

Images: Simile and Metaphor 3

Diction and syntax are important to any kind of writing or speaking. But in poetry their use may be more conscious, more considered, and they may take on special meanings and effects—like a dancer who walks or runs, but does so with more grace, more intention, and as part of a fuller purpose of design and beauty. Imagery is another basic poetic unit, one more specific to poetry and much more obviously exciting; it is the fireworks of poetry, often thought of as poetry’s defining characteristic. Actually, how large a role the kind of vivid visual picture we think of as the very stuff of poetry plays varies from literary period to period, with changes in literary taste and literary fashion. Different ages admire different things in poetry, and our admiration for certain kinds of imagery has its own specific historical context. Still, through most literary tastes and trends, the poetic image has remained a fundamental unit of poetic composition, whether as a small decorative moment in a larger argument, or as the primary organizing principle of the poem as a whole.

There is a wide and indeed surprising number of kinds of poetic image. We will begin with the most familiar images, those of likeness: that is, *simile* and *metaphor*. Both simile and metaphor are structures of comparison. They assert: this is like that, in such and such a way. In simile, the comparison is made explicit. A simile is a comparison that *tells* you it is a comparison. It openly declares “*x* is like *y*,” using a word of comparison such as “like” or “as,” but other words, such as “resemble” or “compare,” can serve the same function. These words act as signals that a simile is taking place, and are themselves part of the image structure and effect. The open declaration of a resemblance may make simile seem simpler or clearer than other images. But it also allows the simile to be extended over any number of lines, which can lead to complex comparisons involv-

ing many terms, in which it is not always obvious at once what is being compared to what, or in what ways.

Metaphor is also a structure of comparison, a likeness. But in metaphor the likeness happens without warning, and involves its own distinctive structure. Instead of, as in a simile, stating x is like y , in a metaphor, some quality or trait or action associated with x is directly attributed to, or transferred, to y . Metaphor in fact means transfer (as Aristotle was the first to analyze in *Poetics* 21, 1457b): the transferral of some quality, or attribute, or word associated with one thing to another. It is this transferral that implies the comparison. The two different things are alike in the way that the transferred quality suggests. If we say: the moon sails in the sky, then a verb belonging to ships—to sail—is transferred to the moon. The movement of the moon, then, is compared to that of a ship, while, implicitly, the sky is also compared to a sea. You could try to reverse this comparison: the ship rises in the sea; but the result would be weak. “Rises” is not specific enough to the moon to make the comparison clear. For the metaphor to be strong, its terms must carry their associations with clarity and specificity. In “the ship rises in the sea,” the ship might be like the moon, or it might be like the sun, or some other planet in its rising. Or, the ship might be simply a ship: rising up on the waves, with no transfer, no metaphor, at all. One may speak here of degrees of transfer: some words very strongly assert a transfer from one sphere to another and hence a comparison because of their very strong and specific associations. Other words may loosely or vaguely imply a comparison.

Handbooks offer you lists of examples of similes and metaphors. But of course the effects and purposes of simile or metaphor only fully emerge within the poetic texts that build upon them. Only then can their complexity and richness be appreciated, or the way in which they might extend throughout an entire poem be followed. This is the case in a simple-looking poem by William Wordsworth (1770–1850), “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.”

I wandered lonely as a cloud
 That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
 When all at once I saw a crowd,
 A host, of golden daffodils;
 Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
 Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
 And twinkle on the milky way,
 They stretched in never-ending line
 Along the margin of a bay:
 Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
 Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.
 The waves beside them danced; but they
 Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
 A poet could not but be gay,
 In such a jocund company:
 I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
 What wealth the show to me had brought:
 For oft, when on my couch I lie,
 In vacant or in pensive mood,
 They flash upon that inward eye
 Which is the bliss of solitude;
 And then my heart with pleasure fills,
 And dances with the daffodils.

This poem opens with a simile: there is the “as” ready at the start to tell you a comparison is being made. The first two lines set up the first terms of the comparison: an “I” who wanders like a “cloud.” People wander, and saying that clouds do compares clouds to people (the more cloudlike word for this sort of aimless movement would be, say, drift). So far, the comparison seems to have to do with movement, a kind of undirected leisurely motion. There is, however, another comparative term, introduced through “lonely.” The poet is saying that the cloud, like himself, is one, alone. But only a human being can, one presumes, feel such solitariness as loneliness. Only humans can feel lonely.

The next lines introduce a metaphor, or perhaps two metaphors: “when all at once I saw a crowd / A host, of golden daffodils.” The daffodils are compared to a crowd, or host, that is, to a group of people. Here number (in contrast to “lonely”) seems to be the main point: there are many daffodils, all close together. The image chosen for this group is, however, a human one (a crowd or host rather than a bunch, or bouquet, of flowers) so there is also some sense that the flowers seem alive and human. Then the last line, very gently, suggests further metaphorical comparisons. “Fluttering”

normally applies to flags; or perhaps butterflies; or perhaps to hearts, when they become excited. Yet “fluttering” can also apply to flowers, since it merely implies a light, waving movement that can describe petals, too. “Dancing,” however, is more clearly metaphorical. Flowers dance only if you are comparing them to people. Here the motion of the flowers is definitely likened to a human activity.

This attention to the imagery is meant to show the way a comparison can be thought through. We can even go further. In the opening simile, a human person, the “I,” compares himself to something inanimate, a “cloud.” In the metaphor that follows, something nonhuman, the daffodils, are compared to human beings, human crowds and hosts and dancers. There has been as well a question of location. The cloud floats on high; but the daffodils are down low, “beside the lake, beneath the trees.” And where is the “I?” Well, not up in the sky we suppose. Yet we picture him in some sense as “high” too, as though looking down at the daffodils from above. This play on height and location is picked up in the next stanza, through the next simile of the stars: “Continuous as the stars that shine.” There is the “as” declaring the simile. Number and extension again take part in the comparison. The flowers stretch on like the numberless stars in the sky. The sky itself seems to parallel the “bay” that the flowers stretch alongside—partly because of the rhyme that connects them (milky way / bay), but mainly because of the repeating play on what is above and what is below. If flowers by a lake are like stars in the Milky Way, then flowers are like stars, and the lake is like the sky. The comparison doubles, connecting everything that appears on the two sides of the “as.” Then comes the “I” again, still almost unlocated, or rather, located somewhere between the stars and the flowers: for to see ten thousand at a glance implies a quite commanding position. The stanza ends with metaphors that pick up on, and strengthen, the earlier comparison of the flowers to humans. “Tossing their heads in sprightly dance” repeats the dance image, but “tossing their heads” makes the comparison to human action even more explicit.

Thus far, the images have generally attributed human traits to the natural world, a kind of comparison called *personification*, which we will discuss more fully in chapter 8. An image personifies something nonhuman by granting, or transferring human features, or actions, or attitudes to it (the daffodils “tossing their heads”). Personifica-

tion forms the central image pattern throughout this poem, which is carried forward from stanza to stanza, always with further intensification. In the next stanza, the metaphor of dancing is extended to the waves of the water of the bay. Now there is a triple comparison: the waves are like the flowers are like people dancing. And the ultimate transfer then follows: "A poet could not but be gay." The gay dancing of nature comes to find its place within the poet himself. Here, he doesn't openly announce that he is drawing a new, and indeed governing comparison: simile at this point drops out. But the whole series of comparisons to human beings is now given a location, solving the mystery of placement the poem has posed.

The whole poem has, we come to see, taken place inside the poet, in some interior space. He, the poet, is "on my couch" looking with an "inward eye." That great expanse of the opening sky with its lonely cloud is finally transferred to the interior space of the solitary heart, where the flowers also find their ultimate location: "then my heart with pleasure fills and dances with the daffodils." Here we see the metaphor completed, at which point, however, it also almost ceases to be a metaphor. The dance is finally a dance of the heart—a strange collapse in metaphorical distance, in that now the human is compared to the human: the human dance to the human heart. The poet sees himself in nature; and then he sees nature in himself. It all becomes a moment of self-reflection, the inward eye of solitude which Wordsworth here unveils as the ultimate poetic source and subject.

Detailed analyses of images can become quite intricate. What is important here is a sense of main lines of development and of how comparisons may be more complex than they first seem. Once you begin comparing one thing to another, multiple terms begin to enter into the quotient. Even the opening simile was more complex than it appeared. The comparison of the "I" to the "cloud" finally included not just wandering motion, but also questions of number (one or many) and of placement in relation to the scene viewed—the question that becomes the central one in the poem's conclusion. Or consider the lake, which in the first verse seemed merely descriptive, decorative but not essential. Yet from stanza to stanza the lake takes on more and more metaphorical power, first becoming an image of reflection for the sky—and, as is very common in Wordsworth, for the reflection in the poet's mind of what he sees—and then personified as waves dancing, like the flowers themselves. The

lake thus becomes part of a whole system of comparison that takes on more and more terms as it goes along. Here we also see how a word that first appears for one purpose (decorative) may gather through the poem more and more purpose, more and more meaning, and not be an idle word at all.

This multiplicity of comparison—the fact that comparison is many-sided, so that comparing one thing to another may carry along with it any number of terms and parallels, may be seen in a poem by Edmund Waller (1606–1687) called “Song”:

Go lovely rose,
 Tell her that wastes her time and me,
 That now she knows,
 When I resemble her to thee,
 How sweet and fair she seems to be.

Tell her that's young,
 And shuns to have her graces spied,
 That hadst thou sprung
 In deserts where no men abide,
 Thou must have uncommended died.

Small is the worth
 Of beauty from the light retired;
 Bid her come forth,
 Suffer herself to be desired,
 And not blush so to be admired.

Then die, that she
 The common fate of all things rare
 May read in thee;
 How small a part of time they share,
 That are so wondrous sweet and fair.

This poem raises a number of different issues, some of which we will return to and examine in chapter 6 when we discuss poetic conventions. But for now, we only need notice that at the center of this poem is a simile—that the whole poem is constructed as a developing simile comparing a lady to a rose. The poem is, artfully, addressed to the rose, which the poet is sending to his lady. Everything he says to the rose he then wishes to be applied to her. This kind of address to an inanimate object (or to an abstraction, an absent per-

son, an animal, etc., as if it were present, alive, and capable of understanding) is called an *apostrophe*—a figure closely related to personification. But the message the speaker sends is constructed through an elaborate comparison between lady and rose. And although there is no “as” or even “like,” the poet states: “When I resemble her to thee.” “Resemble” acts as the “simile” word announcing a comparison to be at hand. This comparison is hardly original. (Waller, writing in the 1600s, wasn’t so worried about originality. He was happy to use old, time-honored material—what we will later examine as *topoi*, conventional literary elements and figures. Originality becomes a major poetic ambition later, with Wordsworth, for example.) The comparison of the lovely lady to the lovely rose is, then, not the poet’s invention. But in developing it in the poem, he brings out aspects of the comparison that are not immediately obvious, and are finally quite alarming.

The first feature of comparison the poet mentions is how “sweet and fair” the lady, like the rose, “seems to be.” We notice the word “seems.” The poet says “seems” rather than “is,” and we wonder why. Perhaps he is merely discussing appearance, and so says “seems,” as a way of saying that she looks a certain way. There is another word in the opening stanza that draws our attention—“wastes”: “Tell her that wastes her time and me.” For one thing, this word belongs to a lower diction-level than do the stanza’s other words, such as “lovely” and “resemble” and “sweet and fair.” It is even a bit aggressive because of the poet’s bluntness; and it inserts into the poem a hint of decay.

The second stanza opens with an emphasis on life, on youth: “Tell her that’s young.” But this seems a bit of an aside—that is, it doesn’t seem part of the main business of the stanza, which is the simile or comparison, now focusing on hiding. The lady “shuns to have her graces spied.” She should instead, says the poet, heed the example of the rose, which, had it remained hidden “in deserts where no men abide,” would have died without being appreciated. The comparison here takes on a little twist. Instead of saying the lady is like the rose, the poet says she ought to be like it. It is open to view; she is not, but she should be. At the end of the stanza, death is brought in again, almost as an aside, but adding a rather threatening note: “Thou must have uncommended died.”

In the third stanza the poet openly declares that the lady should herself fulfill the simile, as it were, by coming forth into the light.

There is again a small change in the structure of the comparison, however. “Desired” is a rather strong word; and it applies much more to a lady than to a rose, which can certainly be admired, but is not normally “desired” with the full connotation of passion this word brings. Here, the rose is like the lady rather than the lady being like the rose, a way for the poet to express his full intentions toward her, which otherwise he can’t politely say. The aggressive note in the poem, which repeatedly resurfaces, comes out here in this indirect way. It also comes out in the lineation of the poem—the way the poet arranges his lines. “Small is the worth” as a phrase standing alone is rather denigrating, a threat in fact.

This threatening element becomes the central feature of the poem’s conclusion: “Then die.” In the end, the lesson of the comparison is not going to be how both lady and rose are sweet and fair, but how they are both mortal—how they both share “the common fate” of death. Death here gathers earlier hints of threat in words like “wastes” and “young.” It is death that forms the center of the simile, this that the lady should “read” in the rose’s resemblance to her. As a simile it works; but it is not neutral. It is important to notice here not only the likeness between the two terms of the comparison, but also the pull of difference between them. This is actually the case in any simile or metaphor. The two compared terms may be alike, but they are never identical. There always remains some difference between them, some *distance* between the terms of the figure. This distance our poet now exploits. In fact, the life of a rose is much, much shorter than that of a lady. Moreover, the rose lacks something that the lady has: a soul. This is in fact the part of the lady that does not share the fate of the rose, the fate of death. For the Christian, the soul is immortal.

All of this remembrance of the Christian soul is not in the poem. Indeed, it is the strategy of the poem energetically to ignore this little question of the difference between the lady and the rose with regard to the length, and kind, of life each leads, and toward what final ends. For the poem has a particular purpose, and is a poem of a particular kind, also not invented by the poet: it is a poem of seduction, of desire. In poems of this kind, the (male) poet never mentions things like the lady’s soul. He focuses instead on her body, and he asks her to do so too; to remember only that her body is mortal, and will die, and that therefore she only has a limited amount of time in which to enjoy it while she has it.

The poetry of seduction is one of the enduring genres, or kinds, of poetry. Poetry can have varied and useful functions; and seduction is apparently something worth writing poems for. Here I would just like to emphasize how the poem develops its simile of the rose and the lady, and how in doing so it focuses now on this aspect of the comparison, now on that; how what seems at first to be the main element shared in common proves not to be (or proves to be so in a different way than it at first appeared); how a quite different point of comparison (mortality), introduced first in a seemingly accidental way, becomes the real heart of the matter; and, finally, how other points of difference between the terms compared are repressed for a particular rhetorical purpose—that is, to persuade.

Thus: comparisons—similes or metaphors—can be thought through in exact and logical ways. Often the comparison will contain or imply more than one feature or aspect; X will be like Y in more than one way. In a good poem, these comparisons will often gather and build on each other and collect resonance and depth. One comparison may also connect with another as the poem unfolds. The comparison, therefore, is not static, but dynamic. It has many parts, and as it develops it modifies and brings into various relations each of the terms drawn into it. Moreover, the comparison is not neutral. It moves to convince; to elevate or deflate; or to draw attention to some specific interest or topic.

In any comparison, furthermore, there will be elements not only of likeness, but of difference. A poem may mute or conceal differences; or it may exploit difference—may play on the pull between compared terms. This case of difference, with its tensions and manipulations, is especially visible in another artful seduction poem, “The Flea” by John Donne (1572–1631).

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
 How little that which thou deny'st me is;
 It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
 And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be;
 Thou know'st that this cannot be said
 A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,
 Yet this enjoys before it woo,
 And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two
 And this, alas, is more than we would do.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
 Where we almost, yea more than married are.
 This flea is you and I, and this
 Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
 Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,
 And cloister'd in these living walls of jet.
 Though use make you apt to kill me,
 Let not to that, self-murder added be,
 And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
 Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?
 Wherein could this flea guilty be,
 Except in that drop which it suck'd from thee?
 Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
 Find'st not thy self, nor me, the weaker now;
 'Tis true, then learn how false, fears be;
 Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me,
 Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

"The Flea," like "Song," turns on a comparison, one rather complicated in its construction. It involves a lady, a man, and a flea. If you find this a strange grouping, that is because it is strange, very strange. It underscores the question of distance between terms in a comparison: how unlike the two things being compared are. Compared terms may be more like each other, for example, a lady and rose, or they may be more unlike each other, for example, love and a flea. When a poet compares two quite similar things, things that seem to go together, the unlikeness may lurk around, perhaps in a subversive way. But sometimes a poet compares two things that are very unlike. John Donne is a poet who likes to do this. It is part of his wit, which his period prized above all. He can show how even very unlike things have something in common: things like a flea and a "marriage bed," or worse, a "marriage temple."

These comparisons appear in the middle stanza of the poem: "This flea is you and I, and this / Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is." How can a flea be (like) a marriage bed? Well, the poet tells us:

Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,
 And cloister'd in these living walls of jet.

In the first stanza, the poet described how the flea sucks blood from both himself and the lady: "And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be." Now he calls this joining a marriage bed, indeed, a marriage temple, where "we're met, and cloister'd." The body of the flea is compared to the walls of a cloister, a monastery or convent! The sucked blood, now contained in the insect, is like monks, or nuns, who live within such containing walls.

To assert such a comparison, is to overlook (to say the least) the fact that life in a cloister is above all chaste; that a cloister is a place where intimate life is lived, but without sexual activity. But here, the flea-image is purposefully sexual. The first stanza had turned on another manipulated comparison, between a flea-bite and the act of intercourse.

It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be;
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead,

In a flea-bite, as in the loss of virginity, blood is shed; while the mingling of blood is compared to the sex act itself. This is, ahem, rather far-fetched. To then extend the comparison into the realm of sacred vows, such as marriage, is more so. To carry it still further, making it an image of the sacred vows of chastity, is to stretch all credibility—as the poet knows quite well.

The outrageousness of this comparison is also due to diction. A flea just doesn't belong in the same sentence with "temple" and "cloister'd." It is an outrageousness Donne is happy to cultivate. In the last stanza, he continues the overblown religious language by suggesting that, in squashing the flea, the lady has martyred it: "Cruel and sudden, hast thou since / Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?" And he goes on to argue that the loss of virginity is no more significant or consequential than the death of a flea: "Just so much honor, when thou yield'st to me, / Will waste." This is, we may remark, quite faulty logic. But the poet is not all that concerned with logic. He is concerned, rather, with effect. This can be best seen, perhaps, in the most provocative comparison of all, when he compares the lady's threat to kill the flea (in the middle stanza) not only to (both) murder and suicide, but to "sacrilege, three sins in killing

three.” The lady/gentleman/flea become nothing less than a figure of the Trinity, and its rejection, a species of blasphemy.

This sort of extended, complex, and daring comparison is called a *conceit*, announced here by a simile-signal, “Mark but this flea,” and pursued in a rapid and embedded elaboration. The conceit was very popular among the Elizabethan poets and seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, and Donne’s poems provide some of the most famous examples of it. The term, derived from the Italian *concetto* (concept), underscores its display of cleverness. And if its logic does not stand up under close scrutiny, this need not weaken its rhetorical power. For, while we may not be convinced of the gentleman’s right to our company by logic, we may nevertheless be persuaded, given how entertaining he shows himself to be, that he may just be worth spending time with.