“Fire i’ the blood”: A Handbook of Figurative Language

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# Table of Contents

## Introduction

To the Teacher .................................................. ii
To the Student ................................................. v

## Definitions ..................................................... 1

## Figurative Language–Spoken ................................. 3

## Rhetorical Classes ............................................ 5

## A Note on Allusion ............................................ 6

## Figurative Language – Written

- Metaphor (examples) ................................. 8
- Simile (examples) ............................ 11
- Personification (examples) ............... 13
- Metonymy (examples) ......................... 16
- Synecdoche (examples) .................. 18
- Hyperbole (examples) ...................... 22
- Litotes (examples) ............................ 25

## Additional Examples ......................................... 28

## Explanatory Appendix I ................................... 32

## Explanatory Appendix II .................................. 39
To the Teacher

Figurative language v. literal language

There are great differences between the oral use of figurative language and its written use. Nevertheless, the only separately published textbook for figurative language is almost entirely concerned with oral figurative language, offering such examples as “you have a heart of stone” or “you make my blood boil.” Much, if not most, oral language consists of long, repetitious portions of cliché and platitude, and not surprisingly, the figurative language used follows the same pattern. Writing teachers generally ask their students not to use clichés and platitudes, even though they may (mistakenly, I think) advise students to “write like you speak.”

In *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, John Arthos reminds us that “[figures of speech] are traditionally considered to be words and expressions . . . serving primarily as ornament and making their appeal through novelty.” The idea of figurative language as ornament has a long history and is still with us. However, attitudes have changed to some degree, and during the period that the New Critics flourished in England and America, figurative language became especially important to the reading of poetry. And recently, the linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published their book *Metaphors We Live By*, arguing for the recognition of what they call “conceptual metaphor” (Argument as War; Ideas as Food [and other things], Love as
Madness, Life as Game, and other concepts) as the basis for a large amount of thinking and speaking.

Certainly the points made by Lakoff and Johnson are valid, and one might think of such “conceptual metaphors,” especially pernicious ones such as “Education as Business” or even “Writing as Assembly Line Production” (commonly concealed in a euphemism and called “Writing as Process”). But even though the idea of conceptual metaphor may perhaps, in some instances, help to save figurative language from being trivialized as a mere stylistic ornament, a great deal more needs to be done in the teaching and learning of common figures of speech. I do not, however, wish to return to I. A. Richards’ concepts of “tenor” and “vehicle” to teach students figurative language, because these concepts seem to me overly complicated and limited in pedagogical usefulness.

I want to suggest, again, that common figures of speech used in writing (in the rhetorical classes of comparison, substitution, and exaggeration) are no more used for the sake of ornament than would be any other element of the language. The reader of any sort of figure of speech must delay and think of two things (the literal and the figurative meanings), and then “meld” them together in a different kind of reading—one that is both literal and non-literal simultaneously. Such a use of language calls the reader’s attention to the points in common of items in a comparison, to the cultural associations and interactions of words in substitutions, and to the processes of discovering truth and validity in exaggerations. Students must consider the writing and the implications and connotations of words and phrases much more carefully when reading works that contain figurative language.
Understanding figurative language should be considered only one part of a larger attempt to teach reading (understanding written works); however, figures of speech are quite common in most writing that asks to be taken seriously and that is something more than a compilation of facts. All writing requires the willing and active participation of the reader, but it is only in writing containing figures of speech that the literal and the non-literal are brought together. As part of a literacy program, the teaching of the common figures of speech presented here should probably begin before middle school and continue through high school, with most emphasis reserved for senior high school. A basic knowledge of figures of speech is required by most teachers of English in college.
To the Student

HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET: FISHING FOR FIGURES OF SPEECH

On the following pages are examples of seven common figures of speech. These are all part of “figurative language,” which is different from “literal language” and must be read somewhat differently. Make sure that you know the definition of each of these figures and that you have studied the examples carefully, and then find your own examples (fish in your own textbooks and library books for good, fresh examples—not too small, now—and then write them down in the spaces provided until your string is full and your catch complete).
You should be able to accurately identify each of the seven figures of speech and also be able to explain why it works well as that particular figure.

When you have completed these exercises, go to the back of the booklet and invent your own figures of speech. Write them down in the spaces provided. Be creative and try to make your figures of speech as different from the examples as you can. Use the examples for ideas rather than for copying particular words and phrases.
DEFINITIONS

Seven common figures of speech are listed below with their definitions. Note that they should be placed in groups or classes: the first three are types of figurative comparison; the second two are types of figurative substitution; and the third two are types of exaggeration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPARISON</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A <strong>simile</strong> is an “indirect” comparison between two different things using the word “like” or “as” or an equivalent term. $(x \text{ is like } y)$</td>
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<tr>
<td>A <strong>metaphor</strong> is a “direct” comparison, explicit or implicit, between two different things. $(x \text{ is } y; x = y)$</td>
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<tr>
<td>A <strong>personification</strong> is a comparison of something not human (abstract or concrete) to a human being. $(x \text{ is a human being})$ It gives something nonhuman the characteristics or attributes of a human.</td>
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Related to personification are the figures of apostrophe (addressing someone dead or missing or addressing something not material or not ordinarily spoken to) and reification (speaking of something unreal as if it were real).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBSTITUTION</th>
<th>EXAGGERATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A <strong>metonymy</strong> is the substitution of some word or term closely related to or associated with the literal word or term meant. (y is substituted for x)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A <strong>synecdoche</strong> is the substitution of the part for the whole, the whole for the part, a species for a genus (or vice versa), an individual for a class, or material for the thing (part is substituted for whole; whole is substituted for part). The second element of the pair is the literal word or term.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hyperbole</strong> is an overstatement of the literal—an exaggeration. (s &gt; x)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Litotes</strong> is an understatement of the literal—an exaggeration. (s &lt; x)</td>
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Figurative Language–Spoken

1. **Metaphor:** a comparison between two different things. [These things must have some feature(s) in common.]

   She is a rat. He is a dog. She is a pig.

2. **Simile:** a comparison between two different things using the word “like” or “as.”

   He’s blind as a bat without his glasses.

3. **Personification:** a comparison of something not human to a human being.

   My car decided not to start this morning.

4. **Metonymy:** the use of a word closely related to or associated with the thing meant.

   That guy’s an old salt. [“salt” is associated with “sailor”]

   The pen is mightier than the sword. [“persuasion” is associated with the “pen”; “might” or “force” is associated with the “sword”]
5. **Synecdoche:** the use of the part for the whole [or vice versa].

   _Look at that redhead!_  [part = redhead; whole = person]

   _All hands on deck!_  [part = hands; whole = person]

6. **Hyperbole:** an overstatement [exaggeration].

   _I was so angry (mad) I could have killed him!_

7. **Litotes:** an understatement [exaggeration].

   _Say, that’s not bad at all._  [meaning it’s very good]

Mixed (illogical) metaphors:

1. A whirlwind of pleasure beckoning seductively, the cool water of the river was dancing and prancing in joy.

2. Education is the key to cruising the future.

3. Their problem, like a tsunami, bobbed up from under the rug where no one expected it to be.
RHETORICAL CLASSES
Figurative Language and Reference

COMPARISON
- Figurative
  - Metaphor
  - Simile
  - Personification
  - Irony
  - Analogy

SUBSTITUTION
- Literal
  - Comparison/
    - Contrast

EXAGGERATION
- Metonymy
- Synecdoche
- Symbol
- Allegory

REFERENCE

OPEN
- Allusion
  - Biblical
  - Literary
  - Topical
  - Classical

CLOSED
- Imitation
- "Echo"
- Citation or Quotation
  - Among Works
    - ("influence")
- Full Reference
  - (sufficiently explained in the work.)
A Note on Allusion

(Allusion is a trope, not a figure of speech.)

An allusion is an unexplained reference to a person, place, thing, or event and may be fictional or real; the assumption is that a reader will know (or find) the reference and incorporate suggestions or elements from the allusion into the work being read.

Identify the allusions in the following sentences and explain them carefully:

1. *His face was a mass of square blotches, like a poor imitation of a Picasso.*

2. *The Judge characterized the traitor’s despicable conduct as “the evil of banality.”*

3. *The report avoided directly mentioning particular people and events; in fact, it was entirely too Panglossian.*

4. *In the bizarre nightmare of war, there can be little difference between Dives and Lazarus.*

5. *Nature and Nature’s laws lay hid in Night: God said, Let Newton be! and all was Light.*

   —*Alexander Pope*
Find and list several allusions from your own reading:

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Figurative Language: Examples

Metaphor

1. The green fire above the twisted banyan trunks covers an uplifted, rocky promontory.

2. At the end of summer, the purled mulberry trees were heavy with the lace of white fruit.

3. Devil claws streak the glowing glass chimney of the coal-oil lamp.

4. Midday's clock, measuring the long silences, is the *lap, lap, lap* of icemelt from galvanized tin gutters.

5. Under the wax paper, the spongy grey bread was wet, and the beanskins were dotted with faintly pink curlicues.

6. The cool, thin sounds of autumn wind pour over these saxifrage hills.

7. Orchids of flame erupt suddenly from the soft, reflecting green fields.

8. On the black branches, the bright orange persimmons are dying suns.

9. Over the feathery, top-bunched palms, gold-highlighted grey clouds ply a steady course to landfall.

10. A blue-tinged darkness slowly washes the potter’s bowl of sky.
11. The road's a steady, unwinding brown cord running to nowhere.

12. __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

13. __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
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14. __________________________________________
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15. __________________________________________
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16. __________________________________________
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17. __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
Simile

1. This salt air oppresses, and waves lap the shining sand like soldiers’ boots.

2. Under the mats of pine needles, the rainslick land’s swollen like a bruised apple.

3. Raindrops, hot and thick as mucilage, strike the pastel concrete walk.

4. Like lumps of fibrous cotton, the heavy snowflakes swirl down slowly.

5. The virgin evening jangles in my pocket like a key chain.

6. Morning has enfolded the room like a blanket, and the sparkling dustflakes shimmer in bright rays.

7. A moonmisted sky, like a dusty parchment, opens slowly to the new darkness.

8. Grainy shadows, uncertain as memory, persist across the deserted streets.

9. The egrets gyre slowly on their swooping path like stamped pieces of metal on an unseen axis.

10. This steady September rain seems to dissolve the distant horizon.

11. It is with words as with sunbeams—the more they are condensed, the deeper they burn.

   --Southey
Personification

1. Brownstone houses drowse atop snowfeathered steps that mount to their doors.

2. Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, That struts and frets his hour upon the stage And then is heard no more.
   --Shakespeare

3. The wind deftly rearranges the flowering plum's wet branches.

4. Under a cold moon, quicksilver fingers of the San Juan de Fuca push inland, past towns and cities.

5. O tenderly the haughty day Fills his blue urn with fire.
   --Emerson

6. [The] clouds .. [are] [s]hepherded by the slow, unwilling wind
   --Shelley

7. Busy old fool, unruly Sun, Why dost thou thus Through windows and through curtains call on us? --Donne

8. Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find Thee [Autumn] sitting careless on a granary floor, Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind.
   --Keats
9. He [the eagle] clasps the craig with crooked hands.  
   --Tennyson

10. The nightwebbed lake speaks of a swollen moon, of the tideswept piles of stars.

11. The wind, open-vested, slouches easily over winding, yellow hills.

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13. ____________________________________________
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14. ____________________________________________
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15. ____________________________________________
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    ____________________________________________

16. ____________________________________________
    ____________________________________________
    ____________________________________________
Metonymy

1. The strongest oaths are straw
   To the fire i' the blood.
   --Shakespeare

2. He watched the life spill from his gaping wound,
   unable to do more than grasp it tightly.

3. Here lies sleeping Jennifer Dow,
   [Note the *Hic jacet* formula.]
   Who, they said, had swallowed a cow.

4. She's gone, who was my moon or more.

5. The White House has suggested a slow, cautious
   approach to the current problems in North Korea.

6. At the foot of August, white watercolored gulls lightly
   shadow the washed plaster of ivory walls.

7. Look into the pewter pot [of ale]
   To see the world as the world's not.
   --Housman

8. Golden lads and girls all must,
   As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.
   --Shakespeare

9. Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.
   --Herrick
10. A little rule, a little sway,
    A sun beam on a winter's day,
    Is all the proud and mighty have
    Between the cradle and the grave.
    --Dyer

11. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them [people].
    --The Bible; Matthew

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