

Rutgers Learning Centers

At Camden Campus

READING: HOW TO READ A POEM

Author vs. Speaker

The author of the poem is the person who wrote the poem. The speaker of the poem is the voice you hear when you read the poem (almost like an invisible narrator who is reading this poem to you). In your paper, don't write: "In *Fire and Ice*, Frost says the world will end in either fire or ice" because that misses the point. You can write, "In Frost's *Fire and Ice*, the speaker discusses two ways in which the world is expected to end."

Literal vs. Figurative Meaning

An important part of understanding poetry is learning when you are dealing with literal meaning and when you are dealing with figurative (or non-literal) meaning. We use figurative language all the time. If someone tells me a joke and I say, "You're killing me," the person who told the joke isn't literally killing me. It's a figure of speech.

Ex. "It's raining" means that water is falling from the sky.
"It's raining in my heart" means "I am sad" or "I feel a sadness inside of me that's beyond my control." It cannot literally rain inside of someone's heart; therefore, this example is figurative language.

Poetry mixes literal and non-literal meanings. Try to understand where the poem has literal meaning and where it has figurative meaning. Wordsworth wrote, "My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky." In this case, the speaker's heart doesn't literally leap up, so that part of the phrase is figurative. But the second part ("when I behold a rainbow in the sky") is straightforward and sounds literal.

Some Figures of Speech

Simile: a comparison that most often uses "like" or "as."

Ex. "My love is like a red rose."

Metaphor: a comparison that generally uses the verb "to be."

Ex. "My love is a rose."

Implied Metaphor: a comparison that doesn't use "like," "as," or verb "to be."

Ex. "My love has red petals and sharp thorns."

Similes, metaphors, and implied metaphors are all figures of speech (devices used by the poet to create non-literal meaning).

Extended or Controlling Metaphors dominate the entire poem.

Ex. My husband gives me an A / for last night's supper, / an incomplete for ironing, / a B plus in bed. / My son says I am average, / an average mother, but if / I put my mind to it / I could improve. / My daughter believes / in Pass / Fail and tells me / I pass. Wait till they learn / I'm dropping out.
("Marks" by Linda Pastan)

(See other side for more)

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Personification gives human qualities to abstract concepts or inanimate things.

Ex. A reference to thunder booming "angrily" personifies thunder by giving it emotion. When we speak of jealousy "rearing its ugly head," we are personifying jealousy by giving it human form.

Symbols are figures which stand for something else.

Ex. Symbols in poetry are those words and groups of words which have a range of reference beyond their literal denotation. Birds traditionally symbolize flight and freedom; roses traditionally symbolize love, etc.

Allusions refer to ideas generally known (literature, art, history, myth).

Ex. A talking garden snake in the poem may be an allusion to the Garden of Eden and accompanying features (such as innocence, temptation, sin).

Allegory: the action consistently describes another order of things.

Ex. The poem can make sense as a story, but it can also stand for political happenings, religious events, or moral values.

Imitation acknowledges another poet/poem in a positive way.

Parody means to make fun of the substance or style of a poem.

Ex. Andrea Paterson's "Because I Could Not Dump the Trash" is a parody of Emily Dickinson's "Because I Could Not Stop for Death."

Sonnets are poems with fourteen lines in a definite rhythm and rhyme pattern. Rhyme patterns are indicated by capital letters (A, B, C, D, etc.) after each line to indicate the end rhyme (the rhyme at the end of the line).

Ex. My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun A
Coral is far more red than her lips' red B
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun A
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head B

English/Shakespearean Sonnets: In this version of the sonnet, there are three four lined "quatrains" (with the rhyme pattern ABAB CDCD EFEF) and a concluding couplet, rhymed separately (GG).

Petrarchan/Italian Sonnets: the first eight lines are known as the octave (with the rhyme pattern ABBAABBA) and the second six lines are called the sestet (with the rhyme pattern CDECDE or CDCDCD).

Spenserian Sonnets: The rhyme pattern is ABAB BCBC CDCD EE.

SOURCES:

- Altenbernd, Lynn, and Leslie L. Lewis. *A Handbook for the Study of Poetry*. New York: MacMillan, 1966.
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