



Figure 1 Logos for the Academic Resource Center and The Writing Center

UNDERSTANDING POETRY AND LITERATURE: POETIC AND LITERARY DEVICES

Poetic and literary devices are tools that the poet and/or author use to convey a particular tone and message in their work. In this handout, we will go over some of the most common devices (such as *figurative language, imagery, and diction*). Although this handout is great for analyzing poetry, don't forget to pick up the companion piece to this handout, the Writing Center Handout titled "Understanding Poetry," as well.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE:

Figurative language is when an author or poet uses something else to describe an image in order to enhance its meaning. Listed below are some of the most common types of figurative language.

→ **METAPHOR**: A *metaphor* describes one thing in terms of another. In the case of *metaphors*, an object takes on the image of something else. Metaphors often present the comparison of one noun to another using the words "is, was, are, were" and **without** the use of the words "as" or "like."

For example:

All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players;

They have their exits and their entrances,

And one man in his time plays many parts,

(lines 1-4 of "All the World's a Stage" by William Shakespeare)

In this example, the “world” takes on the image of a stage in order to perhaps state that life is an arena comprised of theatrical scenes and acts. This is a metaphor because the world **IS** the stage in the poem.

Other examples include:

- * She **is** the apple of my eye.
- * His love **was** my healing grace.
- * These blooming flowers **are** a sign of good things to come.
- * Her words **were** sharp knives.

NOTE! Metaphors are not always as obvious as “is” or “was.” Sometimes, an image is metaphoric because of how it is described. For example, in the poem “Living in Sin” by Adrienne Rich, the speaker states that “each separate stair would writhe / under the milkman’s tramp.” In this case, the inanimate object (the “stair”) behaves (“writhes”) like an animal, specifically a snake.

→ **SIMILE**: A *simile* is a type of comparison in which two objects are compared to one another using the words “as” or “like.”

For example:

Your teeth are like stars;

They come out at night.

They come back at dawn

When they’re ready to bite.

(“Your Teeth” by Denise Rogers)

In this case, the poet uses a simile to compare “teeth” to the “stars,” and she continues the comparison by providing evidence for why they are similar, as they both “come out at night.”

Other examples include:

- * He fights **like** a lion.
- * He swims **as** fast **as** a fish.
- * He slithers **like** a snake.

- * He runs **like** a cheetah.
- * She kicks **like** a mule.

→ **ANALOGY**: An *analogy* is comparable to a *metaphor* and a *simile* in that it shows how two different things are similar, but in a more complex way. Rather than a figure of speech, an analogy is more of a logical argument. The presenter of an analogy will often demonstrate how two things are alike, or *analogous*, by pointing out shared characteristics.

For example:

The white mares of the moon rush along the sky

Beating their golden hoofs upon the glass heavens;

**The white mares of the moon are all standing on their
hind legs**

Pawing at the green porcelain doors of the remote heavens

Fly, Mares!

(lines 1-5 of "A Decade" by Amy Lowell)

In this example, an analogy is used to compare mares and clouds. The image of the mares is used to construct the image of clouds moving in the sky. Lowell is making an argument, in a way, by using evidence to show that white mares look similar to white clouds.

Other examples include:

- * "A glove is to a hand as paint is to a wall."

The analogical argument here is that both gloves and paint are *put on* hands and walls, respectively.

- * "Citizens are to a president as a solar system is to a galaxy."

The analogical argument here points out that citizens serve as a foundation for a president in a way that is similar to how a solar system serves as a foundation for the galaxy.

* “Cameron's house is like a museum. It's very cold, and very beautiful, and you're not.

allowed to touch anything.”

Again, this statement is making an analogical analysis. Although this statement is very metaphorical, what makes it an analogy is the argument made—*evidence* is provided for the claim.

→ **METONYMY**: A *metonymy* is another type of metaphor in which a noun or idea is not called by its own name, but rather by the name of something associated with that noun or idea. For instance, "London," as it is the capital of the “United Kingdom,” could be used as a metonym for the “British Government.”

For example:

And O ye **high-flown quills** that soar the skies,
And ever with your prey still catch your praise

(from the eighth stanza of “The Prologue” by Anne Bradstreet)

In this case, “high-flown quills” represents literary critics and the pens they use to write their critique, or catch their “prey.”

Other examples include:

* The silver screen = *movies*.

* The crown = *the ruling monarch*.

* “He writes a fine hand” meaning good handwriting.

* “The pen is mightier than the sword,” meaning literary power is superior to military force.

* “The House was called to order,” meaning the members in the House.

→ **SYNECDOCHE**: A *synecdoche* (pronounced: *si-nek-da-kee*) is another type of metaphor in which a *part* is used to represent a *whole*, or vice versa.

For example:

“**All hands on deck**, and that young lubber's late!”
Somehow you struggle up the deck's mad slope;

(lines 23-24 of "All Hands on Deck" by Bill Adams)

In this case, the word "hand" represents the entirety of a sailor. Essentially, this synecdoche means that all the sailors should come to the deck.

Other examples include:

*"Twenty sails came into the harbor."

This means that twenty *ships* came into the harbor, and the part of the ship, the "sail," is used to refer to the whole "ship."

*"Cleveland plays Boston tonight."

"Cleveland" (the city) = its *baseball team*.

*"The world treated him badly."

The whole "world" did not treat him badly—only a part.

→ **HYPERBOLE**: A *hyperbole* is a figure of speech in which all statements are exaggerated for emphasis.

For example:

Ares roared

As loudly as nine or ten thousand men

In the thick of a fight, . . .

So terrifying was the cry he raised.

As a dark cloud in the sky

(lines 859-864 of *The Iliad* by Homer)

In this piece, the poet is exaggerating Ares' cry by comparing it to the cries of "nine or ten thousand men / In the thick of a fight." The poet does this to emphasize the darkness and sorrow of the sound.

Other examples include:

* His stomach was as big as Milwaukee. (His stomach was very large.)

* These books weigh a ton. (These books are heavy.)

* I could sleep for a year. (I could sleep for a long time.)

* The path went on forever. (The path was very long.)

- * I'm doing a million things right now. (I'm very busy.)
- * I could eat a horse. (I'm very hungry.)

→ **PERSONIFICATION**: A *personification* is a type of metaphor that gives human characteristics to animals, inanimate objects, or concepts.

For example:

**Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.**

(lines 1-4 of "712" by Emily Dickinson)

In this example, death is a concept that is described as if it were a suitor that is accompanying the speaker in a carriage; death is given human characteristics.

Other examples include:

- *The camera loves me.
- *Art is a jealous mistress.
- *Wind yells while blowing.
- *Opportunity knocked on the door.
- *The sun greeted me this morning.

IMAGERY:

Imagery is one of the most important aspects of poetry and literature. Literature often uses vivid and striking imagery to enhance a storyline; a story's true essence is defined by how vividly the reader can see, smell, taste, and hear the events of the story. On the other hand, since poems are typically short, there are no characters or long scenes in which we can determine what is happening in the poem. Poetry usually needs to appeal to an audience using striking and vivid imagery. Below are some of the most common types of imagery.

→ **SYMBOLISM**: This is when a concrete thing or action implies a hidden meaning, such as how a "clock" represents "time," or how "glasses" represent "wisdom." Many poets

and authors use metaphors, similes or analogies to transform images into symbols to represent a certain idea or quality about the image.

For example:

My heart leaps up when I behold

A rainbow in the sky ...

(lines 1-2 of "My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold" by William Wordsworth)

In this example, a "rainbow" is used as a symbol of hope, i.e. "the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow."

→**SENSORY PERCEPTION**: Poetry and literature often try to evoke sensations associated with sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste. Think of what you're reading as a painting with words. To best understand a poem, pick out and decode what sensations certain images in a poem make you feel. This method also works for literature.

For example:

The winter evening settles down

With smell of steaks in passageways.

Six o'clock.

The burnt-out ends of smoky days.

And now a gusty shower wraps

The grimy scraps

Of withered leaves about your feet

And newspapers from vacant lots;

The showers beat

On broken blinds and chimney-pots,

And at the corner of the street

A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.

And then the lighting of the lamps.

("Preludes" by T.S. Eliot)

In this case, the poet uses sensory perception in order to make the language of the poem striking. Readers can actually experience the "smell of steaks in passageways," as well as the smell of "burnt-out ends of smoky days." The line "a gusty shower wraps / The grimy scraps" helps the reader to feel the wrapping and the thick grime. Finally, the reader can hear the specific "showers beat / On broken blinds and chimney-pots," as

well as how the cab-horse steams and stamps.”

DICTION:

Diction refers to word choice in a poem. Certain words can convey more than one definition, which can suggest specific types of meaning. While one writer uses slang, the other may use formal language. What is the significance of this difference? While reading, remember to ask yourself why the writer may have used a certain word. Is the word choice formal or informal? Are they using particular words to relay a hidden meaning?

→ **DENOTATION:** The *denotation* of a word is its literal meaning, or dictionary definition.

→ **CONNOTATION:** The *connotation* of a word is its emotional and cultural meaning, or the implied meaning.

Denotation and **connotation** can be applied to the same word. For example, the words “home,” and “residence” have the same denotation (“the place where one lives”), but the connotation of each word is very different. The connotation of “residence” is formal and cold—something that a real estate agent or landlord may sue. Meanwhile, the connotation of “home” is familiar and warm—something that is used by the average person.



For a more in-depth look at denotation and connotation, please check out the Writing Center Handout titled “Denotation and Connotation.”

Figure 2 Push Pin

EXERCISE:

Closely read the following excerpts taken from various forms of creative writing. Can you identify the types of *figurative language, imagery, and diction* used? Remember that there may be more than one technique used (i.e. a passage can contain a *metaphor* and a *simile* at the same time.) Please refer to the example below for a guide on how to complete the exercise, and remember that no answer is incorrect if you can prove your interpretation with evidence.

EXAMPLE: The following is an excerpt from the novel *Fat City* by Leonard Gardner:

Occasionally there was a gust of wind, and he was engulfed by sudden rustling and flickering shadows as a high spiral of onion skins fluttered about him like a swarm of butterflies.

The aforementioned excerpt uses simile, symbolism, and connotation.

Please explain with examples:

The statement "onion skins fluttered about him like a swarm of butterflies" is a simile because the author is using "like" or "as" to show a comparison between fluttering onion skins and fluttering butterflies. Also, the "rustling and flickering shadows" can symbolize fear and darkness, because rustling and shadows are both scary sounds/images. I also think it is interesting that the author uses the word "flutter" to describe onion skins. Onion skins are usually considered yucky, but the connotation of "Flutter" is very delicate, which leads me to think that the author wanted the reader to see the onion skins in a delicate and dainty way. The onion skins seem symbolic of something as well.

EXERCISE #1: The following is an excerpt from "Revenge of the Pork Person" by Dave Barry:

I have never met a woman, no matter how attractive, who wasn't convinced, deep down inside, that she was a real woofer. Men tend to be just the opposite. A man can have a belly you could house commercial aircraft in and a grand total of eight greasy strands of hair, which he grows real long and combs across the top of his head so that he looks, when viewed from above, like an egg in the grasp of a giant spider, plus this man can have B.O. to the point where he interferes with radio transmissions, and he will still be convinced that, in terms of attractiveness, he is borderline Don Johnson.

The aforementioned excerpt uses

Please explain with examples:

EXERCISE #2: The following is an excerpt from “Howl” by Allen Ginsberg.

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by
madness, starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up
smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats
floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz,
who bared their brains to Heaven under the EI and saw
Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs
illuminated . . .

The aforementioned excerpt uses

Please explain with examples:

This handout is based on the following sources:

Gwynn, R. S. *Poetry: A Pocket Anthology*. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2005. Print.

Kennedy, X. J., and Dana Gioia. *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. New York, NY: HarperCollins College, 1995. Print.

Welch, Colin. "Elements of Poetry." *Lexiconic Education Resources*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 June 2013. <<http://learn.lexiconic.net/>>

Poets.org. *Poetry, Poems, Bios & More*. Academy of American Poets, 1997-2013. Web. 19 June 2013. <<http://www.poets.org/>>

Roberts, Edgar V. *Writing about Literature*. Boston: Pearson, 2012. Print.

For further reference, see the following books:

Bogard, Carley Rees., and Jan Zlotnik. Schmidt. *Legacies: Fiction, Poetry, Drama, Nonfiction*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College, 2002. Print.

Wyatt, C.S. "Clauses and Phrases". *Tameri Guide for Writers*. Ed. S.D. Schnellbach. 12 September 2009. 27 April 2010. <<http://www.tameri.com/edit/phrases.html>>

All of the above texts are available in the Writing Center. For more information, please visit our website at <http://www.lavc.edu/writingcenter/>