

Defining Figures of Speech

Metaphor

Being visual does not just mean describing; telling us facts; indicating shapes, colors and specific details. Often the vividness of the picture in our minds depends on comparisons made through figures of speech. What we are trying to imagine is pictured in terms of something else familiar to us and we are asked to think of one thing as if it were something else. Many such comparisons, in which something is pictured or figured forth in terms of something already familiar to us, are taken for granted in daily life. Things we can't see or that aren't familiar to us are imaged as things we already know; for example, God is said to be like a father: Italy is said to be shaped like a boot: life is compared to a forest, a journey or a sea. When the comparison is implicit, describing something as if it were something else, it is called a **metaphor**.

Sometimes rather than accumulating metaphors, a poet presents a single metaphor that extends over a section of a poem (in which case it is called an **extended metaphor**) or even over the whole poem (in which case it is called a **controlling metaphor**).

Personification

Another figure of speech, **personification**, involves treating an abstraction, such as death or justice or beauty, as if it were a person.

Simile and Analogy

Sometimes, in poetry as in prose, comparisons are made explicitly. Explicit comparisons are called **similes**, and usually the comparison involves the word like or the word as. Similes work much as do metaphors, except that usually they are used more passingly, more incidentally, they make a quick comparison and usually do not elaborate. Similes sometimes develop elaborate comparisons, and even govern a poem (in which case they are called **analogies**).

Allusion

Allusion is a brief reference to a fictitious or actual person, place or thing, and, usually, to the stories or **myth** surrounding it. Like **metaphor** and **simile**, **allusion** allows poets to economically suggest a wealth of sometimes complex images, feelings and ideas by relying on widely shared literary and cultural knowledge.

Sometimes "getting" an **allusion** or even recognizing one requires us to learn something new. Whenever you come across a name or other reference in a poem that you don't understand or a phrase that seems oddly familiar, it's well worth your while to consult a reference book or the Internet. **Allusions** are one of the ways poems engage with the larger world, participating in a vast conversation they invite and even expect you, too, to be a part of.

Figurative Language

All figurative language involves an attempt to clarify something and to prompt readers to feel a certain way about it. Once you start looking for them, you will find **figures of speech** in poem after poem; they are among the most common devices through which poets share their visions with us.