

METAPHOR

Metaphor is a figure of speech related to the simile.

However, whereas a simile uses the words *like* or *as* in comparing two different things, a metaphor dispenses with these 'bridge' words and basically says that one thing is the other. A metaphor shows a similarity between two completely different things by describing the one in terms of the other.

Metaphor is used in everyday speech all the time, as in expressions such as 'He was born with two left feet', 'He's a sly old fox', and 'To have your cake and eat it too'.

In such cases the literal meaning of the words is not their real meaning. The more colourful language of the metaphor serves to describe something else.

Metaphors such as 'the foot of the stairs' or 'the arm of the chair' have become so much a part of the language that they are called *dead metaphors* - they no longer have a life that could be considered metaphorical.

Metaphor is, however, at the very heart of poetry and it is a poet's job to see connections and similarities which can be used to explain things vividly and make them memorable. Shakespeare's 'Seven Ages of Man' from *As You Like It* is probably one of the best known metaphors in poetry, comparing, as it does, man's life to an actor playing many different parts as he grows older ('All the world's a stage...') and one of the most famous twentieth century extended metaphor poems is Stevie Smith's *Not Waving But Drowning*. Poets normally, however, employ metaphor within the poem, sometimes in just a word or a phrase.

The metaphors in the first example are all highlighted in italics.

Examples:

1. From *The Darkling Thrush* by Thomas Hardy

I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-gray,
And Winter's dreags made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres,

And all man that haunted night
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament,
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

The theme of the following poem is the idea of the road as a metaphor for life and death.

2. *Uphill* by Christina Rossetti

Does the road wind uphill all the way?
Yes, to the very end.
Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?
A roof for when the slow, dark hours begin.
May not the darkness hide it from my face?
You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?
Those who have gone before.
Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?
They will not keep you standing at the door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?
Of labour you shall find the sum.
Will there be beds for me and all who seek?
Yea, beds for all who come.

Sandy Brownson
A Handbook of Rhyme, Metre & Verse
(Hodder & Stoughton, 2002)