

Critical Reading VI: Examining Figurative Language

You may think the word “critical” has only a negative meaning, as in “Professor Smith criticized my paper unfairly.” However, a critical reader is a careful reader. According to Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary, one meaning of the word critical is “exercising or involving careful judgment or judicious evaluation.” In other words, critical reading means being able to comprehend and make educated judgments about what you read.

The skills involved in critical reading are explained in Critical Reading Tip Sheets I-VI.

What is Figurative Language?

Figurative language is a way of describing something that makes sense on an imaginative level but not on a literal level. Figurative language is usually surprising, because it equates to unlike objects based on some common quality.

The most frequently encountered types of figurative expressions are **similes**, **metaphors**, and **symbols**.

Metaphors directly compare two objects without explicitly using the words like or as.

- "Life **is** a roller coaster."

Similes are explicit comparisons of two objects using the words “like” or “as.”

- "Life **is LIKE** a roller coaster."

Parts of a metaphor/simile

- The first is called the **tenor**, the thing actually being described.
 - In the previous example, it is "life." “Life” is what I am talking about.
- The second idea is called the **vehicle**, the thing that is carrying the meaning to you, the reader.
 - In this example, the vehicle is "roller coaster." You understand what life is like because your mind automatically associates certain meanings with the word "roller coaster," frightening, unpredictable, highs and lows, etc.

A symbol represents something other than itself based on some common qualities or shared characteristics. Symbols are created through **vivid images**.

- Carl Jung defines a symbol as "a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us."
- The flag of a country is only a piece of colored cloth, but it reminds you of your country, and many other things about your country as well. The icons of many religions are a kind of symbol, pictures or other representations that contain special meaning.

See if you can figure out the figurative language in the following poem:

Metaphors

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,

An elephant, a ponderous house,

A melon strolling on two tendrils.

O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!

This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.

Money's new-minted in this fat purse.

I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.

I've eaten a bag of green apples,

Boarded the train there's no getting off.

Sylvia Plath

The poem is titled "Metaphors". What does the word "metaphors" tell us this poem is about?

Why would the speaker compare herself to a riddle? What are

What qualities might she share with an elephant? Is an elephant a symbol for anything? What does the word ponderous mean?

Visualize "a melon strolling on two tendrils". What would this look like? Why would the speaker see herself this way?

Do the same for a loaf "big with its yeasty rising". What happens to bread when you let it "rise"?

In what ways is the image "fat purse" connected to a "cow in calf"?

Did you figure it out?

The author is describing her pregnancy! Her "nine syllables" refers to the nine months of pregnancy. Try and decipher the rest of her "riddle."

Adapted from McWhorter, Kathleen T. Reading Across the Disciplines. 2nd Ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2005.