

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Aspects of Poetry

Poetry can be divided into two categories: narrative and lyric. Narrative poems, for example Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes," tell stories, like a novel, and they tend to be long. Epics, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, Homer's *Iliad*, or Milton's *Paradise Lost*, are narrative poems on a grand scale that recount the exploits of heroes and cover a vast canvas such as the fate of nations or of mankind as a whole. Another well-known type of narrative poem is the ballad, which tells a humbler story and was originally composed to be sung. Lyric poetry is a vast category that includes poems whose themes cover the whole gamut of human emotion and imagination. Though they can be of any length, lyrics tend to be shorter than narrative poems (and can be very brief indeed); they often have a musical quality (the word *lyric* comes from the Greek *lyre*, an instrument used to accompany the recital or singing of poems); and they tend to be more subjective than narrative poems, often expressing the feelings or thoughts of a speaker. The lyric is the predominant type of poetry in western literature.

Certain **formal characteristics** of poetry, such as rhyme or the division into lines, are encountered only in poems. Other features are simply more frequent in poetry than in prose, for example the use of figures of speech, or attention to rhythm and sound; poets use them frequently, to underscore the meaning of their lines. All these elements—repetition of sounds or of a particular rhythm, use of metaphors, symbols and other figures—tend to draw attention to the *language* of a poem: the reader is attracted not only to the poem's ideas but also to the way those ideas are expressed. Such elements enrich poetic language and make the study of poetry very rewarding: you will find, as you read poems closely, many layers of expression and of meaning. These multiple levels of expression can also lead to a certain ambiguity, since the significance of rhythms, sounds, metaphors, and symbols is not always immediately clear. Furthermore, they can often be interpreted differently by different readers. Different interpretations of poems are valid, as long as there is evidence within the poem to justify them. You should be careful, when discussing the meaning of a poem, to back up your interpretation with details taken from the poem.

Yet other elements of poetry belong as much to prose as to poetry—e.g., syntax (sentence structure) and choice of vocabulary—but in a poem they may function differently than in prose. In a traditional poem written with lines of regular length, the syntax of a

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as possible, words are often repeated in poetry in order for example to emphasize the importance of certain words in the context of the poem, or perhaps to achieve an effect of monotony. Since poems are usually short compared to prose works, it will be more obvious to the reader if many words are chosen from one semantic field.

A famous twentieth-century French poet, Paul Valéry, compared the difference between prose and poetry to that between walking and dancing. The walker normally aims to reach a certain destination by the most direct route, as prose typically renders its meaning directly, whereas dancing progresses in a roundabout and repetitive manner. Poetry, too, involves repetition of various kinds, and like dancing it is based on rhythm and music.

The different elements of a poem—vocabulary, sounds, rhythm, figurative language—are not independent of one another but work *together* to achieve a certain effect in the poem or in a part of the poem. For example, a poem can convey an impression of calm by the use of appropriate words, but this choice of vocabulary will probably be reinforced by a smooth, flowing rhythm and by soft sounds rather than sharp, hard ones. Elsewhere, a more staccato rhythm and harder sounds might be employed to convey the impression of rapid movement. A close reading of a poem proceeds line by line in order to show how different poetic elements work together to produce the desired impression, and how such effects might vary as the poem develops.

First of all, however, the student needs to know what kind of effects to look for, and so we will begin by isolating the different elements of a poem, such as vocabulary, figurative language, rhythm, structure, and versification, on the understanding that eventually you will consider them all simultaneously, when analyzing a poem line by line.

One of the easiest elements to observe and analyze in a poem is its choice of words, and for this reason we will begin with a study of vocabulary.

VOCABULARY

The choice of vocabulary in a poem has an immediate effect on the reader. Different types of words will be used, for example, to create an atmosphere of mystery, from those selected to explain an idea, describe a natural scene, or celebrate a joyful event. The reader will be affected differently by vocabulary that is simple or highly literary, abstract or concrete, descriptive, **affective** (concerning the emotions), or **didactic** (aiming to teach or inform). When analyzing a poem's vocabulary, it is essential not only to observe the presence of certain types of words but also to suggest why they were chosen. If certain words are repeated, you should try to find the possible reasons for this repetition. You should consider, also, not only the **denotations** of words (their dictionary meaning), but also any **connotations** (wider associations) they may have for you or for others.

Let us take some examples.

In his well-known poem "I wandered lonely as a cloud," William Wordsworth clearly wishes to convey to the reader the feeling of joy brought to him by the sight of a "host" of daffodils. Accordingly, the words he chooses to describe the daffodils almost all relate to the idea of happiness. This is especially evident in the third stanza:

The waves beside them danced; but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,

In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought.

The concentration of positive words here (“danced,” “sparkling,” “glee,” “gay,” “jocund,” “wealth”) unmistakably illustrates the poet’s happiness at the sight of the daffodils, both at the time and later, through memory. Words like “glee,” “gay,” and “jocund” are clearly affective—relating to emotion; “sparkling” is both descriptive, of waves in sunlight, and affective, since it contributes to the mood of happiness.

Sometimes, a poem may employ many words not just from one **semantic** field (area of meaning), as in the above example, but from two contrasting fields. An examination of the vocabulary can help to reveal the contrast. For example, in William Blake’s enigmatic poem “The Sick Rose,” the vocabulary can be divided between two areas of meaning, negative and positive:

O rose, thou art sick.
The invisible worm
That flies in the night
In the howling storm

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

This is a mysterious poem, in which the rose and the worm seem to represent symbols, perhaps of sexual love. We will discuss symbolism later, but, for now, an examination of the vocabulary alone can help to elucidate a basic contrast between a negative area of sickness, darkness, and destruction, and positive connotations relating to love and sexual pleasure. Apparently the rose (perhaps symbolizing a woman) is being defiled or desecrated by the “love” of the worm. Re-read the poem and consider into which category (negative or positive) you would assign each of the underlined words; you will probably find that there’s an almost equal number in each category, illustrating the tension in the poem between light and dark, good and evil, pleasure and destruction.

Different poets may use vocabulary to emphasize different aspects of the same phenomenon. John Keats’s “To Autumn” depicts fall as a season of plenty, especially in the first stanza. So many words here evoke ripeness and plenty; a few have been underlined; see how many more you can find and underline them too:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;

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To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells.

Nearly every line contains an expression depicting the idea of fullness. Also, all the words are very concrete: we not only infer an idea of plenty but also sense the warmth and lushness of the scene by visualizing the grapes and apples, gourds and nuts. Other elements of the poem, such as the sounds, back up the impression of "mellow fruitfulness," but even on the basis of the vocabulary alone, it is easy to see that the poet wishes to emphasize the image of autumn as the culmination, in nature, of the growing season: everything is ripe and round and soft and ready to be harvested. It is a season of warmth and sweetness.

Very different is the picture of fall in Shakespeare's sonnet "That time of year thou may'st in me behold." Feeling the approach of old age, he compares his own stage in life to the season of autumn, but rather than seeing autumn as a time of plenty he views it as a forerunner of winter and of death:

That time of year thou may'st in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

Instead of the lush images created by the vocabulary of the Keats poem, we find words suggesting bareness and destitution: "yellow leaves," "none," "few," "shake," "cold," "bare," "ruined."

When attempting to give a close reading of a poem, then, one of the first useful steps very often is to examine its vocabulary; an analysis of the types of words used can help to make sense of the poem, as in the examples above. Of course, other literary devices will contribute towards the overall effect (the alliteration of the /m/ and /n/ sounds in the first five lines of "To Autumn" certainly helps to convey an impression of fullness), and when analyzing a poem you will take all elements into account; but for the time being we are separating the different features of a poem in order to examine, one by one, the effects produced by each element—vocabulary, sounds, rhythm, figurative language, etc.—before putting everything together in a complete analysis.

A dictionary is often essential in order to write a close reading. Though you should always avoid **paraphrasing** the whole passage, it may, occasionally, be necessary to explain the meaning of individual words, for one reason or another. Poets—especially highly imaginative poets—occasionally invent words, which are called neologisms, and you should attempt to interpret the possible meaning of such words. The etymological

meaning of a word (i.e., the meaning it originally had in another age or another language) may throw light on a poet's understanding of certain terms. A good dictionary will give etymological meanings. A poet from an earlier era, such as Shakespeare, may use words that have become archaic in modern English, in which case you should explain their meaning. At the other extreme, a contemporary author may produce slang expressions or vocabulary belonging to a certain dialect or geographical area that should also be elucidated in a close reading. Often, the explanation might be that the poet is trying to convey the voice of a certain kind of speaker. In addition, poets sometimes employ specialized or technical terms, as in Henry Reed's "Naming of Parts." Here are the first and final stanzas:

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
 We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,
 We shall have what to do after firing. But today,
 Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
 Glistens like coral in all of the neighboring gardens,
 And today we have naming of parts.

.....

They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy
 If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
 And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance,
 Which in our case we have not got; and the almond-blossom
 Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and forwards,
 For today we have naming of parts.

The whole poem contains specialized vocabulary dealing with firearms, most of which is summarized in the final stanza ("the bolt . . . the breech . . . the cocking piece . . . the point of balance"). It is necessary to explain not what each word signifies exactly, but to point out that they are all technical words concerning firearms (whose presence was already suggested in the first stanza by the line: "And tomorrow morning, / We shall have what to do after firing"). This clarifies the situation of the speaker, who is apparently learning—along with his companions—how to fire a rifle, in some kind of military context. Next you may point out the essential contrast between the set of vocabulary relating to rifles and another set of words connected with nature and flowers (e.g., "Japonica" (a flowering shrub), "gardens," "almond-blossom," "bees"). Any valid interpretation of the poem has to take into account these two conflicting sets of vocabulary, the technical and the natural, the death-dealing and the life-giving.

Poets may employ a literary vocabulary, as in most of the poems quoted above, or deliberately choose a more familiar, conversational, or colloquial type of speech, either to appeal more readily to readers or to convey the tone of the poem's speaker, or for some other effect. Consider the following poem by Linda Pastan,

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published in 1988 and entitled “To a Daughter Leaving Home.” You will find that every word of this poem might be used in everyday conversation (with the possible exception of “loping,” which is nevertheless a common word). Some of these common, colloquial words have been underlined in the first few lines. As you read the poem, underline other words in the following lines that you consider to belong to “normal,” everyday speech.

When I taught you
at eight to ride
a bicycle, loping along
beside you
as you wobbled away
on two round wheels,
my own mouth rounding
in surprise when you pulled
ahead down the curved
path of the park,
I kept waiting
for the thud
of your crash as I
sprinted to catch up,
while you grew
smaller, more breakable
with distance,
pumping, pumping
for your life, screaming
with laughter,
the hair flapping
behind you like a
handkerchief waving
goodbye.

The conversational style of this poem seems totally appropriate, since it is addressed to the poet’s daughter, and because the situation it describes—teaching a child to ride a bike (though of course in the context of the poem this is also a metaphor for growing up and leaving home)—represents an everyday, family event. Certain words are repeated here: the roundness of the wheels is reflected in an amusing way in the rounding of the mother’s mouth when she is surprised to see her daughter actually cycle away, “pumping, pumping”; here the repetition underlines the repetitive nature of the action of cycling, and also the effort involved. Again, the vocabulary of this poem is quite concrete and matter-of-fact (“bicycle,” “wheels,” “park,” “thud,” “crash,” “hair,” “handkerchief”), except for the final word, “goodbye,” which is abstract and loaded with emotional impact, and refers back to the idea of “leaving home” in the poem’s title.

As you study a poem's vocabulary, you should consider not only the obvious meaning, or **denotation**, of a word, but also any **connotations** the word may have for the reader. Poetry often plays with the multiple meanings of words. Some may be totally irrelevant and can be ruled out, but if two or three possible senses of a word seem valid, you should not feel obliged to *choose* between them. You should consider them all, because multiple significations enrich a poem; all may be implied. Enraptured with the magical power of words, poets often use them in original ways, playing imaginatively with all their possible meanings.

Poets often allude in their work to other works of literature or to historical or mythological events or characters. Such **allusions** suggest a comparison between the poem in which they appear and the work or event they refer to. They often shed light on some aspect or meaning of the poem at hand. Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" contains many allusions. The first stanza, for example, mentions Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, according to Greek mythology, that ran through the Underworld and whose waters caused those who drank to forget their past. This allusion fits in with the references in this stanza to "hemlock" and "opiate"—other beverages that produce forgetfulness and numbness.

Exercises on Vocabulary

Read the following poems. What impression does each one produce on you and to what extent is the poem's vocabulary responsible for this impression? Use the questions to help you.

a) Wild Nights—Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

Futile—the Winds—
To a Heart in port—
Done with the Compass—
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden—
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor—Tonight—
In thee!

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Emily Dickinson

1. What significance do you see in the repetition of certain words in this poem?
2. To what semantic field do most of the words in the last two stanzas belong? What reason can you find for this?

What is made in the last stanza and what does it add to the poem's impact?

1. What kind of effect does the repetition of the word "luxury" have on the reader?
2. What effect does the repetition of the word "luxury" have on the reader?
3. What are the implications of the word "luxury" in line 3?
4. What is the effect of the word "luxury" in line 3?
5. What connotation does the word "luxury" have in the poem's theme?

IMAGERY

The terms in this section are without the action and this brings the action easily visual.

Would it be more effective if the daffodils in Pastan's poem were described in more concrete terms?

Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
 The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea:
 Listen! the mighty Being is awake, 5
 And doth with his eternal motion make
 A sound like thunder—everlastingly.
 Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
 If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
 Thy nature is not therefore less divine: 10
 Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year,
 And worship'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
 God being with thee when we know it not.

William Wordsworth

1. What kind of atmosphere is created in the first few lines? Which words contribute to the creation of that atmosphere?
2. What effect does the word “beauteous” have on you, as opposed to the more common *beautiful*?
3. What are the literal and metaphorical connotations of the word “Breathless” in line 3?
4. What is suggested by the verb “broods”?
5. What connection is there between the following words that appear in lines 1–11 of the poem—“holy,” “Nun,” “adoration,” “heaven,” “mighty Being,” “eternal,” “divine”? How does this semantic field (area of meaning) relate to the theme of the poem as a whole? What allusion in the last few lines also connects to this theme?

IMAGERY

The terms **imagery** and **image** refer simply to the concept of a picture in words, with or without the benefit of figurative language. Imagery provides a description of a scene, and this brings the scene closer to the reader, so that the latter feels more involved in the action of the poem. Several of the poems already quoted contain images; one can easily visualize Wordsworth's famous daffodils, for example:

Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
 Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Wouldn't you agree that this image allows you to see the daffodils in your mind's eye much more forcibly than if the poet had simply said he had observed the wind blowing the daffodils? The reader can easily imagine, too, the daughter addressed in Linda Pastan's poem, who

These lines not only present the reader with a clear picture, but also suggest, by the use of the word “wobbled,” the mother’s anxiety at her daughter’s precariousness—both when she was learning to ride a bicycle and now that she is leaving home to launch into a life of her own.

A poet may use imagery to emphasize a certain aspect of a scene. Henry Reed’s speaker in “Naming of Parts,” describing

... the almond-blossom
Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and forwards,

stresses the useful industry of the natural world, represented by the bees, as compared with the potentially life-threatening activities of the soldiers. We saw in the section on vocabulary that Shakespeare, in “That time of year thou may’st in me behold,” paints a sad picture of autumn,

When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs,

that immediately attunes the reader to the somber theme of the poem, whereas Keats’s “To Autumn” uses vocabulary to create images of plenty. Obviously, there is a certain overlap between discussion of vocabulary and of imagery, since images are formed by words; indeed, sometimes the most appealing aspect of an image is the poet’s imaginative use of words in creating it. Keats, for example, in “Ode to a Nightingale,” evokes a glass of wine “With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,” and describes a wild rose as “The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.” Can you enjoy the use of words in these lines? Do they help you to visualize the glass of wine or the flowers?

Imagery can also serve to **structure** a poem, as in Shakespeare’s “That time of year thou may’st in me behold,” or in Byron’s “She Walks in Beauty” where the whole poem revolves around the contrast between the images of “dark” and “bright” introduced in the first stanza.

Images do not necessarily involve comparison between two things, as in a metaphor or simile; they are simply pictures, and as such they often involve the sense of sight, but you will also find images that conjure up a taste or a scent, auditory images, and tactile images (concerning the sense of touch). In the following poem, “Meeting at Night” by Robert Browning, can you find images pertaining to the senses of sight, touch, smell and hearing? Mark the poem according to which senses you find illustrated.

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,
And in the cove with pushing prow

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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!

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Figurative language is used in prose but much more commonly in poetry; it implies a more imaginative use of language than normal, conventional usage. Figures include simile, metaphor and symbol; anaphora, oxymoron, antithesis and paradox; hyperbole and litotes; apostrophe and personification. Some **figures of speech**, also called **tropes**, involve substituting certain words for others or giving them a significance beyond their literal meaning; others, such as anaphora and antithesis, depend more on syntax, on the way sentences or lines are constructed. Figures of speech enrich poetic language—and we have seen that poetry tends, more than prose, to place value on language itself; it pays attention to the *way* things are expressed as much as to *what* is expressed. Figurative language often reinforces a thought, a mood, or an emotion, allowing the poet to express himself or herself in a more forceful, original, beautiful or moving way.

When analyzing a poem containing figurative language, you should not only point out the presence of a figure of speech, but also explain what it contributes to the poem. Rather than simply saying, “There is a metaphor in line 6,” you should attempt to show, for example, how this metaphor reflects the speaker’s mood; or how it is more beautiful, more original, or more striking, than a literal expression would have been. Alternatively, you may want to criticize the metaphor: not all metaphors are successful.

Simile and Metaphor

The best-known figures of speech are **simile** and **metaphor**. Both these figures compare two things, but a simile does so explicitly, by introducing a word such as “like” or “as,” while a metaphor does so by directly substituting one word for another. We can see examples of both in the first stanza of Wordsworth’s poem about daffodils:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

loneliness? Does it suggest his aimless wandering, as a cloud might appear to drift aimlessly across the sky? The cloud looks down on “vales and hills”—precisely the kind of area where the speaker is walking, which prepares the reader for the arrival of the daffodils in the next line. Here we find a metaphor: “a crowd / A host of golden daffodils,” where the words “crowd” and “host” effectively suggest a vast number of flowers.

For both metaphors and similes, the words **tenor** and **vehicle** are used to denote the subject that is being compared (the tenor) and the item used as a means, or vehicle, of comparison. In the above examples “I” is the subject (tenor) being compared to a cloud, the vehicle. In lines 3–4, the words “crowd” and “host” form a vehicle to express the idea of a large number of daffodils (the tenor).

A very effective simile appears at the end of the poem we saw earlier, “To a Daughter Leaving Home”:

...the hair flapping
behind you like a
handkerchief waving
goodbye.

Can you imagine long, straight hair “flapping” like a handkerchief? And handkerchiefs are often used to wave goodbye, so this simile returns us to the title and reminds us that the theme is not teaching a child to ride a bicycle, but the fact that the child has now grown up and is leaving home. The simile bridges the time-gap between the long-ago event, with the bicycle, and the present moment of imminent leave-taking, in a very effective way.

Original metaphors and similes that speak to the reader’s imagination can contribute a great deal to our appreciation of a text. If a metaphor (or simile) is overused, however, it loses its force and becomes a convention, or even part of the everyday spoken language (“good as gold,” “she’s an angel”).

Sometimes, a poem presents an **extended metaphor** or **extended simile**, i.e., a string of related comparisons that form the basis of the whole poem and combine to communicate its meaning. Examples are Shakespeare’s “That time of year thou may’st in me behold” and Langston Hughes’s “Harlem (A Dream Deferred).”

Apart from similes and metaphors, a vast number of other figures of speech are at the poet’s disposal, some very common, others more rare. Many originated in the poetry of the Greeks and have names that come from Greek (like *metaphor*, from the Greek verb *metapherein*, “to transfer”: in a metaphor, meaning is transferred from one word to another). The following list is not exhaustive, but contains the most-used figures of speech, in alphabetical order so that you will be able to refer to it more easily later. Remember that figures of speech are used not merely to “decorate” poems but to reinforce meaning in some way: try to determine what they contribute towards creating the mood, ideas, or emotions of the poem (or of a section of the poem).

Allegory

An allegorical poem contains a series of metaphors, all subordinate to a central idea, also used metaphorically, that governs the other metaphors. Allegory is often used to

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the Rose, in which the Rose represents the beloved lady (that is the central metaphor). The allegory illustrates courtly love: it narrates the progress of the poem's hero as he makes his way through a garden to arrive at the rose, i.e., gain the lady's love. On the way, he meets several figures (the subordinate metaphors) who help or hinder him: on the positive side, Beauty, Frankness, Courtesy, Youth, Welcome; and the negative figures of Hate, Envy, Age, Danger, Jealousy. These figures are personified abstractions; they speak and act like real people. This personification of abstract ideas, whose names begin with a capital letter, is a typical characteristic of allegory. A nineteenth-century example of allegory is "Up-Hill" by Christina Rossetti, which presents life and death in terms of a journey. More modern poets do not use allegory very frequently.

Anaphora

This device involves the repetition of the same syntactical structure at the beginning of several successive lines or stanzas. The repetitions produce a sense of expectation, as the reader wonders what will come after them, at the end. The suspense thus created allows the poet to emphasize an important idea, which follows on after the anaphora. An example can be found in Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," whose first three stanzas, or paragraphs, contain the expression "O thou who . . ." or "Thou whose . . .," addressed to the wind and repeated several times, culminating in the exhortation "oh hear!"—also addressed to the wind—at the end of line 42. The poet is asking the wind to listen to his troubles, and the long introduction intensifies the solemnity of the injunction "oh hear!" Then, stanza or paragraph 4 begins with a new anaphora based on "If I were . . .": "If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear; / If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee . . .," which continues through a few more lines and culminates in lines 51–54: ". . . I would ne'er have striven / As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need. / Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud! / I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!"

Antithesis

An antithesis emphasizes a contrast between two expressions or ideas by juxtaposing them, often giving them a similar syntactical structure in order to underline the contrast still further. The first stanza of Byron's "She Walks in Beauty" contrasts, through images concerning the stars, the concepts of "dark" and "bright":

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.

Apostrophe

The poet addresses an absent person, a thing, or an abstraction, thus lending the person or thing a certain presence, in the context of the poem. In the case of an absent person (sometimes a person who has died), the speaker is often regretting his or her

Metonymy

The figure of speech called metonymy involves the substitution of an attribute of a thing (or a person) to represent the thing itself. In Wordsworth's sonnet to Milton, for example (entitled "Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour"), he uses the words "altar, sword, and pen" to refer to the Church, the military, and men of letters in contemporary England.

Oxymoron

An oxymoron is like an antithesis in that it juxtaposes apparently contradictory elements. An oxymoron is more concise, however, consisting often of just two words, frequently an adjective and a noun as in Romeo's series of oxymorons complaining about unrequited love (in Act I, scene I of Shakespeare's play, before he meets Juliet): "O loving hate! . . . / O heavy lightness! serious vanity! . . . / Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health!"

Paradox

Paradox unites statements and ideas that seem contradictory or illogical but that are nevertheless revealed to possess a certain truth. Having proved in his sonnet "Death, be not proud" that death does not conquer us since we "wake eternally," John Donne concludes triumphantly with the apparently paradoxical statement "Death, thou shalt die." The final line of Shakespeare's sonnet "That time of year thou may'st in me behold" seems illogical ("To love that well which thou must leave ere long"), but makes sense in the context of the poem where the speaker has been warning his love that he is approaching old age and therefore death.

Personification

The poet speaks of an inanimate object or entity, often some aspect of nature, as if it were a person. Wordsworth personifies his daffodils when he describes them as "dancing" in the breeze, and later when he sees them "Tossing their heads in sprightly dance." Clearly, only humans can actually dance and toss their heads; these attributes make the daffodils seem more lively.

A completely different example is provided in Howard Nemerov's poem "The Vacuum":

The house is so quiet now
The vacuum cleaner sulks in the corner closet,
Its bag limp as a stopped lung.

Only a person "sulks," but this vacuum cleaner is said to do so because its owner doesn't use it enough; the rest of the poem shows that he has become slovenly since the death of his "old woman." The vacuum represents her, because she used to use it so much, and her death is personified by the vacuum's bag, "limp as a stopped lung."

Simile

Symbol

A symbol resembles a metaphor in that both compare two things by substituting one for the other. A symbol usually presents a concrete object that stands for an abstraction, as a set of scales symbolizes justice via the concept of evenhandedness. In a poem, the possible meaning of a symbol can be fairly easy or quite difficult to interpret, according to the hints and the context provided by the poet. “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost presents a symbol for which it is not difficult to find a satisfactory interpretation: it becomes obvious, as the poem unfolds, that the decision to choose a certain path in a wood symbolizes choices that must be made in life. The symbol is enhanced by the added question of how much the speaker’s life has been influenced by his choosing not only one path rather than another, but specifically “the one less traveled by,” meaning probably an unusual way of life, or a direction in life that few people choose.

Symbols add an imaginative dimension to the reading of poetry; the reader senses there is a hidden meaning and has to work out for himself or herself what it might consist of. But interpretations do not need to be definitive: symbols can often be understood in multiple ways, which can lead to different overall interpretations of the poem by different readers. This adds to the interest and richness of the poem.

Some poems present symbols that are really hard to interpret and seem to belong to the poet’s private world. While not satisfying the reader with a ready meaning, they can fascinate by their suggestiveness. Reading “The Sick Rose” (quoted above in the section on vocabulary), one can visualize a real rose attacked by a pest that has eaten through the bud; yet the poem seems to be about more than this minor horticultural tragedy. Traditionally, roses have often been used in poetry to symbolize love or beauty, particularly feminine beauty. This rose is also personified (“thou art sick”) as if to give it human qualities. Furthermore, the rose has a “bed/Of crimson joy,” which suggests sexual love, and the word “love” is indeed mentioned in the following line, but it is not a positive, healthy feeling but a “dark secret love” that has made the rose sick. The reader gets the impression, without being totally sure, that the rose/woman is being defiled or destroyed by some malignant force or being, symbolized by the “worm” of line 2. Indeed, the worm, which is after all “invisible,” might well be taken to represent an abstraction, an evil force or influence, since it belongs to the night, the storm, and the dark, and has the power of destruction. Then the “rose” would symbolize perhaps the “joy” of line 6. William Blake—like many later poets—frequently used symbols whose meanings were not obvious. But such symbols often possess a mysterious and intense quality whose power can prove more fascinating to the reader than ones that are more readily explained.

Colors are often given symbolic value, as in the expression “crimson joy” above. The color red can symbolize passion, as here, but also danger, blood, violence. Black is frequently used to suggest despondency, depression, and death; white evokes purity, and so on.

Synecdoche

This is a figure of speech in which a part of a person or thing stands for the whole, as a

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Understatement

Understatement is the opposite of hyperbole. The use of understatement enables an author to imply more by saying less. We do this in everyday language by using expressions such as “Not bad!” to imply that something is in fact very good. Officially termed **litotes**, this form of understatement through negation of a negative word is one among many ways of understating. Some poems, for example, speak of tragic events in a restrained, matter-of-fact, or understated tone that often conveys more depth of emotion than a more exclamatory and overtly emotive style would do. Seamus Heaney’s poem “Mid-Term Break” recounts events surrounding the death of a child, but the speaker never openly reveals his anguish or sense of tragedy at the death of his four-year-old brother, simply referring to the coffin, in a moving final line, as “A four foot box, a foot for every year.” Like hyperbole, understatement is related to irony, in that it says something other than what it really means.

Exercises on Imagery and Figurative Language

For each of the following examples, say what figure or image it contains, how you interpret it, and whether it seems to you effective in evoking a certain scene, idea, picture or thought. Remember that all the poems quoted in these exercises are given in full in appendix 2.

- a) She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that’s best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes
“She walks in beauty” (1–4)
George Gordon, Lord Byron
- b) Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
“Ode to a Nightingale” (61)
John Keats
- c) And mid-May’s eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.
“Ode to a Nightingale” (48–50)
John Keats
- d) Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter.
“Ode on a Grecian Urn” (11–12)
John Keats
- e) This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning.
“Composed upon Westminster Bridge” (4–5)

- f) My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest.

“To His Coy Mistress” (11–16)

Andrew Marvell

- g) When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and
measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much
applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick. . . .

“When I heard the learn'd astronomer” (1–5)

Walt Whitman

- h) Consider also the poem **“Wild Nights—Wild Nights”** quoted above
in the section on vocabulary, page 10.

Now read the following poem. Try to find examples of figurative language and explain what they add to the poem. Examine the use of vocabulary also. Use the questions to help you.

- i) That time of year thou may'st in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang. 5
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire, 10
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Sonnet 73

William Shakespeare

1. What do you feel is the purpose of the repetitions in lines 1, 5, and 9 (“thou may'st in me behold,” “In me thou see'st”)?
2. What figure of speech is involved in lines 1–4, 5–8, and 9–12, and what does each

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