comes to us through our senses. For example, the experience of a spring day would come partially from thoughts, but mostly through sense impressions. Seeing the blue sky and clouds, hearing robins, smelling the earth and flowers, feeling the breeze on your cheek are all part of “spring”. It would be hard to talk about spring without creating some images of what it is like.

Poetry appeals directly to our senses, along with its music and rhythm, which we actually hear when it is read aloud. Poetry is meant to be read aloud! The word image perhaps most often suggests a mental picture, something seen in the mind’s eye—and visual imagery is the most frequently occurring kind of imagery in poetry. An image may also represent a sound, a smell, a taste, a tactile (touch) experience, such as hardness, wetness, or cold. An internal sensation, such as hunger, thirst, nausea, movement or tension in the muscles or joints could also be represented. Some people would say that we even have more senses than the ones listed here. Poetry could probably appeal to those as well.

This poem has a LOVE theme (some will argue a sexual element as well). It makes a number of statements about love: being in love is a sweet and exciting experience; when one is in love everything seems beautiful and the most trivial things become significant; when one is in love his/her sweetheart seems the most important person in the world.

But the poet actually tells us none of these things directly. He doesn’t even use the word love in his poem. His business is to communicate experience, not information. He does this largely in two ways.

First, he presents us with a specific situation, in which a lover goes to meet his sweetheart. Second, he describes the lover’s journey so vividly in terms of sense impressions that the reader not only sees and hears what the lover saw and heard but also shares his anticipation and excitement.

Every line in this poem contains some image, some appeal to the senses: the gray sea, the long black land, the yellow half-moon, the startled little waves with their fiery ringlets, the blue spurt of the lighted match—all appeal to our sense of sight and convey not only shape, but also colour and motion. The warm sea-scented beach appeals to the senses of both smell and touch. The

Meeting at Night by Robert Browning

The gray sea and the long black land;
And the yellow half-moon large and low;
And the startled little waves that leap
In fiery ringlets from their sleep,
As I gain the cove with pushing prow,
And quench its speed i’ the slushy sand.

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;
Three fields to cross till a farm appears;
A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch
And blue spurt of a lighted match.
And a voice less loud, through its joys and fears,
Than the two hearts beating each to each!
pushing prow (could be some sexual innuendo there) of the boat on the sand, the tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch of the match, the low speech of the lovers, and the sound of their two hearts beating—all appeal to the sense of hearing.

We cannot evaluate a poem, however, by the amount or quality of its imagery alone. Sense impression is only one of the elements of experience. A poet may use other means to reach an end. We must never judge any single element of a poem without looking at the total intention of the poem.

Questions

1. Vocabulary: (a) crag, (b) azure.

2. Find examples of imagery, and list the senses that are used.

3. We know that the eagle is not literally close to the sun. If Tennyson had written “Waiting on high” instead, would the poem be improved or worsened? Why?

4. How does the imagery used here give us a sense of the eagle that would not be portrayed in a literal description?

**Denotation and Connotation**

The difference between the practical use of language and the literary use is that in literature, especially in poetry, a fuller use is made of individual words. Words actually have 3 parts: sound, denotation and connotation.

The sound part is pretty obvious, in that it is broken down into the various noises we make while speaking. The denotation(s) of a word is the dictionary meaning(s) of the word. Connotation, on the other hand, is the implied meaning that a word might suggest. For example, a gold coin called a *doubloon* is just a coin; however, that word will suggest pirates to four out of five readers. Pirates are part of the connotation for doubloon. How about the expression, “It rained cats and dogs”? There is a hidden/implied meaning.

Connotation is very important to a poet, for it is one of the means (aka “tricks”) that a poet uses to concentrate or enrich the meaning of the poem—say more in fewer words. It is also possible for a word to have more than one denotation, which leaves it open to interpretation when used cleverly. For example, the word *spring* could mean a season, a coil of wire, or even a source of water. Combine the multiple denotations of a word with connotation and you will see why our language is so complicated and confusing. A poet is not searching for the most beautiful words, but for the most meaningful words.
**Richard Cory by E.A. Robinson**

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,  
We people on the pavement looked at him;  
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,  
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,  
And he was always human when he talked;  
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,  
“Good-morning,” and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—  
And admirably schooled in every grace;  
In fine, we thought that he was everything  
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,  
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;  
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,  
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

**Questions**

1. In how many senses is Richard Cory a gentleman?

2. The word crown, meaning top of the head, is familiar to you from “Jack and Jill”; but why does Robinson use the unusual phrase “from sole to crown” instead of the common “from head to foot”?

3. List the words in the poem which express or suggest the idea of aristocracy or royalty.

4. Why is Richard Cory a good name for the character in this poem?

5. Some people think that the ending is “cheap.” Do you agree? Explain.

**The Rich Man by Franklin P. Adams**

The rich man has his motor-car,  
His country and his town estate.  
He smokes a fifty-cent cigar  
And jeers at Fate.

He frivolous through the livelong day,  
He knows not Poverty her pinch.  
His lot seems light, his heart seems gay,  
He has a cinch.

Yet though my lamp burns low and dim,  
Though I must slave for livelihood—  
Think you that I would change with him?  
You bet I would!

**Questions**

1. What meanings has *lot* (line 7)?

2. Bearing in mind the criticism of “Richard Cory”, state whether you think that poem or this has more poetic value. Which poem is merely clever? Which is something more?
### Musical Devices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alliteration • Assonance • Onomatopoeia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An essential element of all music is repetition. Alliteration and assonance make use of this.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alliteration</th>
<th>The repetition of initial consonant sounds, as is found in many tongue twisters. The P’s of Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers...is an example of alliteration.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assonance</td>
<td>The repetition of vowel sounds is called assonance. Examples: mad as a hatter, time out of mind, free and easy, slapdash.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onomatopoeia</td>
<td>The use of words that try to express a sound. Examples: pop, fizz, snap, hiss, bang.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Song by William Shakespeare**

Hark, hark!
Bow-wow.
The watch-dogs bark!
Bow-wow.
Hark, hark! I hear
The strain of strutting chanticleer
Cry, “Cock-a-doodle-doo!”

### Lyric Poetry

For the Greeks, a lyric was a song accompanied by a lyre (a stringed, guitar-like instrument), but by later times it had its present meaning of a poem that, neither narrative (telling a story) nor strictly dramatic (performed by actors), is a poem that is centered on emotion or memories.

Still, it is rarely very far from a singing voice. A narrative usually is set in the past, telling what happened, and a lyric is set in the present, catching a speaker in a moment of expression. But lyric can, of course, glance backward or forward. A lyric can also have a sort of plot like a narrative.

Lyric poetry is sometimes broken down into a couple types:

**elegy:** a lyric that is melancholy (sad) or if it laments a death.

**ode:** a lyric that is rather long, elaborate, and on a lofty theme such as immortality or a hero’s victory.

Modern song lyrics are descendants of this type of poetry. Songs will often tell a story, or be based on emotion. They don’t necessarily follow the rules that lyric poetry, but are evolving into a unique form of poetry.