

Literary Terms

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A Practical Glossary

Revised & expanded

2nd Ed

Figurative Language

To get you thinking

■ Can you say what two things are being compared in each of the following phrases?

Phrase	Elements
My love is like a red, red rose.	Lover & flower
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.	_____ & _____
The minister waddled up to the speaker's platform, ruffled his plumage importantly, and addressed the crowd.	_____ & _____
Shared beliefs are the foundation of any society.	_____ & _____
The old man in the corner was well known for spinning yarns.	_____ & _____

■ Are these 'special' uses of language? Would you find any of them in everyday conversation?

Theory

The term 'figurative' language has traditionally referred to language which differs from everyday, 'non-literary' usage. Figures were seen as stylistic ornaments with which writers dressed up their language to make it more entertaining, and to clarify the meanings they wanted to convey. According to this view, literary devices such as metaphor, simile, rhythm, and so on, embellished 'ordinary' language, and so forced readers to work harder at making meaning in a text. Nowadays it is argued that all language is in some sense 'figurative': there are very few ways of talking and writing about the world that do not make use of comparisons, symbols, and so on.

The following are some important figures.

Simile

The comparison of two elements, where each maintains its own identity. For example: 'My love is like a red, red rose.' Here a person is compared to a flower in a way that suggests they have certain features in common, such as beauty, fragility, and so on.

Metaphor

The merging of two elements or ideas, where one is used to modify the meaning of the other. For example: 'The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.' Here the image of the moon in a cloudy night sky is merged with that of a sailing ship on stormy seas, so that some characteristics of the latter are transferred to the former.

Metonym

The use of a part to represent a whole, or the use of one item to stand for another with which it has become associated. For example, in the news headline 'Palace Shocked By Secret Snaps', the palace stands for the royal family and their aides.

Personification

The description of a non-living force or object in terms of a person or living thing. For example, 'The gnarled branches clawed at the clouds.' Here, the tree branches are given the characteristics of grasping hands.

Symbol

The substitution of one element for another as a matter of convention rather than similarity. For example, in the biblical story of Adam and Eve, the serpent is used as a symbol of temptation. In the ceremonies of the modern Olympics, white doves symbolise peace and freedom. Language itself is also symbolic, since words and meanings are associated purely by convention.

Because so much of our language is 'figurative' rather than literal, there is always room for disagreement about the meanings of words, phrases and texts. Different groups of readers may well 'decode' such language in different ways, according to their beliefs, values and social practices.

In exploring the language of 'literary' and 'non-literary' texts, we need to consider the range of readings made possible by figures of speech, and how this range of possibilities is limited or closed off by other features in the text and by specific ways of reading.

Practice

The following extract is from Colin Thiele's story 'The Shell'. In these passages, some of the figurative language has been set in **bolder** type.

The green sea swept into the shallows and seethed there **like slaking quicklime**. It surged over the rocks, tossing up spangles of water like a **juggler** and catching them deftly again behind. It raced knee deep through the clefts and crevices, twisted and tortured in a thousand ways, till it swept **nuzzling and sucking** into the holes at the base of the cliff.

The shell lay in a saucer of rock. It was a green cowrie, clean and new, **its pink undersides as delicate as human flesh**. All around it the rocks dropped away sheer or **leaned out** in an overhang streaked with dripping strands of **slime like wet hair**. The waves spumed over it, hissing and curling, but the shell **tumbled the water off its back** or just rocked gently **like a bead in the palm of the hand**.

In the course of the story two fishermen are swept from the rocks by a wave. The story concludes with two policemen searching the beach for the bodies.

The first man searched down along the shore and stopped near a rock exposed by the ebb. 'Look at this shell,' he called. 'It's a beauty. A green cowrie.'

'Blood money! The sea's buying you off!' He watched distastefully as the first man reached down and closed his fingers beneath the smooth pink underside of the shell, **as delicate as human flesh**. And the sea came **gurgling** gently round his shoes, **like a cat** rubbing its back against his legs.

(NB: quicklime = a fizzy, acid solution)

In the chart that follows some examples of figurative language that can be found in the in the extract are listed in the left-hand column.

1. Quote words or phrases from the extract as follows:

Figures	Quotations
A phrase which <i>personifies</i> the sea.	
A <i>simile</i> which makes the sea seem playful.	
A <i>metaphor</i> which compares the sea to a baby.	
A <i>simile</i> which makes the sea seem calculating.	
A <i>symbol</i> of trading.	

2. What characteristics are given to the sea by these comparisons? Make your selections by matching items from the two lists below.

Comparison	Characteristics
The juggler	capricious (changeable, selfish)
The baby	ruthless
The trader	innocent, not responsible
Quicklime	skilful, playful
The cat	damaging

Can these items be matched up in more than one combination? Is there room for disagreement about what figurative expressions might mean?

3. Which of the following reasons might explain why the sea has been characterised as a living thing?
- because it makes the story more entertaining?
 - because western cultures see life in terms of a competition between humans and nature?
 - because it provides a mythical explanation for events that otherwise seem meaningless?
 - the characterisation is purely accidental?

Summary

Figurative Language

Figurative language is that which provides the reader with comparisons, substitutions, and patterns that shape meaning. Literary texts sometimes make concentrated use of figurative language. However, most language is figurative some sense, because words do not have single, objective meanings.

See also: *imagery*