

Figurative Language Vocabulary

allegory: a literary work in which characters, objects, or actions represent abstractions

allusion: a reference to something literary, mythological, or historical

apostrophe: when a writer breaks off and directs speech to an imaginary person or abstract quality or idea; e.g., “Roll on thou dark and deep blue ocean” (Lord Byron, “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage”)

conceit: an extended metaphor with a complex logic that governs a poetic passage or entire poem (between two concepts that would seem to have nothing in common); used most often in context of the so-called “metaphysical poets” of 17th Century England (especially John Donne); e.g.,

Batter my heart, three-person’d God; for you
As yet but knock; breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp’d town, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betroth’d unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

(John Donne, “Holy Sonnet XIV”)

fable: a brief story that leads to a moral, often using animals for characters; e.g., “The Tortoise and the Hare”

figurative language: a type of language that varies from the norms of literal language, in which words mean exactly what they say

metaphor: a forced comparison between two unlike concepts (without using “like” or “as”), e.g., “The gaping wounds of my wrongs too, was now quite healed.” (Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*)

metonymy (metonym): the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated; metonyms are substitutions, though the two concept will share associations, as opposed to the comparison of metaphor, e.g., “Hollywood” is used as a metonym for US cinema because of the fame and cultural identity of Hollywood, CA, but there is nothing “movie like” about the physical location itself (they merely share associations); “The pen [writing] is mightier than the sword [fighting]”

onomatopoeia: a word formed from the imitation of natural sounds; e.g., moo, buzz

parable: a simple story that illustrates a moral or religious lesson

personification: an assignment of human characteristics to non-human objects or ideas, e.g., “Your pity, my darling, is the suffering mother of love” (Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*)

simile: a direct comparison between two unlike concepts (using “like” or “as”); a simile is a specialized form of metaphor, e.g., “The café was like a battleship stripped for action.” (Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*)

symbol: a concept with significance beyond its obvious and immediate meaning (used to represent something else); this significance can be established using either the logic of metaphor or metonym

synecdoche: when the parts of something is used to signify the whole (or the reverse); synecdoche is a specialized form of metonymy, e.g., “All hands on deck;” “The pot is boiling;” “Houston played New York in the 1994 NBA finals;” “Was this the face that launched a thousand ships, / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?”-- referring to Helen of Troy (“the face”) and the Greek army (“a thousand ships”) (Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*);

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

(William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence”)