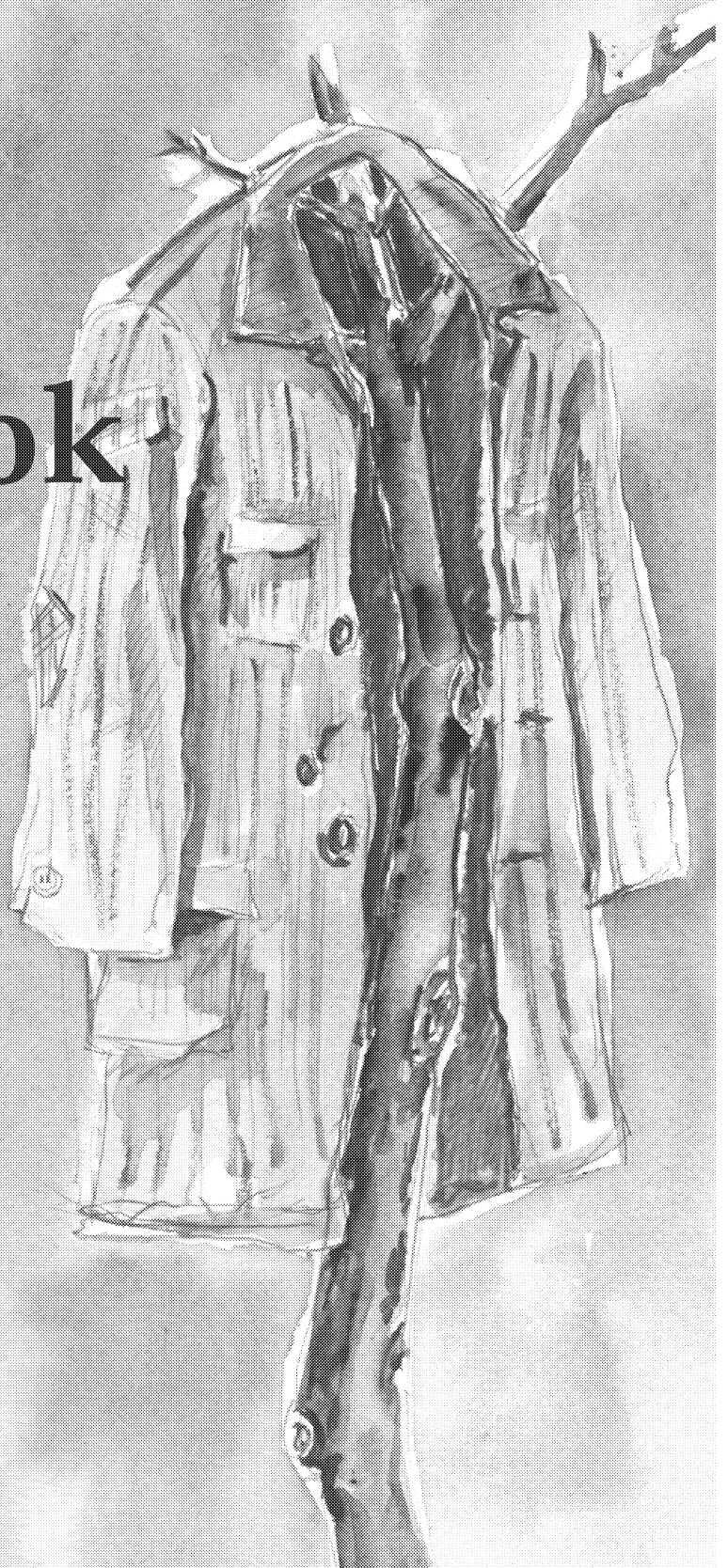


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Poetry & Prose Handbook

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To the teacher

This book, designed for grades 9 to 12, contains an interactive and sophisticated approach to teaching students about literary devices. Students learn by reading concise, accurate definitions; by following a variety of examples; and by applying new ideas in their own creative writing. The goal is to teach students not only to identify literary devices, but truly to understand them—their nuances, their challenges, and their pleasures.

Two sections are devoted to each literary device: a page or so of explanation followed by a set of activities. First, the device is introduced in a clear and precise way. Students are then presented with an example of how the device can be employed. In most cases, discussion of a more subtle application of the term follows, again with an example. Since the examples are an important aspect of the instruction method, they have been chosen carefully: all contain accessible language, and they come from a variety of periods and writers. When students have read the text and have proceeded to the activity page, they are asked to demonstrate that they understand the device and can identify it in a text. They also complete creative exercises in which they employ the device; often these are modeled on the examples previously cited.

The devices covered span the spectrum from basic terms to relatively complex ones, and the book aims to explain each in a way that is appropriate for the suggested audience. Assuming that students have already encountered terms such as simile, metaphor, and alliteration, the text and activities emphasize their import and introduce their various manifestations. More advanced concepts such as allusion or apostrophe are presented with a

detailed definition, but, again, students are encouraged to consider the functions—in addition to the meanings—of such terms.

Students thus learn about how plastic literary devices can be, as well as how they impact a text and affect the reader. Indeed, while each of the devices covered has a distinct definition and function, they often overlap. Lines of imagery contain metaphor; a metaphor personifies; something personified is a symbol for something else. This book was written with the assumption that the precise points at which a metaphor becomes a symbol is less important than the way all of these devices combine to enhance the reader's—the student's—understanding of the concept or scene described.

The Cumulative Activity was designed to encourage overall appreciation of the variety and power of literary devices. In completing the exercises, students witness the way that many devices can be present in the same poem—or even in the same line or word of a poem. They are then given the chance to employ several devices at once in their own writing. When students are ready for such creative work, teachers should encourage students to go beyond the instructions; incorporating a device in addition to the ones assigned, or substituting one for another, should be welcomed. Ideally, students will enjoy the experience of manipulating language to express themselves in a way that is accurate and beautiful. As they learn to do so, their interest in and connection to the work of others will be deepened.

simile

A simile used the word *like* or *as* to compare two seemingly unlike things. “The moon was as white as a desert-bleached bone” is a simile; so is “Her sadness seeped into the room like ink spilled on a white shirt.”

Similes are compelling because they present innovative descriptions, often ones that startle the reader with an unexpected image or vibrant vision. Rather than just noting that the moon was white, for instance, the simile used above lets us know exactly what kind of white the moon was. Further, it may inspire us to think of bones sitting out in the desert, an image that may help set a certain mood or foreshadow something that will happen later. Similarly, the second simile tells us not only how her sadness slowly, but irrevocably, seeped into the room; it lets us imagine that her dark sadness is a contrast to the lighter room.

Similes are common in both poetry and prose, and are often seen in non-fiction descriptive writing as well. Notice how this simile, from Christopher Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*, compares pebbles to diamonds but actually reveals something about the character’s beauty:

About her neck hung chains of pebble-stone
Which, lightened by her neck, like diamonds shone.

Jonathan Swift relied on similes as a descriptive device when writing *Gulliver’s Travels*, in which he narrates adventures to strange lands populated by imaginary creatures. Here is part of a description of Yahoos, which we have been told are something like humans: “They climbed high trees, as nimbly as a squirrel, for they had strong extended claws before and behind, terminating in sharp point, and hooked.” Picturing a squirrel scampering up a tree trunk helps us to imagine the Yahoo.

One of the most famously striking similes of the twentieth century can be found in the opening of T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table . . .

The invitation “let us go then” is friendly, and we expect that that the evening “against the sky” will be blue, or relaxed, or portentous. Instead, it is lying, drugged, unconscious. The evening suddenly seems threatening, and the tone of the poem becomes ominous and clinical.

simile activities

1. In the spaces below, write similes to complete the following sentences or phrases. Try to think of aspects of these objects that are unique or unexpected, and choose appropriately striking objects of comparison.

The window was _____.

His eyebrows _____.

Her eagerness _____.

The bath _____.

My grandmother's hands _____.

2. Write down three instances in which employing similes would be especially helpful to describing something to your audience.
3. Take out a work of fiction and find two similes in it. Is one better than the other? Why? Which presents an image that makes you stop to consider it?
4. Write a poem describing yourself using only similes. You should include both physical characteristics and personality traits.