

#Flashwrite Teen Poetry MOOC 2016

CLASS TWO • Transcript

>> Welcome back guys. Last time we talked about an aspect of craft in poetry, called imagery. And I want to talk really, really briefly about that real quick. While we, throughout this MOOC, are going to learn things individually, we never really work, in the creative process at least, with these things exclusively.

What I mean is, while we're going to spend time today talking about another aspect of craft, it doesn't mean we now forget what we talked about last time. Over the course of this MOOC, we want you to be building a sort of poetic toolbox, something you can carry with you, and you can learn which tool you need to use at which time to make sure the poem you're writing is as secure, as tight, as strong as it can be.

So today's element of craft that we're going to focus on is figurative language. There's an essay that you guys have listed under your assignments called, "Learning About Figurative Language," with the wonderful subtitle, "how to use simile and metaphor like a boss." It is written by Rebecca Hazelton, and I suggest you read it, especially after this video you feel like you could use, not only a refresher on figurative language, but maybe some exercises which she does include at the end as well.

When we first talk about figurative language it's important to remember that there are different types of ways we can use the words that we want in a poem. We can have something that's called a literal description, which is mostly what we talked about when we were looking at imagery.

But we can also give that literal description new life by focusing on something called figurative language. When we use figurative language, we are often comparing or equating two or more unlike things in order to bring, and this is important, a deeper emotional connection for the reader. And there are many types of figurative language, and again, I'm sure most of you have covered some of this in school, or have come across it through other types of exams, and in tests, in conversations you've had with friends, whatever it may be.

But we're going to focus on two specific kinds of figurative language, and those are called simile and metaphor. Now first, simile. Similes compare two unlike things using the word "like" or "as" Really basic simple example: Love is like a rose. Well, what does that mean? We go with the idea, love, and then we compare it to something so that maybe someone who hasn't experienced it can get an idea of what it feels like.

So, in this case, love, the beautiful thing. The sweet thing. The wonderful thing we all want, it is like a rose. What is a rose? A rose is a flower and it smells pretty. And when they grow, they're often red. And they're just so visually stunning. But, what else can a rose do?

It can prick you with its thorns. So, love is beautiful. But it also hurts. If we said love is beautiful, but it also hurts, that is a literal description and it's not really that interesting. And so when we move to a simile, to use figurative language, we breathe new life into what could be a tired image.



So simile, comparing two unlike things, often using like or as, in fact always using like or as. Then we move on to metaphor. Metaphors directly equate dissimilar things. And I want to repeat that last part, dissimilar things. We're going to talk about that more in a second. Here's an example:

Time is a thief. There's no like or as there, directly equating time and thief. Is time really a thief? Is time, the idea of it, stealing something from me. Not literally, but figuratively it is. It's in some ways taking my life. Time is a thief is an example of a metaphor.

Now what we're going to do in a little bit is we're going to look at some poems that utilize simile metaphor. But, before we do that I want to talk about a couple important things about both of them. First of all, it's important to remember that metaphor because it directly relates the dissimilar things, it's a little bit riskier.

You can sometimes write a metaphor that might be so good, or have such a literal reading, that a reader might actually not recognize that it's a metaphor. So we have to be really careful with how we present it. Now when we go to simile, it's important to acknowledge that the simile admits that it's actually not similar to the thing that it is comparing because it uses the word "like" or "as." By me saying love is like a rose, I'm saying in that sentence it's like but it's not, so it's a little more clear.

So if you're concerned that the reader might not get it and it's really important for you to use figurative language and to tie it in to what the reader can connect to. You might at times choose a simile, but if you really want to take a risk, sometimes a metaphor can be a little bit more effective.

Now, metaphors and similes only work when they are illuminating and helping us better understand or see something. We cannot use similar comparisons because that doesn't help us see anything new. Let's look at a very quick example. There's a poem that is not included in your handout, we're not going to read the whole thing, by Norman Dubie.

And it's called "The Funeral." I want to just call attention to the very last couple lines of that poem. In this poem, as stated in the title, the narrator, the speaker, is at a funeral and he talks about going back to where his aunt lived and he remembers being a kid and watching the minnows nibble at his toes and feeling the way that felt and standing in the river.

And then we sort of learn, again from the title and from some of the turns in the poem, that the speaker is recognizing that the woman has died. And then we find out that he's actually at the funeral. And when he's standing at the funeral, they're laying the body to rest.

And then there's a moment at the very end where he says that one of his uncles looked around in sort of in a low voice said, "the cancer ate her like horse piss eats deep snow." First of all it sounds beautiful, but it's disgusting. But let's unpack that simile.

The cancer ate her. So the cancer really killed her. But how did it do it? Like horse piss eats deep snow. Now, maybe some of you have animals, maybe some of you don't, but have you seen an animal urinate on snow, or water poured on snow? The snow vanishes.

A big hole comes where the water came. So what Norman Dubie is trying to show there is what? That the cancer killed her, went through her body very quickly. And by saying it ate her, it feels very unpleasant, right? Now think about how that would change if we said, "the cancer ate her like a debilitating disease."

Okay, like a debilitating disease. Well, actually that's not different from cancer. So, by me trying to compare it to something that it already is, I as a reader am not learning anything new. I'm not using what we're supposed to be connecting to when we're using similes and metaphors.

I'm not taken anywhere new. Now, same thing, what if I said or Norman Dubie had said, "the cancer ate her like a caterpillar gnawing on a leaf." Does it sound as scary, does it sound as painful, does it sound as alarming? No, it doesn't. So even sometimes, once we recognize we're not comparing two similar things, we need to make sure they're different cancer and a caterpillar are pretty dissimilar, but the caterpillar doesn't necessarily give me the feeling that I need which is disgusting, pain, the quickness of it, and that's why he went with horse piss eating deep snow.

Now to take it further, again, horse piss is something that's disgusting. People don't often want to use those words. By using something so grotesque and out of the ordinary, especially for a poem, he's showing us, even in the beauty of the sounds, he's showing us the effectiveness of a simile.

But at that moment, if you want to feel something different as a reader, we can do so if the writer, poet gives us a simile. Okay. So there you have it. Similes and metaphors should transport the audience. They should help them feel something new and to better understand someone else's experience.

We understand Norman Dubie's experiences, when he says the cancer ate her like horse piss eats deep snow. When writing similes and metaphors, last thing I want you to think about is avoiding something called the cliché. We're not going to get too much into cliché and definitions, maybe you can talk to the moderators about this on the discussion boards.

But in general the rule of thumb is cliché is an over used image, idea, word, or phrase. It's something that too many people already expect so it has lost its value. When we go back to one of the examples that I gave before, love is like a rose.

We heard that so many times that actually it just kind of sounds boring. Right? Now I'm going to take the exact same idea, love is beautiful, but it can hurt you. Now I'm going to substitute like a rose and we're just going to throw something else in there. We'll see if it's a little more lively for you.

Love is a dog from hell. Same thing right. Love is like a rose, love is like a dog from hell. Or to make it a metaphor, love is a rose, love is a dog from hell. What is a dog supposed to be, friendly, always there for you, something that can comfort, something that you can love and that loves you back and that holds you and protects you in all these ways.

It's this beautiful friendship, that's what love can be like, it's the feelings it can give you. But, it's a dog from hell? What might it do? It might bite your face off. It might hurt you. So by changing up a tired image, a tired idea, by adding a new simile, a new aspect to the simile we've created a new connection.

And that line, by the way, loves a dog from hell, it's from a poet named Charles Bukowski. You can read his work, hopefully you'll enjoy it. What metaphors and similes want to do, and again this is noted in Rebecca Hazelton's essay which again I really encourage you guys to read.

Metaphors and similes aim to always be apt, which means they should be accurate, and surprising. So to be apt they need to make sure we're not comparing similar things, we want to compare

dissimilar things to make sure the connection is there. But they also want to be surprising. You don't want it to feel like it's a cliché.

Okay, finally, remember that without figurative language, we are just, as Rebecca Hazelton says, robotic outsiders. We're just writers with fewer ways to connect. When we think about imagery, we try to be that video camera. We try to specify and really focus on the colors and the details. When we allow ourselves to move towards figurative language, we can take those colors and those images and we can make them mean other things to allow a reader to have more access to our emotional space or our experience.

>> Okay, let's look at a couple poems that might help illustrate this. First, I want to look at a very famous poem that's only two lines, so it'll be quick, called "In a Station of the Metro" by Ezra Pound. And Ezra Pound's, amongst many other things, sort of followed for a little while this idea of what's called imagism, which was directly treating the idea, directly treating the thing.

The poem goes like this:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

So what do we have here? We have in a station of the metro. So we have somebody in a train station, a railway station. And suddenly what we see is the apparition of these faces in a crowd.

Out of darkness these faces come to light. Ghostly, but also the appearance of something remarkable. Here come these faces. And now, what is that like? What's the metaphor? It's like petals on a wet black bough. If you think of the stalk of a flower, or the trunk of a tree with leaves coming off of it, if it's black you almost can't see it, and then the petals, what?

They pop. And you see those faces, but we also see them briefly. Because, just like a tree or a flower, maybe we walk right by it. In this case, he's showing the inability to keep that image, for it to stay where it is. And as these people move by him on the platform or in the train, all he's seeing, is very briefly those faces appear and then pull away.

And, again, what is that like? It's like the petals on a bough, yeah? More examples? Okay. I want to look at a little longer poem, and this is one that's going to sort of extend a metaphor. So in the example we just looked at, it was really tight, it was really contained, and it was relatively quick.

This is a poem by Kevin Young called "Song of Smoke." And later in this discussion we're going to talk about you holding your own sort of writing experience in trying to create a piece in which you use a simile or a metaphor as a way of giving an old idea sort of new wings.

So here, I won't tell you what it is, but this is a pretty old idea that I think is given new wings. "Song of Smoke:"

To watch you walk
cross the room in your black

corduroys is to see
civilization start—

the wish-
whisk-whisk

of your strut is flint
striking rock--the spark

of a length of cord
rubbed till

smoke starts--you stir
me like coal

and for days smolder.
I am no more

a Boy Scout and, besides,
could never

put you out—you
keep me on

all day like an iron, out
of habit—

you threaten, brick-
-house, to burn

all this down. You leave me
only a chimney.

Let's go all the way to the back to the beginning. So it's a song, and it's a song of smoke. Smoke is something you can't grasp, you can't hold. It's there, it can choke you, but it's just sort of in the air, all around you.

And we start with this person walking. To watch you walk across the room with these pants on. It's to see what? So here's where the metaphor begins, it's to see civilization start. Familiar idea. To see you walk is to see humans reach an advanced stage. When I see you walk, it's as if life has come to its highest point.

What does that mean? Well, when we start a civilization, we need things like fire. And we feel this energy. This heat between the speaker and this person, but we never really say fire, until the very end there's the word burn. So right away, there's the flint. Right away there's the spark, a length of cord.

Right away, there's smoke starting. Then there's being stirred like coal, which is obviously a simile. Then there's smoldering. And then there's being left on like an iron. And then there's something being burnt down until there's destruction. So what does all this mean? Here's a speaker that's trying to say, maybe you guys have felt this before:

Man, I'm feeling you, right? I have a big crush on you. I am so into you. And you either are ignoring me, or you know what you're doing and you're okay with that, and I can't do anything about it. And in the end, you threaten to essentially leave me a wreck of myself.

But you know what? I'm kind of okay with it. It's kind of beautiful, I want to sing this song. And if we dial this back and we think again, that's the extended metaphor that we get from the beginning. But he also peppers in these similes. So let's go through a couple of them, right?

You stir me like coal. If you stir coal or you poke at a fire, you are trying to reignite the fire, keep it going. So, even when, maybe I walk away or try to forget you, or move on, what do you do? You keep stirring it. You keep walking by me.

You keep making me feel like I've got a chance. Later he says, you leave me on all day like an iron, out of habit. You may not even know out of habit, you may not even know how much you literally turn me on, you leave me on all day.

It's out of habit and that connection to the iron, something that could be hot, that could make something smooth if used right, is important here because he's not being used right. He's not being helpful. He's just sitting there on. And his heat isn't working. And then again, it comes back and it says, you've threatened brick house.

Which brick house is obviously the way in which you could build something. But brick house also is a way to describe people. It has a connotation in which it describes a body. So that's important. It brings back us slowly to the idea of this house actually being a human, right?

Or this person being present in the poem again. And again, you leave me only a chimney, you leave me a wreck of myself. When you're considering how metaphors work think back to this poem. It builds really beautifully at the beginning and then uses such a curious thing. An apt comparison that is also fresh.

It's like seeing civilization, like seeing civilization start. And then from there it's all about fire. And where as many people would say, The Door's song Come On Baby Light My Fire, right? If you turn on any pop song, I'm sure there's fire and heat. All these things are coming up.

He doesn't want to use those words, and yet, do you feel the heat? Yes, because of figurative language.

>> Okay, quickly, I want to look at just two more brief examples. "Song of Smoke," as I said, was sort of an extended metaphor that had a couple similes. The next poem I want to look at is just a piece that uses individual similes to help us understand a new meaning from the piece, and this is called "And Then It Was Less Bleak Because We Said So." It's by Wendy Xu:

Today there had been so much talk of things exploding
 into other things, so much that we all become curious, that we
 all run outside into the hot streets
 and hug. Romance is a grotto of eager stones
 anticipating light, or a girl whose teeth
 you can always see. With more sparkle and pop
 is the only way to live. Your confetti tongue explodes
 into acid jazz. Small typewriters
 that other people keep in their eyes
 click away at all our farewell parties. It is hard
 to pack for the rest of your life. Someone is always
 eating cold cucumber noodles. Someone will drop by later
 to help dismantle some furniture. A lot can go wrong
 if you sleep or think, but the trees go on waving
 their broken little hands.

We dial this back to the beginning. We start in a really located, really easy to access point. Today, there has been so much talk of things exploding. Now you pay attention to the news, unfortunately these things happen every day.

There's a bomb, a terrorist attack, something terrible in the world. And if we pay attention to stuff all the time as she says at the end, if we sleep or think, things can be really terrible. So what does she do? She takes what could be hopelessness and she starts to shift it.

There's all this talk of things exploding, so what did we do? We ran outside into the streets and we hugged. Then there's a really beautiful metaphor: Romance is a grotto of eager stones anticipating light. What does that mean? Again, it's not love is a rose. This is more love is a dog from hell.

It's taking an old idea and making it new, central to the poem. Romance is a grotto. Romance is like a cave. It's something that maybe feels like we start on our own, but it's eager with stones anticipating light. We know that there is something beautiful out there, and if we fulfill the movement of the romance.

If we keep pursuing it, if we keep love in our hearts, that light might just come in and light the cave up. It's that anticipation and I love what she does next. If that doesn't do it for the reader, let's try again. It's like a cave or, she says, like a girl whose teeth you can always see.

And that's really curious. For a while, I remember the first time I read this poem I thought that's really beautiful. What does it mean? And I can leave that up to you. I'll tell you though I know when I laugh or when I smile when I'm really happy, it's when my teeth show.

So what is romance? Romance is like someone who is always happy, and always full of joy. We never have to say these kind of tired words. Happiness, joy, love. We can say it through anticipation of stones and light, and through a girl with teeth always showing. Later, there's another couple images that show up that I think are effective because of the way figurative language is used.

Your confetti tongue explodes into acid jazz. Did that really happen? No, it's figurative. Small typewriters that other people keep in their eyes click away at our farewell parties. Now, I believe, as a writer, this happens, maybe it happens to everybody, we go to an event, someone's going-away party or the last day of school or Graduation.

And in our eyes, what are we doing? We're sort of writing the memory. So, instead of just saying people are sitting there, being nostalgic for some moment that's happening now, or everybody's there taking in the memory, taking in the moment, she brings it back to writing, to the physicality, what actually is happening.

We're looking at each other, we're seeing the experience and it's like somebody's got a typewriter in our eyes and we're just jotting down notes. It's new, it's fresh and it makes me feel something but it's also where the turn occurs. From the beginning, there was explosion, but then there was romance.

But then it comes back and it says people are leaving. And then someone's always eating cold cucumber noodles they're not even cooked well, they're just cold. Sounds kinda lonely and then someone will drop by later to help dismantle furniture. Again, it means somebody's moving on, something's changing. And then it says, a lot can go wrong if you stop to think, if we really start to think about all this stuff.

Even the beautiful stuff with romance, things can fail so there's a lot of hopelessness but that's not where the poem leaves us. It comes back to this metaphor of trees waving their, not little hands, their broken little hands. What does that mean? One could argue that it means, yes there's bombs, and yes love can be great and then feel like it's destroyed you, like it did in "Song of Smoke."

And we can have people in our lives that leave, and the furniture's being dismantled. But through it all, if we have faith in the movement of the world, the trees stay up and life goes on. We can be hopeful because even if it gets windy and a storm passes through, the trees stay there with their broken little hands.

They're not leaving and you don't have to either, life can go on. It's a poem of hope that starts with destruction. That's what figurative language can do. It can send us to a new meaning and way to understand it. And finally the last thing I want to show you guys is a figurative language, is just that this is not a new idea, right?

We use figurative language with our speech everyday. You walk out of a class and someone says, how was class today. And you say I feel like I'm dying in there. Are you really dying in there? No, I hope not, right? We use hyperbole, we use other forms of figurative language all the time, we use similes all the time.

But a lot of other writers have done this too, so we've been looking at a lot of contemporary writers, but I want to draw your attention to a wonderful poet, hopefully you guys have heard about, Emily Dickinson. I want to leave you with this piece, it's known as "'Hope' is the thing with feathers:"

"Hope" is the thing with feathers-
That perches in the soul-

And sings the tune without the words-
 And never stops - at all-

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard-
 And sore must be the storm-
 That could abash the little Bird
 That keeps so many warm-

I've heard it in the chillest land-
 And on the strangest Sea-
 Yet - never - in Extremity,
 It asked a crumb - of me.

Same idea as Wendy Xu's beautiful poem. Hope, it says at the beginning, is what? Hope in this case for the metaphor is the thing with feathers and what do we learn? Hope is like a bird sitting in our soul and it sings without words.

And it never stops and even in the gale, even when a storm comes, the words are there. And everything could try to crush the bird, even when it keeps everybody warm, but even in the chilliest land, the most frozen place, the most stormiest situation you could ever be in, hope is still there.

It never asks of anybody anymore to be hopeful. So we can keep on living, remembering. And if we are hopeful, there's always possibility that things will change, get better, etc. Small idea hey, keep your chin up, we say to each other. Hey, be hopeful it'll get better tomorrow.

But when we use the bird we make it a figurative piece of language and we extend the metaphor. We have now something new to connect to. There's a hopeful burn in my chest too. It's always going to be there even if today was bad and tomorrow's worse. These are all the things that you should keep in mind as you move towards your next assignment, which is going to ask you to write a poem that moves in some way. It can move across a page, it can move in weird and wild and wacky narrative terms. But somewhere in there, we want you to have a critical metaphor or simile that takes maybe a tired idea in a new direction, gives it as they say new wings.

To hopefully again allow your reader to get something new from it. And don't forget, you can still use imagery too. Thanks, guys. See you soon.