Similes

To appeal more readily to our understanding and imagination, poets use picture-giving word patterns that are called **figures of speech**. One of the most important of these is the *simile*.

A simile asks us to picture one thing as being similar to another and uses the words ‘like’, ‘as’ or ‘than’ to create the comparison in our minds. All of the following sayings are similes:

- as cool as a cucumber
- as slippery as an eel
- like a house on fire
- like a fish out of water

IDENTIFYING SIMILES

In the first verse of a poem which follows, the poet has used similes to stimulate the reader’s imagination. Write down the three similes from the poems and explain why you think the poet may have chosen them.

Timothy Winters comes to school
With eyes as wide as a football-pool,
Ears like bombs and teeth like splinters:
A blitz of a boy is Timothy Winters.

Metaphors

The *metaphor* takes us one step further than the simile. Instead of asking us to picture one thing as being *like* another, we are asked to picture one thing as *being* another. For example:

- The sun *is like* a golden coin (simile)
- The sun *is* a golden coin (metaphor)

IDENTIFYING METAPHORS

By their use of metaphors in ‘Green Lions’ and ‘Crow’, Douglas Stewart and Tim O’Coy present us with a new vision of familiar sights. Explain each metaphor.

*From Green Lions*

The bay is gouged by the wind.
In the jagged hollows green lions crouch
And stretch
And slouch
And sudden with spurting manes and a
  glitter of haunches
Charge at the shore
And rend the sand and roar

*Crow*

Sharp, shabby, avaricious,
A black oily rag...
Dracula of the airwaves.
IDENTIFYING SIMILES AND METAPHORS

Identify the similes and metaphors in the following poem, explaining why you think the poet chose these particular comparisons.

Slow Reader

He can make sculptures
And fabulous machines
Invent games, tell jokes
Give solemn, adult advice
But he is slow to read.
When I take him on my knee
With his Ladybird book
He gazes into the air
Sighing and shaking his head
Like an old man
Who knows the mountains
Are impassable.

He toys with words
Letting them grow cold
As grisly meat
Until I relent
And let him wriggle free-
A fish returning
To its element
Or a white-eyed colt
Shying from the bit
As if he sees
That if he takes it
In his mouth
He’ll never run
Quite free again.

VICKI FEAVER
Personification

**Personification** is a particular form of metaphor in which an object or an idea is spoken of as though it has human characteristics. For example:

> Fire raced with giant strides through the dry grass.

Here, the fire, which has no real life, is spoken of as thought it is a person. This is personification.

**A PERSONIFICATION POEM**

This poem by Theodore Roethke shows how human characteristics can be attributed to a most unlikely object – a geranium (a large and bright pot plant).

**The Geranium**

When I put her out, once, by the garbage pail,
She looked so limp and bedraggled,
So foolish and trusting, like a sick poodle,
Or a wizened aster in late September.
I brought her back in again
For a new routine-
Vitamins, water, and whatever
Sustenance seemed sensible
At the time: she’d lived
So long on gin, bobbie pins, half-smoked cigars, dead beer,
Her shrivelled petals falling
On the faded carpet, the stale
Steak grease stuck to her fuzzy leaves
(Dried-out, she creaked like a tulip.)

The things she endured!–
The dumb dames shrieking half the night
Or the two of us, alone, both seedy,
Me breathing booze at her,
She leaning out of her pot toward the window.

Near the end, she seemed almost to hear me–
And that was scary–
So when that snuffling cretin of a maid
Threw her, pot and all, into the trash-can,
I said nothing.

But I sacked the presumptuous hag the next week,
I was that lonely.

THEODORE ROETHKE
Symbolism

In our lives we are continually encountering symbols. The symbol may be the big ‘M’ for MacDonalds, or a traffic symbol for a slippery road. A symbol in poetry, as in other areas of life, refers to the use of a specific concrete object to stand for one or more abstract ideas. The grim reaper, for example, symbolises death, while the dove symbolises love and peace.

In poetry, symbols are used to increase our awareness or deepen our understanding. When a poet uses symbols, it is usually done with some subtlety. Sometimes a symbol will recur a number of times until we start to understand its significance in the poem. We can actually judge what something symbolises by looking at the poem as a whole. Once we have done this, some things start to glow with symbolic meaning and this always adds a certain richness to the writing. Of course, one of the dangers for a poet using symbolism is that the symbols may be too complicated or remote for the reader to understand.

IDENTIFYING SYMBOLS

The poet, William Blake, often used symbols in his poetry and this tendency is revealed in his poem ‘A Poison Tree’. This poem illustrates how the repression of anger can lead to hatred. A tree is a symbol of growth and development. Poison is a symbol of death and destruction. The juxtaposition (placing next to each other) of the two words suggests the irony of the poem – that the growth in this instance is that of a destructive force. Growth and destruction are normally opposites.

A Poison Tree

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I water’d it in fears,
Night and morning with my tears;
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright;
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine,

And into my garden stole
When the night had veil’d the pole:
In the morning glad I see
My foe outstretch’d beneath the tree.

WILLIAM BLAKE
Onomatopoeia

There are many words in English that actually suggest the sound of the action they are describing. That is, the sound echoes the sense of the word. Words such as ‘shriek’, ‘hiss’, ‘gurgle’, ‘patter’, ‘purr’, ‘buzz’ and ‘thud’ are just a few of the many sound-words we come across every day. The use of sound-words in poetry is called onomatopoeia.

IDENTIFYING ONOMATOPOEIA

Read aloud the sounds of the ice breaking in ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’:

*From The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

The ice was here, the ice was there,
The ice was all around:
It cracked and growled, and roared and
Howled,
Like noises in a swound!

AN ONOMATOPOEIC POEM

Ted Hughes enables us both to picture and hear the wild wind in his poem ‘Wind’:

*Wind*

The house has been far out at sea all night,
The winds crashing through darkness, the booming hills,
Winds stampeding the fields under the window
Floundering black astride and blinding wet

Till day rose; then under an orange sky
The hills had new places, and wind wielded
Blade-light, luminous black and emerald,
Flexing like the lens of a mad eye.

At noon I scaled along the house-side as far as
The coal-house door. Once I looked up-
Through the brunt wind that dented the balls of my eyes
The tent of the hills drummed and strained its guyrope,

The fields quivering, the skyline a grimace,
At any second to bang and vanish with a flap:
The wind flung a magpie away and a black-
Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly. The house

Rang like some fine green goblet in the note
That any second would shatter it. Now deep
In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip
Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought,
Or each other. We watch the fire blazing,
And feel the roots of the house move, but sit on,
Seeing the windows tremble to come in,
Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons.

TED HUGHES

**Alliteration**

The repetition of consonants, especially at the beginning of words, is called **alliteration**. Some poets use it to create rhythmical or musical effects; others to focus the reader’s attention on certain qualities or attributes.

**IDENTIFYING ALLITERATION**

What sound effects are created in the following example (taken from D. H. Lawrence’s poem ‘Snake’), and why are they appropriate?

*From Snake*

He reached down from a fissure in the earth-wall in the gloom
And traile[d] his yellow-brown slackness soft-bellied
down, over the edge of the stone trough
And rested his throa[t] upon the stone bottom,
And where the water had dripped from the tap, in a
small clearness,
He sipped with his straight mouth,
Softly drank through his straight gums, into his slack
long body.
Silently.

D. H. LAWRENCE
Assonance

Assonance is the repetition of identical vowel sounds followed by different consonant sounds (as distinct from rhyme in which the same vowel sounds are followed by the same consonant sounds). Thus, for example, ‘feel’ and ‘weed’ is an example of assonance; ‘feel’ and ‘wheel’ is an example of rhyme. Assonance is one of the techniques commonly used by poets to achieve a musical effect. Look at this example from ‘Ode to Autumn’ by Keats:

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thy sitting careless on a granary floor
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind.

The following groups of words show how Keats has used assonance. The italic type indicates the identical vowel sounds in each example:

- seen, thee, seeks
- sometimes, find
- amid, sitting, lifted, winnowing

IDENTIFYING ASSONANCE

Read through the poem ‘Thrush’. Write down two or three examples of assonance and explain what effect the poet has achieved in each:

Thrush

A Thrush, lush, limpid, O like lightning under
the mountain-piled white clouds, the caverns of the thunder,
O call, call, in cold cadenza call the rush,
the hush of rain. O drench, quench the summer hush
the thronging fires of red and yellow Christmas bells,
the sapling flames, each heat-hushed gum that shells
its sun-burned bark. O let the creek speak from soak
to soak; let the frogs croak, in chorus croak.
Ah thrush, limpid, lush, ah, let the rain be spent
night-long on the leaves, the mould, my stretched-tight tent.

ROLAND ROBINSON
**Hyperbole**

*Hyperbole* is a figure of speech which uses deliberate exaggeration in order to emphasise something. The purpose of hyperbole is to emphasise in order to make more dramatic or vivid.

*From A Red, Red Rose*

And I will love thee still, my dear,
Till a’ the seas gang dry;
Till a’ the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi’ the sun.

ROBERT BURNS

Highlight the examples of hyperbole in the following Australian poem:

*From The Wombat and Goanna*

I was shearing up in Queensland, then, where the Diamantina flows;
Where the lambs at birth are six feet high, and the dreaded hoop-snake grows;
Where the combs and cutters are two feet wide, and they really jar your hand
As you plough through half a ton of fleece and a hundredweight of sand:
Where the trains run up and down the board from the ringer’s to the learner’s pen.
And it takes a mighty gun to ring them sheds – with a thousand men.
Well I rung them sheds on the Brisbane side, the same as I’ve always done-
From the Kiwi Isles to the Northern Plains, from the East to the setting sun-
And the Banana Benders had to admit, I was still the greatest gun.