HEY PRESTO! METAPHORS AND SIMILES

by Katy Evans-Bush

COMPARISONS ARE ODIOUS

Metaphors and similes have many common uses, and we use them so freely in speech and writing that we often don't even know we're doing it.

Comparing something to something else may be odious, as Oscar Wilde said, but it is also how we signpost our ideas, peg them in place, tether them to real life. (That 'signpost' is a metaphor of course, as is the peg, as is the tether.)

In a simile, we openly make this comparison: 'My love is *like* a red, red rose'. We are using language literally, to draw out a similarity. But if Robert Burns had instead written, 'My love *is* a red, red rose', he would have written a metaphor. By being figurative, not literal, a metaphor takes language to a new level, seeming to transform his love into a flower.

'IT WORKS LIKE MAGIC'

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. A concrete comparison is especially handy if your original idea was abstract.

So I've just said a metaphor is a signpost to an idea. Because we can all imagine a signpost in our mind's eye (another metaphor, because our minds don't really have eyes in them) it tells the reader how a metaphor works on the original idea and makes it a new thing.

Metaphors are one of the fastest ways to create imagery in your poem. You mention one thing and then mention something else, something with similar qualities in some way, and hey presto! Your first thing is something else. Now *that's* sleight of hand.

But look at it another way: you've chosen your subject, and started talking about it, and now suddenly you're saying this subject is something else altogether?

Why do this? Why not just say your subject is *like* something else – why not use a simile?

SIMILES

A simile, which we might say is a lot *like* a signpost, does the same work, but it looks knowingly at you as it does so and points daintily with one finger – rather than just jumping in and declaring itself. It knows it's a simile, not a signpost.

So a simile might work well in a poem where you're talking *about* your subject. 'My love is like a red, red rose,' you say. 'Why, she's so lovely and rare that she ...'. You're still talking *about* your love; we can see her in our mind's eye alongside this red rose she's like. You allow us to make the comparison for ourselves.

METAPHORS

To make your point immediately and forcefully, you can create an image that completely takes over: 'Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this Son of York ...'.

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See how perfect this metaphor is for the subject at hand: we can feel both winter – in its coldness and bleakness – and summer, with its birdsong and warmth and colour. (And the wordplay of 'son' for 'sun' doesn't hurt, either.) The writer – in this case, Shakespeare – has chosen a double metaphor which exactly illustrates the change from a desperate time to a time of hope and growth. And because he has not said it was merely 'like' a winter and a summer, he has made it *true*.

One reason it feels true is that is operates purely as image: we don't need the author to tell us about it, because we can see it.

WATCH OUT!

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.

IS IT ALIVE?

In many cases, old metaphors are based on images we no longer even know how to see! They aren't relevant to modern life, and we'd never have invented them now. These are 'dead metaphors.' The way to spot one is to look at a phrase and imagine it says literally what it means.

- Kick the bucket
- Getting down to brass tacks
- Put the horse before the cart
- Not the full shilling
- Going at it hammer and tongs
- Pull up by your bootstraps

This isn't to say you have to be bang up to the microsecond; we all know that much human experience endures, and that cutting ourselves off completely from the past isn't a good idea.

HERE ARE SOME TIPS:

- Try having a conversation in which you use no figures of speech, no similes, no metaphors. Just say what you mean in plain words. You'll quickly find that you can hardly utter a word. Pay close attention to this. It's all about training yourself 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 similarities.
- Don't mix your metaphors: '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.' In a poem, this is a sure sign that you aren't seeing it or feeling it authentically.
- Make sure that the metaphor or simile you choose - 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 it says what you want to say about your subject. Beware of hidden, literal or secondary meanings.
- Don't over-egg the pudding. Just keep your metaphor going as long as it's working. You don't have to base every image in the poem on it.
- Above all: keep doing it. Trust us; you'll be as happy as a ...

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