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Metaphor

The prospect of having to write a coursework essay that focusses on metaphor may seem daunting. Perhaps because the basic idea of metaphor seems so familiar to you, you may wonder how you'll find any sort of focus or definite thesis beyond "An Interpretation of Metaphors in [insert name of text here]." But perhaps we should say, at the outset, that *"an* idea of idea of metaphor seems so familiar to you." And, perhaps, by the end of this article and/or your writing process, you will have come to think of the familiar view of metaphor as a wrong or misleading view. "Metaphor" means "carrying over," or "carrying from one place to another" (see entries in Gray 1992 and Cuddon 1998). What, then, is "carried over" in metaphor? Usually, we think of a "carrying over" or "transfer" of meaning: the word "metaphor," we should note, has become reserved for studies in communication and expression, and, arguably, is most strongly associated with literary language (as narrator Christopher Boone likes to remind his reader, this means that, in the standard view, "metaphor" is a metaphor [Haddon 2003]). As Finch neatly summarizes it, the usual view is of a "process in which one semantic field of reference is carried over, or transferred, to another" (Finch 2000, p.169). That is more or less the view with which we will start; we will end, however, with a very different view.

Metaphor in Literature

A typical definition may tell you that metaphor is the life-blood of poetry. Cuddon, for example, calls metaphor "[t]he basic figure in poetry" (Cuddon 1999, p. 507). Wellek and Warren, too, are aware of the close association of metaphor and poetry, but equally are aware that metaphor is a commonplace in everyday language; what poetry does, they suggest, is exhibit poets' self-conscious uses of metaphorical language, the effect of which is to make careful readers generally more aware of metaphorical language (Wellek & Warren 1963, pp. 186, 27).

Poetry enjoys an elevated status in literary studies: "Poetry" names not just a genre of Literature; often, to refer to something as "poetic" or as "poetry" is to pass favourable judgement on its quality (McArthur 1992, p. 791). Additionally, poetry, as a genre, is often viewed as language in its most compressed, and therefore highly charged form. Certainly, an essay focussing on metaphor could be easily built around a poem that was clearly highly metaphorical. All one needs for this approach is a workable definition of metaphor, a suitable text, and you're away.

However, I do not wish to focus specifically, or primarily, on poetry (the genre). The word "poet" is derived from a Greek word meaning "maker"; "poetry," if we stretch its range of meaning almost to breaking-point, is potentially anything that is made or crafted. Sticking to the written word, then, we will consider all literature as poetry, in the broad sense of literature/poetry being the self-consciously crafted use of language, in written form.

Let us return to standard definitions of metaphor. Reference works will likely mention some or all of the following:

1) Metaphors are implicit comparisons, whereas similes (because of their typical grammatical construction – *x* was ***like*** *y*) are explicit.

2) Metaphors are a form of linguistic substitution (in contrast to *metonymy*, which relies on association or concatenation – click here for more): one thing stands for another.

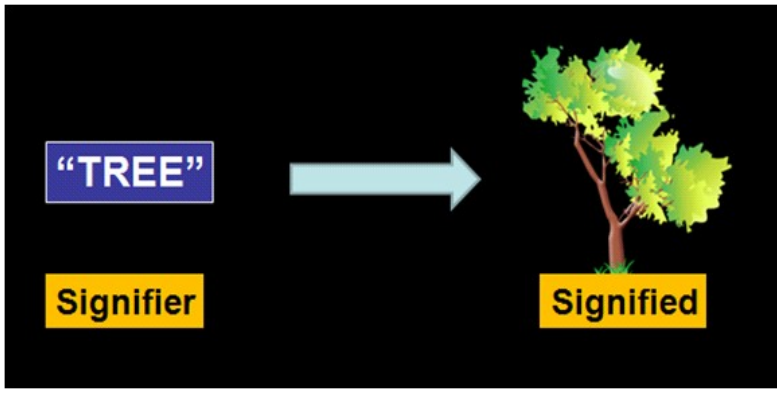
3) Because of the typical differences in their grammatical construction, similes are always true (for the simile *x* is ***like*** *y* to work, *x* really does need to be, in some way, like *y*); metaphors, by contrast are false (in order to "understand" a particular metaphor, we must not be confused into thinking that *x* really *is y*).*

4) Metaphors function on a principal of dual, or multiple, meaning, what I will call the "dual-track" principle. There are various permutations of the dual-track view; one of the better known ones comes from I.A. Richards, who divides metaphors into their "vehicle" and "tenor." "Tenor" refers to the content, the concept(s), what you might even have heard called the "hidden meanings," which "travel" in the metaphorical word(s), or "vehicle." So, "vehicle" is the form, while "tenor" is the meaning. To illustrate by means of an overused example: *He was a lion in battle*. Using Richards' terms, we can say that the word "lion" is the vehicle of a metaphor whose "tenor" is "bravery, loyalty, fearsomeness." To understand this metaphor, presumably we have to understand what lion means literally, and we have to be able to then "extend" its meaning beyond the literal.**

The points outlined above are more or less compatible with the "classical," Aristotelian view of metaphor and the "literal language theory" view. The "classical" view sees metaphor "as a kind of decorative addition to ordinary language" (Finch 2000, p.170). The "literal language theory" view holds that believes metaphor is understood through a process of "translation" back to the "real" meaning. In this view, we can, supposedly, say "this metaphor means *x*" (see Finch 2000, p. 170). Often, these definitions of "metaphor" seem fairly workable and clear. They furnish us with a little extra vocabulary, which will help us describe or report on what we already know – that metaphor is a system, or mechanism, for creating dual, multiple, perhaps "extended" and/or "hidden" meanings. But the works of philosophers like Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty (to name only two) introduce some rather interesting complications to this model. The primary problem, as I will try to explain below, is that the definitions we have reviewed are based on ideas of meaning that run into serious problems when we try to separate literal and metaphorical language.

Consider the dual-track view of metaphor I've outlined, best illustrated by Richards' vehicle/tenor distinction. The first thing worth mentioning is this: Richards' model *might* be a good model for the way language *in general* works, but it does not help us separate metaphorical language from non-metaphorical language. Here's a short story explaining why.

Once upon a time, the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure devised the following theory, intended to explain the relationship between words and their referents (the things/ideas that words "mean" or "point to"). He developed the following model: Words are *signs*, and signs can be divided into two parts, the *signifier* and the *signified*. The *signifier* is the word – the sounds made by a mouth, or the marks produced on a page by a pen – while the *signified* is the concept that the *signifier* represents:



End of story

Now, consider this: there is nothing particularly tree-like about the word "tree"; all that is needed for "tree" to communicate effectively is agreement (among all speakers and/or readers/writers) over what "tree" refers to when it is used.

How, then, in basic structure, does Richards' theory of metaphor differ from Saussure's theory of language? It is tempting to say that, at base, they do not differ greatly; both theories hinge on a separation of words and their objects. But if this is true, then the distinction between metaphorical and literal language seems to be breaking down. For Saussure's is a general theory of language and meaning, not of metaphor, and if there is little difference between him and Richards, then Richard may not actually be telling us much about what makes metaphors distinctive.

Theories of metaphor should not be theories of meaning

If the problem outlined above makes sense to you, then, you may be wondering, *what will be the fate of metaphor?* Actually, the approach with which I will end this section makes the following argument: metaphor is alive and well, but when we try to explain what it is and/or how it works, we should not get confused into offering theories of *meaning.* This will probably sound strange; let me explain.

In the above example, all that is needed for the *sign* "tree" to be meaningful is that we understand the correlation of spoken/written *signifier* to *signified.* I used the example of "tree" because there is relatively little chance of you, the reader, misunderstanding my example. But, of course, I might use "tree" to signify something like this: "a visual or mental representation of my family history." Or, perhaps less likely, I might use "tree" to signify this: "the structure of hierarchy in a corporate body (e.g., a school or business)." "Tree," then, does not always mean the same thing in every context; it does not always mean "a plant having a permanently woody main stem or trunk, ordinarily growing to a considerable height, and usually developing branches at some distance from the ground" (dictionary.com).

In order to cover "tree" as it is defined in the previous paragraph, a dictionary would have to list three distinct definitions, *and* provide examples of sentences which exemplify these definitions. That is to say, for a dictionary to make sense of "tree" as we now have it, what it would have to describe is *a range of ways, or contexts in which, "tree" is used.* The dictionary would, in our imagined example, have to explain *usage,* rather than meaning (as we normally understand the term); it would have to explain that "tree" is *used for* referring, in

different contexts, to “a woody-stemmed plant etc.,” and/or a diagram of family history, and/or a diagram of professional hierarchy.

What are the implications of all this, when thinking about metaphor? First, we might want to re-think what we *mean* when we talking about words' *meaning*s. If someone were to ask you what “tree” means, your first response would, more than likely, be a version of “a woody-stemmed plant etc., etc…”; but you would have no problem, if you were prompted by further questions, expanding your definition to include the other options mentioned above. So, when we think of what “meaning” *mean*s, we might want to say something like this:

> *the full range of words' meanings are generated by the* ***different ways in which they are used***. E.g., “tree” means differently depending on the *context* in which it is used. By context here, we mean such things as *topic of conversation*, *the words and sentences that precede and follow the particular occurrences of “tree”; the who/what/why/when/where of the conversation or text.*

With this slightly sharpened definition of “meaning” in mind, I will end this section by considering the views of metaphor developed by Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty, views which might be seen as compatible with what Finch terms the “romantic” account of metaphor (in this account, just as I have hinted above, there is no firm distinction between metaphorical and literal language) (Finch 2000, p. 171). A first principle to work from, then. If comparing the theories of language and metaphor Suassure and Richards offer makes us realize that we cannot use either one to distinguish metaphorical and non-metaphorical language, we might be tempted to say something like this:

> *All language is metaphorical. Language uses one thing (noises uttered, and/or marks made on a page) to “stand for” something else (the thing(s) represented by the noises/marks). So words “stand in for” other, non-linguistic things. But words often, if not always, have the capacity to refer to many different things; this depends on the contexts in which words are used.*

Note: in your essays, after using Saussure and Richards to illustrate the difficulties of separating metaphorical and non-metaphorical language, a definition along these lines might be helpful.

The point, then, is not to distinguish between metaphorical and non-metaphorical (or literal) language. Rather, the point is to distinguish between what we might call “live” and “dead” metaphors (Gray 1992, pp. 174-76; refer also to your AQA Critical Anthology on this). “Live” metaphors are those that strike us as unusual; they force the attentive listener/reader to pause, to pick over the words and phrases, to consider the possible range of significations of the metaphor. And to do this, we have to do two things: 1) we have to work through all the possible concepts that the metaphor “stands for”***; 2) we have to consider the *context*, the way in which the word(s) has been *used*, in order to appreciate the ways in which the metaphor illustrates, illuminates, or perhaps complicates our understanding of the text.

The point that Donaldson would make is this: we confuse the issue, and ourselves, when we ask “what does this metaphor mean?” The ideas that metaphors can have “dual,” “multiple,” or “extended” meanings, beyond the “dual,” “multiple,” or “extended” of “normal” words is a nonsense, he says. If this were true, we would

forever be afloat in a sea of possible meanings, with no hope of anchorage or orientation. Metaphors, says Donaldson, can only ever mean what the word or words normally mean. What gives them their interest or "magic" – and this is the difference between what we might call "live" and "dead" metaphors (or, indeed, just "interesting language") – is the innovative ways in which words are combined, the new contexts in which words appear. When critics and teachers say "this metaphor means *x*," they are, Donaldson would argue, getting confused. They are offering up the particular associations the metaphor has excited in *their* minds, but presenting them as "the" meaning. Metaphors have the resonances they do because they set off a potentially endless string of associations in the reader's mind. And because there are no rules governing the string of associations, metaphors remain potentially open. Forever.

All this does *not* mean, of course, that people cannot agree on what metaphors "mean"; but agreement is just that – it is an agreement that the metaphor in question excites the same or similar associations in the minds of more than one reader. And such agreement is, likely, the result of critical discussion/argument, and perhaps also the of readers having a lot of information/context in common with one another.

So, in metaphors the words can only mean what the words normally mean; they are no "hidden" meanings as such. But there is nothing restricting the full range of associations any one reader might read into a metaphor. Here are some of Davidson's own words:

> The common error is to fasten on the contents of the thoughts a metaphor provokes and to read these contents into the metaphor itself. [...] When we try to say what a metaphor "means," we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention. [...] You might list a great many [things], but you could not finish since the idea of finishing would have no clear application. (Davidson 1978, pp. 222, 223)

Rorty takes his cue from Davidson. He argues that we should give up asking whether this or that sentence, and, more broadly, this or that theory, describes the world better or worse (that is, more or less truly or accurately) than the next. There is a real world out there, stresses Rorty, but language will not pull us to, nor push us farther from, it. Language will, rather, simply make us see the world differently. The point Rorty wishes to make is this: for a long time, many people have assumed that language is a system for *representing* the world. Most of us would call literal language that which gives the clearest and "truest" picture of the world (for example, the "truest" understanding of the organization and movement of the planets). But Rorty disagrees. He believes that language does not *reflect,* it *makes.* Language *constructs* our realities – that is, the broader, the more supple and subtle our vocabularies, the more nuanced will be our *interpretations and understandings of the world.* This takes us back to the earlier point: *all language is metaphorical*. The interesting task for Rorty, then, is not sorting literal from metaphorical language; rather, it is to consider those words, sentences, and theories that make us *see the world anew*. What we call "literal language" is, for Rorty, simply language whose metaphorical (or "metaphoricity") we no longer notice (e.g., "table leg"). The point is to revel in those metaphors that strike us as interestingly, magically metaphorical, because they make us see and think afresh; they make us view the world as if for the first time.

I can offer a concrete example of this, drawn from recent experience: introducing a Year 13 English Literature class to the notion of Baudrillard's "hyperreal" (Baudrillard 1994), and nervously asking if the idea was

appealing/sensical/interesting, one or two students said that Baudrillard's theory expressed, differently, views they already intuited. I make no grand claims – either on my or Baudrillard's behalves – to altering anyone's world view, but I hope the point is more or less clearly made here. For some, it might be reasonable to suggest, Baudrillard offered a vocabulary in which to phrase thoughts and ideas that had almost-but-not-quite found their tongues (metaphorically speaking, of course…).

Approaches for your coursework

1) Of course, the option of simply offering close, detailed readings of a range of metaphors that occur in, say, a poem is open to you. This is a relatively straightforward approach; it will be strengthened if you build an argument around a particular theme or set of themes, and investigate the ways in which the poet's metaphorical strategies impact on these and their development across the text. It may be helpful to consider, in keeping with Finch's definition of metaphor (see above), whether a particular theme or idea in a text is developed by drawing on just one semantic field, or several. The relationship of "symbol" to "metaphor" might also be a helpful consideration here (see note **** below). Taking this approach, you may wish to use some of the above discussion, and perhaps some of sources listed below, to give a sense that you understand some of the problems that hide behind the superficially easy notion of metaphor.

2) If you are attracted the romantic/Davidson/Rorty account of metaphor, then you may wish to use elements from the discussion presented here, and/or the sources cited below, to complicate the "standard," dual-track view of metaphor. From there, you may wish to consider the metaphorical richness of texts that are not so obviously "literary" as, say, Shakespeare's sonnets. Remember Davidson's argument that metaphors do not have special or extended meanings; rather, they are the result of usual meanings – for him, there cannot be any other sort of meaning – being arranged unusually. In my Year 13 class, we have considered the metaphorical richness of "I do not" in Saunders's story "Pastoralia" (2000). Here, context and grammar are everything. The sentence – which is easily understood but, in a prescriptive sense, grammatically incomplete or "incorrect" – is an answer to a question, to which the narrator has to respond as part of a daily, professional evaluation. But towards the end of the story, this sentence constitutes an entire paragraph. And simply because of its structural and graphological isolation on the page, and the way it is repeated or threaded throughout the story, this grammatically "broken," single-sentence paragraph takes on a metaphorical or symbolic**** resonance that draws the story's themes – of *ennui*, isolation, alienation, socio-economic decline and decay – together.

Notes

* To make sense of this difference, apply the basic rule that metaphors are false, similes true, to this:

A) He was a lion in battle.

B) He was like a lion in a battle.

For criticism of this model, read on, and see also Davidson (1978).

** For more on METAPHOR, TENOR, and VEHICLE, see the entries on these terms in Cuddon (1999) and Gray (1992). For criticism of the dual-track view of metaphor, see Davidson (1978). Richards develops this theory in Richards (1926).

*** Maryanne Wolf (2008) explains that when we read a word, our brains "select," as it were, the correct meaning (as far as is possible) from a mental filing cabinet (the *metaphor* here is mine) of possible meanings. Again, the context in which a word appears must surely play a role here. Interestingly, we do always experience this cognitive "searching" for meanings – Wolf is *not* talking about those occasions when we vaguely remember a word but are not quite certain of its meaning. Here then, is a distinctly spooky possibility: it may be right to say that our brains "sort through" and "select" the correct meanings of words, but, because *we* ourselves are not aware of this process, it might not be right to say the *we* do it. Is this not a little strange? To say my brain selects... but I do not?

**** Wellek and Warren suggest that the difference between a metaphor and a symbol is deliberate repetition. Thus, a metaphor that is used repeatedly throughout a text, and seems to adds to it's thematic coherence, might just as well be called a symbol as a metaphor (Wellek and Warren 1963, p.189).

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