

Images, Metaphors and Similes

- A poem becomes more than words on a page when a reader can hear and see it. It has to be palpable and sensual and, importantly, visual ie. an image.
- With imagery a reader can enter the poem and experience it. Without imagery, a reader is just having something explained to them.
- The basic kinds of imagery are:
 - SIMILE
 - METAPHOR
- A simile is the comparison of one thing with another
 - eg. *My love is like a red, red rose*
 - *My fingers are like seaweed*
 - *The day has been going through like a cement mixer*
 - If Robert Burns had written *My love is a red, red rose* that would be a metaphor.
- A metaphor is when we dispense with the word “like” and one thing instead becomes another. By removing the buffer zone of “is like” a metaphor creates such a strong sensory comparison that the reader sees it as clearly as the original subject.
- By dispensing with those bridge words “like” or “as” a metaphor shows a similarity between two completely different things by describing one in terms of the other eg. *He’s a sly old fox, she’s a dark horse.*
- A metaphor is a figure of speech that says that one thing is another different thing. This allows us to use fewer words and forces the reader or listener to find the similarities.
- The word ‘metaphor’ comes from the Greek word *metapherein* = to transfer
- The simplest form of metaphor is “This [first thing] is this [second thing]”
- eg.
 - **Her home was a prison.** In this sentence, we understand immediately that her home had some of the characteristics of a prison. Mainly we imagine that she could not leave her home – we don’t know why – perhaps her husband forced her to stay at home? The context/rest of the story would tell us why. The main thing here is that these five words tell us a lot about her environment and how she felt about it. In this sentence ‘prison’ is a metaphor.
 - **George is a sheep.** What is one characteristic of sheep? They follow each other. So we can imagine that George is a follower, not a leader. In this sentence, ‘sheep’ is a metaphor.

USING METAPHORS

- Metaphors are one of the fastest ways to create imagery in your poem but watch out for mixed metaphors which are always confusing eg.
 - It was an uphill climb but he didn't rock the boat.
 - I want this all wrapped up tonight so stay here till you've cracked it.
 - I'm in a cement mixer, my fingers waving from the ocean floor.
- If you find yourself using mixed metaphors in a poem it's a sure sign that you aren't seeing it or feeling it authentically
- Make sure that the metaphor or simile you choose (or the comparison you make) is alive and meaningful to you, not just a familiar group of words. Can you visualise it? Do you feel it?
- Be sure your metaphor or simile says what you want it say about your subject. Beware of hidden, literal or secondary meanings.
- English is a very figurative language. Our daily talk is full of metaphors we're so used to that we don't even notice them any more. You have to be very careful of these because they make any writing they get into less convincing. Try having a conversation in which you use no similes or metaphors. Just say what you mean in plain words. You'll quickly find that you can hardly utter a word! This exercise will train you to notice what you're saying and how.
- Notice things. When you think something's like something else, remember it, write it down. Get in the habit of observing, noticing similes.

In the following famous verse from *The Highwayman* by Alfred Noyes, can you spot the three metaphors in the first three lines?

*The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding—
Riding—riding—
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn door.*