

Making Metaphors

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Welcome!

I've always been deeply affected by metaphors in all their different forms, which made me want to explore them further so I could create them. I assume that's the same with you since you're here. And we're not alone:

Aristotle:

All men take a natural pleasure in learning quickly words which denote something; and so those words are pleasantest which give us *new* knowledge. Strange words have no meaning for us; common terms we know already; it is *metaphor* which gives us most of this pleasure. Thus, when the poet calls old age "a dried stalk," he gives us a new perception by means of the common *genus*; for both the things have lost their bloom.

Jose Ortega y Gasset:

The metaphor is perhaps one of man's most fruitful potentialities. Its efficacy verges on magic, and it seems a tool for creation which God forgot inside one of His creatures when he made him. *The Dehumanization of Art and Ideas About the Novel*, 1925

Why Bother with Metaphors?

1. Expand sensory perception beyond the literal meaning.

Ex: His smile was as stiff as a frozen fish. Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*

2. Give pleasure and/or surprise to the imagination

- a. When was the last time you thought of a stiff smile as a frozen fish?

3. Give vigor by including another sensory detail

- a. A vivid image, this frozen fish

4. Deepen the themes/focus of the story/character development

- a. Contributes to theme/mood/tone

To Make Metaphor We Need A Different Way of Thinking:

The traditional Western thinking we take things that are different and put them into **strict binary** opposition:

Good/bad; night/day; light/dark; hot/cold; strong/weak; on/off; up/ down; male/female;

In Ancient Chinese the philosophy of **yin and yang are two interdependent forces that underlie everything that exists**. Yang, the white portions, is the positive, active visible, hot, dry, masculine force; Yin, the negative, passive, hidden, cold, feminine force associated with the earth. Neither of the two is elevated above the other; they are interrelated, bound.

To make metaphors we need to invoke both types of thinking.

Comparison:

A is like B; A as B as

A=B

Think of A as the target, B as the source

Target: What is being talked about

Source: the concept/image to which the target is being compared.

Coherence Principle: Applies to human thinking. Whenever people try to understand a situation, their relevant attitudes, beliefs, and emotions tend to shift so as to form a coherent pattern.

--this principle will cause us to discard some of the properties of the source because they don't cohere with the target.

EX: His hair was gray, something like the color of drying oregano. Saul Bellow, "By the St. Laurence"

Target: hair

Source: color of drying oregano

DOMAINS:

Strategy #1: Separate the world into domains. This is similar to biology's genus, though as creative types we can be, well, more creative. Via comparison, we connect domains by finding something in common:

Human

Animal

Plants

Technology

Appliances

Transportation

Insects

The bigger the gap between the domains, the more surprising the comparison

Ex: clean as soap

Ex: I spied a very small brown duck riding the swells of the sea like a rocking chair.

We can break these categories down even further:

Human:

- a. How the person moves
 - a. Swims
 - b. Runs
 - c. Walks
 - d. Wanders
 - e. Rides a bike
- b. Eats
- c. Laughs
- d. Sleeps
- e. Talks
 - a. To peers
 - b. Boss
 - c. Family
 - d. offspring
- f. Stands
- g. Interacts at a party
- h. Interacts at work
- i. Interacts with family

Plants:

- a. Flowers
- b. Herbs
- c. In the wild
- d. In a yard
- e. Weeds

1: His hair was gray, something like the color of drying oregano. Saul Bellow, “By the St. Laurence”

Target: hair

Source: color of drying oregano

DOMAIN 1: human/property: hair

Properties: color/texture/length/shape

DOMAIN 2: plants/herbs

- a. Properties: color, shape, taste, texture

IN CLASS EXERCISE-TRY IT:

Let’s change the domains

2. DOMAIN 1: Human hair

DOMAIN 2: a household item

3. And one more time:

DOMAIN 1: Human Hair

DOMAIN 2: Animal

4. My heart is like a singing bird. “A Birthday,” by Christina Rossetti

DOMAIN 1: Human/ property heart

Properties: sound, rhythm, shape, color, function

DOMAIN 2: animal/bird

a. Properties; fly, small, wings, sing

IN CLASS: Try It:

Metaphor:

5. Exhaustion is a thin blanket tattered with bullet holes.” —*If Then*, Matthew De Abaitua

Target: exhaustion

Source: thin blanket

Domain 1: human/emotion

Domain 2: creature comforts/attire

Try It:

6. But it is just two lovers, holding hands in a hurry to reach their car, their locked hands a starfish leaping through the dark. *Rabbit, Run*, John Updike

Target: holding hands

Source: starfish

Domain 1: human/fingers

Properties: cleanliness, state of health, size, skill, touching

Domain 2: animal/ marine life

- a. Properties: Arms of starfish, reaching, grabbing shells,
- b. B=starfish

7. Outside her breath rises in a fine mist and the snow keeps falling, like a ceaseless repetition of the same infinitesimally small mistake.” Sally Rooney, *Normal People*

Domain 1: snow

Domain 2: a human activity

Properties: small, falling, many pieces

8. The wood duck flew away. I caught only a glimpse of something like a bright torpedo that blasted the leaves where it flew.” Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Try It:

Extended Metaphor: a comparison between two (seemingly) unlike things that continues throughout a series of sentences in a paragraph or longer.

It requires keeping in mind several properties of both the source and the target. Need to track the relation between the properties.

EX: My sister's voice was like mountain **water** in a **silver** pitcher; the clear blue beauty of it cools you and lifts you up beyond your heat, beyond your body. Amy Bloom, “Silver Water”

Target: voice

Source: mountain water in a silver pitcher

Domain 1: Human/voice (pitch/volume)

Domain 2: Element/water + kitchenware

Element properties: color, temperature, clean/dirty, salty/not salty;

Water=blue→ blue beauty

Water= cools you and lifts you up beyond your heat, beyond your body

Ex: Mallory’s feelings for Scott are the ball that glides toward the hole but stops *just* short, resting on the lip of the cup, eliciting a shout of disbelief and frustration. *Drop in already!* she thinks. Elin Hilderbrand, *28 Summers*

Domain 1: human feelings

Domain 2: game

EX:

The Verb:

Ex: Her tall black-suited body **seemed to carve** its way through the crowded room.

Domain 1: Human/ body

Property: movement

Domain 2: kitchenware/knife (cut/slice/ carve/slash/wound/nick/graze/scratch)

Definition carve: cut with precision and care; to make or get by “carve out a profession”

Ex: The day is overcast: clouds **sag** over the plain. “I Am Nothing, I Am Everything,” Rachel Cusk, *Coventry*

Domain 1: sky/clouds

Property: shape, movement, color

Domain 2: human

Property: posture

Ex: The wind was rising again, live oaks **conducting** the storm with mossy arms. *Fates and Furies*, Lauren Groff

Domain 1: trees: live oak

a. Size, branches, movement

Domain 2: Music/Symphony—conducting/mossy arms

Ex: Moon rose blowzily, pissing white on water. Groff

Try it:

The Adjective

EX: It was a **young** pool, only two years old, of the fragile type fashioned by laying a plastic liner within a carefully carved hole in the ground. “The Orphaned Swimming Pool,” by John Updike

Ex: Now and again there is a **motiveless** gust of wind, like an outburst of temper across the flat fields that subsides as suddenly as it came. Rachel Cusk

The Noun:

In the modern world it was difficult to make a room completely dark; a **stub** of green on the smoke alarm, a **ramp** of amber on the surge protector, a **ring** of soft white where her computer sipped electricity, bars of sodium vapor through gaps in the blackout curtains. Billy Song, “Commendation of the Dying”

A SECOND STRATEGY FOR MAKING METAPHORS:

Ex: They crossed a vast dry lake with rows of dead volcanoes ranged beyond it like the works of enormous insects. Cormac McCarthy, Blood Meridian

Maybe McCarthy was walking along and saw an ant hill. I mean he stood there and really looked at it. And it stayed with him. Or he wrote it down. The simile was beginning to hatch at that precise moment by the act of looking. Maybe he even thought: I want to use this image in my writing somehow.

Or Updike might have been walking along and saw a starfish. He stopped and looked at it, not glanced, looked at it a long time. The arms were moving, reaching for something. He let himself free associate, like fingers, like hands, reaching, wanting to touch something.

Ex: Callan Wink, “Breatharians,” in the 2013 Best American Short Stories

He let his fingers linger on the places where the wire cut into the trunks, and then he knelt and sighted all the way down the fence, squinting into the strengthening light, and imagined he was looking at a row of gnarled old people, the soft skin of their necks garroted by barbed wire, the twisted branches like arms raised, fingers splayed, trembling and clutching the air.

He said he’d seen trees like this and found a spot in the story and plugged it in.

Other forms of metaphors:

1. Source only is stated:

- a. Ex: Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken"—refers to something beyond itself.

The Road Not Taken
By Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

2. **Juxtaposition:** source and target are each stated but not with an explicit link. Encourages the reader to consider why the two disparate domains are there.

Ex: "My memory, my prison," Theodore Roethe

Ex: Floating cloud, wanderer's mind

Setting sun, old friend's feeling.

by Li Bai

List of Metaphors

Definitions:

- a. **Definition Metaphor: (Greek, “to transfer”)** A *metaphor* is a trope or figure of speech in which an implied comparison is made between two unlike things that actually have something in common. The word *metaphor* comes from a Greek term meaning to "transfer" or "carry across." Metaphors "carry" meaning from one word, image, idea, or situation to another.
- b. **Definition Simile:** (from Latin, *similis*, meaning “similar” or “like”) a comparison between two different things using “like” or “as” or “as if” (and sometimes “seems” “appears”) to show a common quality between them
- c. **Definition Personification:** An emotion or something nonhuman is given human qualities.

Ex: The speechless cities of the night—Randall Jarrell

Ex: the sleeping sea --William Sharp

Ex: the last fingers of leaf clutch and sink into the wet bank –T.S. Eliot

Ex: Jude’s loneliness grew, became a living creature that shadowed him and wandered off only when he was in the company of his numbers. “At the Round Earth’s Imagined Corners,” by Lauren Groff

- d. **Definition Analogy:** An analogy is a literary technique in which two unrelated objects are compared for their shared qualities. Unlike a simile or a metaphor, an analogy is not a figure of speech, though the three are often quite similar. Instead, analogies are strong rhetorical devices used to make rational arguments and support ideas by showing connections and comparisons between dissimilar things.

Sources:

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The Spider’s Thread: Metaphor in Mind, Brain, and Poetry, by Keith J. Holyoak

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Best Words Best Order, by Stephen Dobyns