

# TROPES ABOUND IN SPEECH AND WRITING

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With due limitations, specific terms are to be preferred to general for the sake of clearness and force. For example, "The end of acquisition and accumulation is conventionally held to be the consumption of the goods accumulated," is less clear than, "A man puts his dollars in the bank in order that he may buy bread, clothes, and a house when he wants them." In the same way it is less forcible to say, "There shall be universal peace," than, "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." The general terms "acquisition," "accumulation," "consumption," "goods," "peace" are less easily understood and less vivid than the specific terms "dollars," "bank" "break," "clothes," "house," "swords," and "pruning-hooks."

The words in the second group above have been in greater or less degree turned from their original or literal meaning; as used here they are spoken of tropes or figures of speech. Many of them, indeed, we no longer recognize as tropes, because the figurative sense of the words has become the common meaning, while the literal sense has been lost, either wholly or partly. Thus we can speak of a "retentive mind," but not of a "retentive vessel"; of a preponderating influence," but not of a "preponderating rock." Many more words may be used either literally or figuratively; e.g., the "weight of evidence," and "weight of sand"; a "solvent bank," and a "solvent for gold"; a "monumental courage," and a "monumental inscription"; the inclination of the will," and the "inclination of the angle"; a "soft heart," and a "soft rug"; a "fertile fancy," and a "fertile field," etc. More obviously figurative are the words which a given writer or speaker for the first time turns away from their literal meaning, or those which, in the figure, depart so far from the original significance that, however often they are used, we find it hard to forget both the primary and the secondary meaning. These latter are what are commonly known as tropes. We shall discuss some of the forms in which they occur.

### Synecdoche and Metonymy

One of the simplest of figures is the use of the name of a part for the name of the whole; a species for a genus; an individual for a species. This form of trope is called synecdoche. Examples are: the "bench," the "bar," the "board"—for the judges on the bench, the lawyers within the bar, the members of the board; "coin" for money; a "Judas" for a traitor, etc.

A similar substitution occurs when an accompaniment is taken for the thing it accompanies, a cause for an effect, a sign for the thing signified, etc. This trope is called metonymy. Such are the expressions: "gray hairs" for age; "sunshine" for happiness; "seed-time" for spring; also the "altar," the "baton," the "tomahawk," the "purse," etc., when used to express acts or things that usual accompaniments of the ideas expressed by the terms.<sup>1</sup>

It can not be said that, as an invariable rule, either metonymy or synecdoche promotes clearness more than force, or force more than clearness.<sup>2</sup>

### Metaphor and Simile

Perhaps the most common form of trope consists of an implied comparison. This is called a metaphor. In the lines from Tennyson's *Ulysses*,

Yet all experience is an arch where thro'  
Gleams that untravell'd world,

the comparison lies between an abstract idea, "experience," and a concrete idea, "arch."

1. The distinction between Synecdoche and Metonymy still lingers in some school-rooms; but it is obviously of no practical value, for the force of tropes belonging to either class lies in the fact that they single out a quality of the object, or a circumstance connected with it, and fix the attention upon that. The quality or the circumstance thus emphasized should, of course, be the real center of interest.—A.S. Hill: p. 177.
2. Some rhetoricians classify figures in two broad divisions: figures that promote clearness, and figures that promote force. No such strict division, however, can be made. Frequently a figure by illustrating an abstract thought really gives force to the idea; again the happy use of a forcible metaphor or simile may by stimulating the mind add to the clearness of the thought. Each case must be decided on its own merits, when it is important to make any decision.

Other examples are:

An hour before the worshipp'd sun  
Peer'd forth the golden window of the east.

—Shakespeare.

I shall light a candle of understanding in thine heart, which shall not be put out.  
—The Bible.

He smote the rock of the national resources, and abundant streams of revenue gushed forth.—Webster.

In the simile the comparison implied in the metaphor is stated in full, and usually by “like” or “as.” Any metaphor, therefore, may be converted into a simile; thus, the second example above could be changed thus: “An hour before the sun rose from the east as it it peered from a golden window. . . .” Further examples of the simile are:

Her beauty hands upon the cheek of night  
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiope's ear.—Shakespeare.

Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore:  
So do our minutes hasten to their end.—Shakespeare.

The process of thought in the metaphor and in the simile is essentially the same. The comparison serves to emphasize the one or two qualities which the objects compared have in common. The metaphor is a more hyperbolic expression than the simile in that it asserts an apparent falsehood, while the simile does not go further than to state a comparison. For this reason the metaphor is commonly said to be the stronger, more emotional trope<sup>3</sup> of the two. The simile is to be preferred to the metaphor whenever the comparison is not at once apparent. Involved or far-fetched similes and metaphors are to be avoided; also, confused or “mixed” metaphors.

### Personification and Apostrophe

One special form of metaphor is the trope called Personification, by which life and

3. A logician appeals to our head, but a poet to our heart. A poet arouses in us feelings of love or hate, joy or sorrow, pity or admiration, beauty of nature and goodness of truth, the weakness or the strength of man.

the characteristics of animate objects are given to inanimate objects, e.g.:

And watching, with eternal lids apart  
Like Nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,  
The moving waters at their priestlike task  
of pure ablution round earth's human shores.

--Keats.<sup>4</sup>

And gentle Dulness ever loves a joke.

--Pope.

Personification when not used to excess stimulates the fancy and gives reality to abstractions. The danger in the use of this trope is that mere sex, and not qualities of life, shall be given to the object.

### Apostrophe

Closely related to personification is that form of address to an imaginary or absent person called apostrophe, as:

Sweet Queen of Parley! Daughter of the Spheres!  
So mayst thou be translated to the skies;  
And give resounding grace to all Heaven's harmonies!

--Milton<sup>5</sup>

This figure is more natural in verse than in prose. Indeed good modern prose uses apostrophe very rarely.

### Forms of Literature Classified as Figures

Certain forms of literary expressions, such as the epigram, the fable, the allegory, the parable, are often called figures of speech, although they have little more of the nature

4. From the beginning of Keats's poetic career, he never let go his clear conception that beauty such as he conceived it--the abstract idea of beauty in all things--is the summit and crown of his aim. But he then identity beauty with truth, and out of them when together and at once, proceeded power. Truth, beauty, and power--a co-equal trinity.
5. There is a mastery of phrase and epithet, remarkable in Milton's poems. He shows his command of the English language. Note the aptness of such expressions as "Laughter holding both his sides," and "the light fantastic toe." The clever use of personification should be observed.

of tropes than the short story, the essay, and other literary forms.

1. Originally, an epigram meant an inscription. From this use, which implies conciseness and point, the term came to be applied to short poems, frequently only couplets, that expressed some general truth in a striking manner. The term epigram as at present used means a concise statement in which there is "a conflict between the form of the language and the meaning really conveyed" (Bain). "To be epigrammatic an expression must have fundamentally two qualities: it must be brief; it must give some unexpected turn to the idea" (Genung). Example:

Language is the art of concealing thought.

2. The fable is a short story, embodying some special moral. Frequently animals or inanimate objects exemplify the qualities of character displayed. Aesop's and La Fontaine's Fables are the most celebrated examples of literature.

3. The allegory is merely a longer form of the fable or the parable. In the allegory, persons, real or imaginary, and inanimate objects, are used to bring out a moral truth. Throughout the story the comparison between the fanciful details and real life must be sustained. Famous examples of allegories are "The Pilgrim's Progress, in which the spiritual progress of a Christian is pictured by the story of a pilgrim in search of a distant country; Spenser's Faerie Queene, in which virtues and vices are personified; Gulliver's Travels, in which human follies and vices are ridiculed by the portrayal of society among imaginary peoples—dwarfs, giants, horses, etc.

The fable, the parable, and the allegory are all closely related to personification. All are stories told for the purpose of moral instruction.

#### Sentence-forms Classified as Figures

Certain well-marked forms of arranging the elements in the sentence are usually called figures of speech. Such are:

1. Interrogation, e.g., "Doth Job fear God for naught?"

This oratorical device is used only where the answer to the question is self-evident.

2. Exclamation, e.g., "O eloquent, just and mightie Death!"

Frequent use of this device either in writing or in speaking weakens rather than strengthens the style.

3. Antithesis, e.g., "To be a blessing, and not a curse."

In antithesis one element of a sentence is set over against another in form and in sense.

4. Climax, e.g., "I came, I saw, I conquered."

Climax is the principle of ascending interest in thought and expression. It may be applied to phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or whole writings.

### Qualities of Style Classified as Figures

Two so-called tropes, hyperbole and irony, are rather qualities of style, pervading either a single statement or a whole writing. Hyperbole consists of conscious overstatement for the sake of emphasis. For instance, "He flew down the track like lightning" is a hyperbolic expression; so also is this apostrophe to Helen in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*:<sup>6</sup>

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships,  
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?  
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.

Irony expresses the contrary of what is meant. It is the quality of obvious untruth. Swift's *Tale of a Tub* is a celebrated instance of sustained irony. Certain passages of Job, e.g., "No doubt ye are the people, and wisdom will die with you" are admirable instances of the quality of irony.

### The Use of Figures of Speech in Composition

The analysis and classification of figures of speech is an interesting and helpful part of the study of literature. To a large extent literature, as opposed to mere statement of information, consists of the happy use of concrete, image-making words instead of general terms. The secrets of a great master's style may often be detected more completely by a study of his tropes than by any other means. It is true, also, that in a small degree the close study of tropes as found in literature will assist the writer in creating suitable figures to

6. The present version of *Faustus* is very much mutilated, and does not preserve the play as Marlowe wrote it. Marlowe, however, is the first writer to use the legend for dramatic purposes. He points the moral that a "Hellish fall" awaits those who "practice more than heavenly power permits. His contributions to the drama are considered to have been the molding of the blank verse line into a "mighty line" of eloquence and dignity.

illustrate and embellish, his thought.

It must not be forgotten, however, that any figure, any deviation from the literal statement of the literal truth must be spontaneous and, further, appropriate to the case in hand. The figure must grow out of the idea to be expressed; it should not be added afterwards to the idea as an ornament. We speak of figures of speech, to be sure, as ornaments that embellish style; but here, as in every fine arts, ornaments, to be appropriate and effective, must grown out of the structure of the thought. The writer can not cultivate figures of speech as he would roses in a garden, and pluck them when he would, to adorn his composition. He must let them grow naturally from the warmth of his interest, from passion for his subject.

What practical benefit, then will the students of composition derive from the study of tropes? Attention given to the subject will cultivate in him a standard of taste: he will know what figures to use; when to restrain, when to give free rein to his fancy. It has already been said that the English language is sown thick with similes, metaphors, personifications, etc. Moreover, a writer seldom handles a topic in which he is interested without striking out many new figures, some good, some bad. To learn to avoid hackneyed figures—the common property of all—to avoid redundant or mixed or confused or grotesque figures, and lastly, to use a figure with a strict conception of its literal meaning—these are the results a student of composition should hope from a study of figurative language.

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## Figures of Speech

### In a Nutshell

A figure of speech is used by writers to create a striking effect on the mind, imagination or feelings of the reader. This is done by using words in new ways and new arrangements.

These figures of speech can, *for the sake of convenience*, be grouped under the following heads:

#### I. Figures Based on Resemblance

1. *The Simile*.—In Simile two dissimilar or unlike things are compared to each other.

The Simile is introduced by such words as like, so, as.

- (1) He acted like a devil.
- (2) Thy soul was like a star and dwelt apart,  
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea.

2. *Metaphor*.—In Metaphor also two things are compared, but the words introducing the likeness are omitted; as,

- (1) He was a donkey.
- (2) Life is a dream.

3. *Analogy*. In Simile, one object is compared to another object, while in an analogy a relationship is compared with another relationship.

- (1) How far that candle throw his beams! So shines a good deed in a naughty world.
- (2) As spice flavours food, so variety makes life more pleasant.

4. *Personification* is a figure of speech by which inanimate objects or qualities are spoken of as having life and intelligence as if they were living beings.

- (1) The angry sea began to war.
- (2) Death lays his icy hands on kings.

5. *Apostrophe* is a direct address to a person dead or absent or to an inanimate object or an abstract idea. This figure is a form of personification.

- (1) O Grave! where is thy victory?
- (2) O Liberty! what crimes have been committed in thy name?

## II. Figures based on Association or Contiguity

6. *Transferred Epithet*. When the qualifying adjective is removed from one word to another, the figure is called Transferred Epithet.

- (1) I passed a sleepless night.
- (2) He gave a generous donation.

7. *Hyperbole*. This figure is used to make a statement emphatic by over-stating of facts.

- (1) We met after ages, and found her more beautiful than the moon.
- (2) He drowned the stage with tears.

8. *Metonymy* consists in naming an object by one of its attributes or accompaniments:

- (When the name of a sign is used for that of the thing signified; as)

(1) The crown would not yield to the red shirts.

(2) The case has been tried by the full bench.

(When the container is used for the contained; as)

(1) He drank the cup.

(2) He is addicted to the bottle.

(When the name of the author is used for his book;)

(1) I have read Tennyson.

(2) I am reading Shakespeare.

(When the instrument is used for the agent; as)

(1) He carried fire and sword.

(2) The pen is mightier than the sword.

(When an effect is used for a cause and vice-versa;)

(1) Grey hair should be respected.

(2) Yet oft a sigh prevails and sorrow fails.

9. *Synecdoche*—This figure substitutes one thing for another, while metonymy substitutes one name for another. It consists in naming—

(The part for the whole;)

(1) He lived fifty summers.

(2) I have to earn my bread.

(The whole for the part;)

(1) The smiling year has dawned today.

(2) The Republic of China won the first match against Singapore.

(The material for the thing it is made of;)

(1) The stones speak.

(2) This is a fine canvas.

(The abstract noun for the concrete;)

(1) The authorities will do the needful.

(2) Patience overcomes mountains.

(When the genus is used for the species or the general for the special and vice-versa;)

(1) Many poor creatures lost their lives in the war.

(2) This is a fine vessel.

### III. Figures Based on Contrast

10. *Antithesis* presents a strong contrast of words or sentiments.

- (1) United we stand, divided we fall.
- (2) He speaks like a saint, but acts like a devil.

11. *Moxymoron* places together two words of opposite significance about the same thing.

- (1) We must hasten slowly.
- (2) He is regularly irregular.

12. *Paradox* is an apparently self-contradictory statement, though a well founded one.

- (1) No one is so poor as a wealthy miser.
- (2) When I look up, I look down.

13. *Epigram* is a brief and pointed saying conveying much meaning in a few words.

- (1) The child is the father of man.
- (2) Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

14. *Pun* consists in playing on the meaning of a word and is used to cause admiration, or surprise or humour.

- (1) A woman powders the face, while a soldier faces the powder.
- (2) In righting the wrong, we often wrong the right.

15. *Climax* (= a ladder) is a figure of speech in which a series of ideas or expressions is arranged in order of increasing importance.

- (1) He begs, he lies, he steals, he kills for gold.
- (2) I came, I saw, I conquered.

16. *Anticlimax* is the opposite of climax and shows a descent from a higher to a lower level.

- (1) I die, I faint, I fall.
- (2) He preaches like a saint, speaks like a man, but acts like a devil.

### IV. Figures based on Construction

17. *Interrogation of Rhetorical question.*

The asking of question, not for the sake of getting an answer but for the sake of putting the point more effectively, is an interrogation or rhetorical question.

- (1) Who can sow wheat and reap barley?

(2) Can the leopard change his spots?

18. *Exclamation*. This figure is used to make the statement, starting and forceful.

(1) What a piece of work is man!

(2) How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!

19. *Repetition*. This figure is used when there is necessity to repeat the same word for the sake of emphasis.

(1) Break, break, break, on the cold grey stones, oh sea.

(2) Alone, alone, all, all, alone.

Alone on a wide, wide sea.

### V. Figures Based on Circumlocution

20. *Euphemism*. This figure is used when something unpleasant, or delicate or blunt is to be expressed in a mild and gentle way. It is used to avoid giving offence.

(1) He has quitted this vale of tears (i.e., died).

(2) The thieves put him away (i.e., murdered him).

21. *Irony*. This figure of speech is used when the thing said is meant to convey just the opposite.

(1) I don't believe it ever entered his wise head.

(2) He is too generous to part with a dollar.

22. *Sarcasm*. This figure is used to pass a bitter taunt, or a remark, directly.

(1) God made him and, therefore, let him pass for a man.

(2) A book is a book though there is nothing in it.

23. *Innuendo*. By this figure a thing is nearly hinted at or is alluded to instead of being said plainly. In irony the opposite meaning, in sarcasm, contempt, and in innuendo the sting is latent or indirect.

(1) He did not consult physicians, for he hoped to die without them.

(2) They are no thieves now in the town; they have all become hotel keepers.

24. *Litotes*. This figure is just the opposite of Hyperbole. A Hyperbole is an over-statement, a litotes is an understatement. It is also used to give an effect.

(1) I am a citizen of no mean city.

(2) That is not a bad idea.

25. *Aposiopesis*. This figure is used to suggest violent emotion. This is done by breaking off in speech at an important point.

(1) An hour ago the child was alive and well, but now. . . .

(2) If you continue behaving like this in six month's time. . . . .

26. *Hyperbaton* is inversion of normal order of words for the sake of emphasis.

(1) Stone walls do not a prison make.

(2) Not to the vacant benches, but to living students. I speak.

27. *Historical Vision*. The present tense is used for either the past tense of the future tense—an emphatic expression.

(1) When the man reaches the moon, a race for colonization begins.

(2) I see before me the slaughtered heaps of citizens lying unburied in the midst of the ruined country.

28. *Fable* is a short story conveying a moral! The story has animals for its characters as in Aesop's Fables.

29. *Parable* is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It is a tale which gives a moral; as, the parable of the Prodigal Son.

30. *Allegory*. An allegory is a long and sustained metaphor. Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress*, Addison's *Vision of Mirza* are famous Allegories.

31. *Alliteration* is the repetition of the same initial letter or the same initial sound in two or more words.

(1) Full fathom five the father lies.

(2) The fair breeze blew the white foam flew, the furrow followed free.

32. *Onomatopoeia*. In Onomatopoeia the name of the sound resemble the object or its function or qualities. The imitative and expressive sounds made by animate or inanimate objects are onomatopoeic words.

(1) The door closed with a ban.

(2) Cannon to the left of them, volleyed and thundered.

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