

Journalism/Creative Writing Extended Project Poetry Track

Step Eight: Figurative Language and Literary Devices

Today I'll call your attention to different figurative language choices and literary device options to include within your poems. Remember, even when poems are about intangible things—like thoughts and feelings—we want to communicate them in tangible ways. Figurative language and other literary devices are the best way to do this. After examining the following devices, make notes on your outline where you think you could employ certain ones to help get your point across.

Figurative Language

Figurative language is used anytime you describe something not-literally (shocker, I know). Most commonly, this refers to analogies: similes and metaphors. You've had similes and metaphors beat over your head since about the fourth grade, so I'm not going to cover those specifically here. Instead, I want to talk just generally about analogies, and how the best ones communicate a certain mood, feeling, desire, or thought that most everyone can identify with but doing so in a completely new and unique way.

Think of using analogies as tangible descriptions in uncommon ways.

A great way to strengthen your writing is to use analogies when you are describing something in a way that the reader has never heard before, while also using an idea that everyone can understand easily.

Douglas Adams, author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, is great at this.

- Some examples (I know these are prose, but the same idea translates into poetry):
 - “He leaned tensely against the corridor wall and frowned like a man trying to unbend a corkscrew by telekinesis.”
 - “Stones...pranced past him like clumsy puppies, only much bigger, much, much harder and heavier, and almost infinitely more likely to kill you if they fell on you.”
 - “He gazed keenly into the distance and looked as if he would quite like the wind to blow his hair back dramatically at that point, but the wind was busy fooling around with some leaves a little way off.”
 - “The hatred he felt was cold, not like ice is cold, but like a wall is cold. It was impersonal, not as a randomly flung fist in a crowd is impersonal, but like a computer-issued parking summons is impersonal.”
 - “The ship's sails hung in the sky in much the same way that bricks don't.”

- “Arther Dent was grappling with his consciousness the way one grapples with a lost bar of soap in the bath.”

In short, when describing, don't always just tell us what it looks/feels/sounds like, show us it with an analogy. The reader will be able to picture it much easier and better.

Literary Devices

Obviously, there are more literary devices than are on this list. You are welcome to employ any literary device you've learned in English classes or otherwise. I just wanted to take this time to highlight some of the most-used devices in poetry.

- **Allusion:** A casual, brief, symbolic reference to a well-known or familiar person, geographical place, event, literary work, author, work of art, or historical idea. The allusion may be obvious or subtle, generally, however, allusions tend to be indirect or passing. Allusions are commonly made to the Bible, nursery rhymes, myths, and Shakespeare. Allusions depend upon shared experiences between the reader and the writer since they are a type of shorthand. allusion = reference to something outside the main text.
 - *Example 1:* J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* offers many subtle allusions encouraging the reader to ask himself, “What does this remind me of?” Chapter 1 has a subtle allusion to prayer: As soon as Mr. Bilbo Baggins asks for help, he receives it.
 - *Example 2:* Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*
 - Chapter 1 refers to the beatitudes (Christ's teachings) — “Well,” said the Lieutenant who had listened with amused interest to all this, and now waxing merry with his tipples; “Well, blessed are the peacemakers, especially the fighting...”
 - *Example 3:* Catch 22 = When someone refers to a situation as a “Catch 22” they are referring to a no-win situation. Taken from Joseph Heller's book, *Catch 22*.
- **Paradox:** true, profound statements that initially appear seemingly untrue or self-contradictory.
 - *Examples:* Fight for peace. Do not read this sentence. The beginning of the end. Make it idiot proof and someone will make a better idiot. Being “born again.” The sounds of silence.
- **Hyperbole:** A figure of speech in which exaggeration is used for emphasis or effect.
 - *Examples:* I could sleep for a year. This book weighs a ton. I'm starving, and it's only 10:30 am. I could eat a cow.
 - *Example:* From Macbeth:

- Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood Clean from my hand? No. This my hand will rather The multitudinous seas incarnadine, Making the green one red.
 - Here, Macbeth says that all the ocean water will not clean his hand of blood; rather the blood from his hand will turn the green seas red. Shakespeare uses this hyperbole to stress the enormity of the guilt Macbeth feels for murdering Duncan.
- **Oxymoron:** figure of speech placing contradictory ideas side by side for descriptive purposes.
 - Examples: Dodge Ram, genuine imitation, jumbo shrimp slightly pregnant (a woman is either pregnant or she is not)
 - *Example :*
 - Why then, O brawling love! O loving hate!
O heavy lightness, serious vanity;
Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms!
Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health!
—Act 1, scene 1 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*
 - Also, Juliet says, "My only love sprung from my only hate," referring to the fact that her beloved Romeo was born in the family which is the enemy of her family.
- **Irony.** A mode of expression, through words (verbal irony) or events (irony of situation), conveying a reality different from and usually opposite to appearance or expectation. Can be verbal (such as sarcasm) or situational. Irony can be witty, funny, or sad.
 - For example, in the film *Brazil* (dir. Terry Gilliam) we learn that the action takes place at 8:49 am sometime in the 20th century. The irony is that we know exactly when it happens (8:49), but apparently we only know in what century.
 - The firestation burning to the ground or a lifeguard drowning in the bathtub are simple examples of situational irony.
 - An example of dramatic irony (where the audience has knowledge that gives additional meaning to a character's words) would be when King Oedipus, who has unknowingly killed his father, says that he will banish his father's killer when he finds him.
 - Ironically, some of the greatest proponents of peace, Ghandi, Martin Luther King, and Jesus of Nazareth, all died violently.