# Open Form – Figurative Language Is Like A New Set of Brushes

Brothers and sisters, at our last meeting we spoke on imagery, or the judicious use of concrete nouns, carefully selected adjectives, and sensual description in general to ground a poem in the perceivable world, to open the door to ideas through things, to paraphrase Bill Williams. Nothing kills an open form poem faster that abstraction, and yet, and yet, a poem that is purely physical will lay flat on the page and evoke an "Ooh isn't that pretty!" response. Our poems must use that groundedness to reach for the sky, and that is where *figurative language* comes in.

The phrase "figurative language" can mean any type of non-literal language, or words which refer to more than their "dictionary" referent. This can be anything from the connotation, or emotional meaning, of a word, to complicated extended metaphors. Ideally your words will a function both on the poem's surface and have this pointing feature. This is what allows a poem about a wheelbarrow to be about the hardships of rural life in America (to take the simplest of many interpretations of that symbol). Imagery shows, figurative language whispers and suggests and hints and insinuates and most of all broadens your poem's emotional palette. As indicated, there are many types of figurative language, including simile, metaphor,
symbol, personification, apostrophe, synecdoche, metonymy, allegory, paradox, understatement, irony, etc. By way of introduction we will deal with only the first four today, the others will be covered in future essays. Connotation will be discussed in next month's essay on diction. *Alles klar?* Gut.

Remember high school English? College? Then you probably know the text-book definition of a *simile*: "a comparison using 'like' or 'as'". Small words that make a big claim: that two unlike things are in fact like each other, share a surprising and revealing similarity. This similarity may be visual or otherwise sensual, functional, relating to action, or, perhaps best, purely imaginative but somehow dead-on. In a simile both entities exist or can exist and are not identical in time or space, and one is usually just named and not described. The object receiving the comparison takes on the attributes and associations of what it is compared to, as with figurative language in general: it expands your meanings without multiplying your language. It is useful when bare statement cannot engage the reader. Classic example: you want to describe the beauty of a woman (don't we all?). She's "pretty, cute, beautiful, fine, etc." all give you no picture, no feeling. So you say she is *like* something beautiful, something your reader can probably imagine and will agree is beautiful and not too much like a beautiful woman, as that would be pointless (and women hate to be compared to each other). So forests, mountains, oceans, birds, floor-to-ceiling shelves of poetry, all the usual clichés…..then it hits you– ballerinas and witch doctors!:

her movements delicately sculpted,
gliding like a ballerina in dance
or a witch doctor at secret rituals (from a poem by the author)

Here she is described in action, rather than statically with breasts like grapefruit. She has the grace of a ballerina, not too far out there, but then the move to an unexpected image: the significance and gravitas of a witch doctor in the zone. Of course, figurative language depends on your readers making connections between the objects in the comparison that are something like the ones you make: someone who thought witch doctors were bizarre and possibly evil would not see how this simile fit into a poem about a beloved. But you have to take risks to avoid cliché, and hopefully the readers can see your angle from the cumulative effect of the all the poem's figurative language and enjoy having their perceptions stretched. The simile can do this while still keeping the poem clear: we are not told that she actually *is* a witch doctor, only that she shares a few of his qualities at a certain time. When it works it will take the top of Emily Dickinson's head off. Or your reader's.

As useful as simile is, it has a critical limitation: it can't take you all the way there. It is always at one remove from sensual or conceptual immersion. That's where *metaphor* comes in. To go old school once again, metaphor is "A figure of speech in which a comparison is made between two things essentially unalike which states identity between the items being compared." Here we *do* say one thing is another. The object taking the comparison is replaced in our imagination in it's entirety by the thing providing the comparison, even if only briefly. A switch is made in the reader's mind, and the other thing, with its full set of implications, acts or speaks or is seen. This is of course much stronger than a simile, and should be used when a total transference of feeling is desired. Metaphors can be simple, dynamic, or extended. Simple metaphors appear once and are not directly elaborated on within the work, like the title of this essay. Dynamic metaphors and extended metaphors related: the extended metaphor supports a more detailed, point by point comparison: my lover's eyes are an ocean, and I am at sail upon it, tossed by the wind of her hair, etc (my favorite cliché). An extended metaphor is dynamic when some change occurs within the comparison object (and a change is implied in the compared object): Storms arise upon my lover's ocean (she cries when I lie to her) and my vessel goes down (you fill in the blank). That got heavy quick, no? Metaphor is powerful like that. Use carefully.

Here's a metaphor from somebody famous (I have a quota):

**As I Walked Out One Evening**
by W.H. Auden

As I walked out one evening,
Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat.

http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15551

This is reminiscent of Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," in which "faces in the crowd" are directly juxtaposed with "petals on a wet, black bough," in one of the most striking metaphors of all time. Metaphors can be written as sharp turns like that or as here with verbs like "were". The crowds are visualized as harvest wheat, and we think of them as we think of harvest wheat. Not much if we were raised in a desert, but again, you makes your metaphors and you takes your chances.

So far we have the items meant in a poem literally being there (mostly) and the things they are compared to being *brought in* either partially or fully for a length of time. The sun is here, the blood orange we compare it to makes an imaginary cameo. *Symbol*, ladies and germs, is "a thing (could be an object, person, situation or action) which stands for something else more abstract." That is, the symbolic object is both literally here and pointing to some meaning out there that is not mentioned directly. It's like having the blood orange but not mentioning the sun. This dual role is crucial for the symbol: it must suggest the abstract *inhering* in the concrete, not brought in by either kind of comparison we have mentioned. The apple pie is an embodiment of the mother's love. We see the pie and feel the love. No extra verbiage is required for a properly set-up symbol, and symbols are properly set-up when the poem itself indicates an object is to be taken symbolically– symbols nearly always signal their existence by emphasis, repetition, or position. Also, the meaning of a literary symbol must be established and supported by the entire context of the poem. A symbol has its meaning inside, not outside a poem. Finally, to be called a symbol, an item must suggest a meaning different in kind from its literal meaning. For example, in Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken:"

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

http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15717

Here we are to take literally the description of roads and they are described in physical terms. But from the context of the entire poem we gather that the forked road represents life's many choices and possibilities. Explained, this would be dull prose, shown as a symbol it dawns on us slowly and powerfully.

Finally, the last major sort of figurative language I will deal with is *personification*. Personification tells us that he is “a type of metaphor in which distinct human qualities, e.g., honesty, emotion, volition, etc., are attributed to an animal, object or idea.” Which of course is an example of personification- we treat it as a person who could define himself to us. Personification allows us to relate to the abstract/nonhuman as if it was human– it has a form, behavior and motivation we can understand and identify with. It’s a big universe, and it would be nice if things were all on a human scale– in poetry we can enjoy this pleasant conceit, as in Shakespeare’s “Sonnet XVIII”:

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;

The sun here is “the eye of heaven,” a metaphor/personification, and is implied to be a he.
Again:

Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,

Death is also male.

http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15555

To recap, poetry fans, figurative language is the relation of the concrete/ present to the abstract/absent in order to generate insightful comparisons or imaginings or connections. It is how a poem transcends its images and dances in the realm of ideas. BAMMO! That was personification. It’s everywhere like credit card offers. It’s cut grass in the Spring. *You get the picture!* 😀

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I am indebted to "The Poetics of Robert Frost - Examples" for help with this essay. Most of the definitions are modified from ones on this site:

http://www.frostfriends.org/figurative.html#metaphor