

# One Page Concept Review: Metaphor

## What is it?

Metaphor is the forced comparison between unlike things. It is both a concept and specific literary element (when the comparison does not include *like* or *as*). When the comparison does contain *like* or *as*, it is the specialized form of metaphor *simile*. The other common specialized form of metaphor is *personification*, when human characteristics are assigned to non-human objects or ideas (creating an implied comparison between the two concepts).

What these have in common is the idea of comparison: one concept is like another-- even though they would seem to have no unifying characteristics (as they are not of the same type or quality).

## Why should I care?

Metaphor is ubiquitous in language. It can exist, for instance, at the syntactic level, as, for example, the idea that *argument is war*-- source of such idioms such as "shooting down an argument" or "indefensible claims" that operate according to the logic of this comparison, made comprehensible through the lens of a culture that is defined by both individualism and competition. This sort of micro-level metaphor is hard to notice, since it requires the reader to take an objective look at language (difficult to force oneself to do, since speaking the language tends to make us take these features for granted). However, poets often deliberately use syntax metaphorically (as opposed to idiomatically), so it is worth thinking about these kinds of implied comparisons in terms of how it helps to reveal the point of view of the poem.

Perhaps more relevant to you, there are metaphors used in the usual sense of the word, either as isolated literary devices (which usually also function as images, and can be analyzed as such) and metaphors that are used as a structural device, most notably in extended metaphors (where a comparison is developed at length) or a symbol of some important idea in a text. All of these are worth noticing because authors often use such obvious figurative devices to develop the big ideas in a text.

Finally, there are implied comparisons that can be treated as metaphors by you, even if the text isn't specifically highlighting them as such. Analyzing such things as metaphors in a conclusion (as a part of larger thematic statement) makes you sound very clever indeed. This is obviously a good thing.

Yes, recognizing and explicating metaphors is often harder conceptual work than writing about diction and imagery. However, consider the upside. First, once recognized, your explanation writes itself: breaking down the comparison and what that implies. Second, choosing to tackle more ambitious and conceptual ideas gets rewarded on the AP test. No risk, no reward. Third, writers typically work in metaphors when they're engaging their big ideas, so breaking them down is often a short-cut to the big ideas in a text.

## How do I do it?

- **Explain the logic of the comparison.** This is how metaphor works, so any explication of the text requires that you unpack this knowledge for the reader.
- **You can usually treat isolated and extended metaphors like imagery.** First and most obviously, this is because they *are* often images in addition to being an example of figurative language. Even when isn't obviously true, though, the concept to which an idea is being compared will virtually always have some connotation that can be analyzed.

- **Look for extended metaphors.** This is simply the sustaining and development of a metaphor over a chunk of text-- most commonly in a paragraph length description in prose or over the length of a short poem. If the text is taking the time to develop an idea at length, it's probably worth paying attention, since the author obviously believes the idea to be important.
- **Think conceptually.** An action, a character, a plot point, etc. can all serve as a metaphor for some larger idea in a work. Do not be afraid to tease out comparisons in longer texts that may only be implied in the text itself. When metaphor works like a symbol, it is a structural device, so the repetition of ideas with certain common features helps you to understand what the text is trying to communicate.
- **Symbols are usually metonyms, however, so be attentive to the difference.** Or, alternatively, you could side-step the problem and just talk about a *symbol* (and never use the words *metonym* or *metaphor*). Assuming that you want to be precise, however, if a symbol recurs in different contexts and seems to develop in meaning over the course of a work, it's almost certainly a metonym (since it will work by highlighting associations between ideas-- instead of making claims that the ideas are, on some level, the same). If it's a metaphor, it will more likely be a one time comparison (or, if recurring, the context will not change). In a longer text, the development of this type of metaphor is usually an extended one (red flag: a narrator or character starts to muse at length about an idea that seems to have little to do with the main conflict or plot). (Seemingly) odd titles of works are also frequently a metaphor.

## How do students screw this up?

### Forgetting Metaphor is a Comparison

- **Explanations should establish how the comparison works.** Since, by definition, the two concepts are seemingly unlike, the point of comparison must be made clear for the reader. Remember, your job as a writer to explain how the text works. Do your job.
- **Structural metaphors must also be explained.** If you're writing about a text, and you're arguing for an allegorical or symbolic meaning, it is necessary for you to sell the reader on your interpretation. Simply claiming that "X is a symbol for Y," without actually convincing the reader why this is so, is not getting it done. How important this sort of claim is to your argument determines the appropriate degree of explanation. If this claim is a minor point, append a phrase like "in the way that [brief explanation of how the two concepts are alike]." A more sustained focus on a symbol obviously requires more than just a sentence to convince.

### Not Connecting Metaphor to an Argument

- **Explaining how a literary device works is useless unless it advances an argument that you are making.** This means you need to be judicious in what you write about. A passing comparison that momentarily makes something more vivid is probably revealing themes in a work to a much lesser extent than metaphors that are being used to structure a work (symbols, extended metaphors, metaphorical titles, etc.).
- **Metaphors are usually more obviously thematic than most other literary devices.** This means it's often easier to connect metaphors to an argument a text is making than other ways of explicating the text. From an author's point of view, it's hard to come up with comparisons that haven't been done a million times before, so a lot of mental effort usually goes into producing metaphors that feel fresh to the reader. As such, this kind of effort is often reserved for ideas that the author feels are important.