

Shakespeare's Metaphors and Similes

From *Shakespeare: His Life, Art, and Characters, Volume I*. New York: Ginn and Co.

Since Homer, no poet has come near Shakespeare in originality, freshness, opulence, and boldness of imagery. It is this that forms, in a large part, the surpassing beauty of his poetry; it is in this that much of his finest idealizing centres. And he abounds in all the figures of speech known in formal rhetoric, except the Allegory and the Apologue. The Allegory, I take it, is hardly admissible in dramatic writing; nor is the Apologue very well suited to the place: the former, I believe, Shakespeare never uses; and his most conspicuous instance of the latter, in fact the only one that occurs to me, is that of the Belly and the Members, so quaintly delivered to the insurgent people by the juicy old Menenius in the first scene of *Coriolanus*. But, though Shakespeare largely uses all the other figures of speech, I shall draw most of what I have to say of his style in this respect, under the two heads of Simile and Metaphor, since all that can properly be called imagery is resolvable into these. Shakespeare uses both a great deal, but the Simile in a way somewhat peculiar: in fact, as it is commonly used by other poets, he does not seem to have been very fond of it; and when he admits it, he generally uses it in the most informal way possible. But, first, at the risk of seeming pedantic, I will try to make some analysis of the two figures in question.

Every student knows that the Simile may be regarded as an expanded Metaphor, or the Metaphor as a condensed Simile. Which implies that the Metaphor admits of greater brevity. What, then, is the difference?

Now a simile, as the name imports, is a comparison of two or more things, more or less unlike in themselves, for the purpose of illustration. The thing illustrated and the thing that illustrates are, so to speak, laid alongside each other, that the less known may be made more intelligible by the light of that which is known better. Here the two parts are kept quite distinct, and a sort of parallel run between them. And the actions or the qualities of the two things stand apart, each on their own side of the parallel, those of neither being ascribed to the other. In a metaphor, on the other hand, the two parts, instead of lying side by side, are drawn together and incorporated into one. The idea and the image, the thought and the illustration, are not kept distinct, but the idea is incarnated in the image, so that the image bears the same relation to the idea as the body does to the soul. In other words, the two parts are completely identified, their qualities interfused and interpenetrating, so that they become one. Thus a metaphor proceeds by ascribing to a given object certain actions or qualities which are not literally true of that object, and which have in reference to it only the truth of analogy.

To illustrate this: When, in his sonnet composed on Westminster Bridge, Wordsworth says, "This City now doth, like a garment, wear the beauty of the morning," the language is a simile in form. If he had said, This City hath now robed herself in the beauty of the morning, it would have been in form a metaphor. On the other hand, when in the same sonnet he says, "The river glideth at his own sweet will," the language is a metaphor. If in this case he had said, The river floweth smoothly along, like a man led on by the free promptings of his own will, it would have been a simile. And so, when Romeo says of Juliet, --

"O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
Her beauty hangs upon the cheek of night,
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear";

here we have two metaphors, and also one simile. Juliet cannot be said literally to teach the torches any thing; but her brightness may be said to make them, or rather the owner of them ashamed of their dimness; or she may be said to be so radiant, that the torches, or the owner of them may learn from her how torches ought to shine. Neither can it be said literally that her beauty hangs upon the cheek of night, for the night has no cheek; but it may be said to bear the same relation to the night as a diamond pendant does to the dark cheek that sets it off. Then the last metaphor is made one of the parts in a simile; what is therein expressed being likened to a rich jewel hanging in an Ethiop's ear. So, too, when Wordsworth apostrophizes Milton, --

"Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea"; --

here we have two similes. But when he says,--
 "Unruffled doth the blue lake lie,
 The mountains looking on";
 and when he says of the birds singing,--
 "Clear, loud, and lively is the din,
 From social warblers gathering in
 Their harvest of sweet lays";
 and when he says of his Lucy,--
 "The stars of midnight shall be dear
 To her; and she shall lean her ear
 In many a secret place
 Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
 And beauty born of murmuring sound
 Shall pass into her face";--
 in these lines we have four pure and perfect metaphors.

Again: In *Cymbeline*, old Belarius says of the "two princely boys" that are with him,--

"They are as gentle
 As zephyrs, blowing below the violet,
 Not wagging his sweet head; and yet as rough,
 Their royal blood encha'f'd, as the rud'st wind,
 That by the top doth take the mountain pine,
 And make him stoop to th' vale."

Here are two similes, of the right Shakespeare mintage. As metaphors from the same hand, take this from Iachimo's temptation of Imogen, "This object, which takes prisoner the wild motion of mine eye"; and this from Viola, urging Orsino's suit to the Countess,--

"Holla your name to the reverberate hills,
 And make the babbling gossip of the air
 Cry out, *Olivia!*"

and this of Cleopatra's with the asp at her bosom,--

"Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
 That sucks the nurse asleep?"

Or, as an instance of both figures together, take the following from *King Lear*, iv. 3, where the Gentleman describes to Kent the behaviour of Cordelia on hearing of her father's condition:

"You have seen
 Sunshine and rain at once; her smiles and tears
 Were like: a better way,--those happy smilets
 That play'd on her ripe lip seem'd not to know
 What guests were in her eyes; which parted thence
 As pearls from diamonds dropp'd."

Here we have two similes, in the first two and last clauses; and also two metaphors, severally conveyed in,--
 --"That play'd on her ripe lip," and, "What guests were in her eyes." Perhaps I ought to add that a simile is sometimes merely suggested or implied; as in these lines from Wordsworth:

"What is glory?--in the socket
 See how dying tapers fare!
 What is pride?--a whizzing rocket
 That would emulate a star.

What is friendship?--do not trust her,
 Nor the vows which she has made;
 Diamonds dart their brightest lustre
 From a palsy-shaken head."

Thus much by way of analyzing the two figures, and illustrating the difference between them. In all these instances may be seen, I think, how in a metaphor the intensity and fire of imagination, instead of placing

the two parts side by side, melts them down into one homogeneous mass; which mass is both of them and neither of them at the same time; their respective properties being so interwoven and fused together, that those of each may be affirmed of the other.

I have said that Shakespeare uses the Simile in a way somewhat peculiar. This may require some explication.--Homer, Virgil, Dante, Spenser, Milton, and the great Italian poets of the sixteenth century, all deal largely in what may be styled full-drawn similes; that is, similes carefully elaborated through all their parts, these being knit together in a balanced and rounded whole. Here is an instance of what I mean, from *Paradise Lost*, i.:

"As when the potent rod
Of Amram's son, in Egypt's evil day,
Wav'd round the coast, up call'd a pitchy cloud
Of locusts, warping on the eastern wind,
That o'er the realm of impious Pharaoh hung
Like night, and darken'd all the land of Nile;
So numberless where those bad angels seen
Hovering on wing under the cope of Hell,
'Twixt upper, nether, and surrounding fires."

This may be fitly taken as a model specimen of the thing; it is severely classical in style, and is well worthy of the great hand that made it. Here is another, somewhat different in structure, and not easy to beat, from Wordsworth's *Miscellaneous Sonnets*, Part ii.:

"Desponding Father! mark this alter'd bough,
So beautiful of late, with sunshine warm'd,
Or moist with dews; what more unsightly now,
Its blossoms shrivell'd, and its fruit, if form'd,
Invisible? yet Spring her genial brow
Knits not o'er that discolouring and decay
As false to expectation. Nor fret thou
At like unlovely process in the May
Of human life: a Stripling's graces blow,
Fade, and are shed, that from their timely fall
(Misdemean it not a cankerous change) may grow
Rich mellow bearings, that for thanks shall call."

It may be worth noting, that the first member of this no less beautiful than instructive passage contains one metaphor,--"Spring her genial brow knits not"; and the second two,--"in the May of human life," and, "a Stripling's graces blow, fade, and are shed." Herein it differs from the preceding instance; but I take it to be none the worse for that.

Shakespeare occasionally builds a simile on the same plan; as in the following from *Measure for Measure*, i. 3:

"Now, as fond fathers,
Having bound up the threatening twigs of birch,
Only to stick it in their children's sight
For terror, not to use, in time the rod
Becomes more mock'd than fear'd; so our decrees,
Dead to infliction, to themselves are dead;
And liberty plucks justice by the nose;
The baby beats the nurse, and quite athwart
Goes all decorum."

But the Poet does not much affect this formal mode of the thing; he has comparatively few instances of it; while his pages abound in similes of the informal mode, like those quoted before. And his peculiarity in the use of the figure consists partly in what seems not a little curious, namely, that he sometimes begins with

building a simile, and then runs it into a metaphor before he gets through; so that we have what may be termed a mixture of the two; that is, he sets out as if to form the two parts distinct, and ends by identifying them. Here is an instance from the Second Part of *King Henry the Fourth*, iv. 1:

"His foes are so enrooted with his friends, That, plucking to unfix an enemy, He doth unfasten so and shake a friend. So that this land, like an offensive wife That hath enrag'd him on to offer strokes, As he is striking, holds his infant up, And hangs resolv'd correction in the arm That was uprear'd to execution."

And so in *King Henry the Fifth*, ii. 4:

"In cases of defence 'tis best to weigh The enemy more mighty than he seems: So the proportions of defence are fill'd; Which of a weak and niggardly projection, Doth, like a miser, spoil his coat with scanting A little cloth."

Also in *Hamlet*, iv. 1:

"So much was our love, We would not understand what was most fit; But, like the owner of a foul disease, To keep it from divulging, let it feed Even on the pith of life."

And somewhat the same again in iii. 4:

"No, in despite of sense and secrecy, Unpeg the basket on the house's top, Let the birds fly, and, like the famous ape, To try conclusions, in the basket creep, And break your own neck down."

Something very like this mixing of figures occurs, also, in *Timon of Athens*, iv. 3:

"But myself,

Who had the world as my confectionary;
The mouths, the tongues, the eyes, and hearts of men
At duty, more than I could frame employment;
That numberless upon me stuck, as leaves
Do on an oak, have with one Winter's brush
Fell from their boughs, and left me open, bare
For every storm that blows."

And I suspect that certain passages, often faulted for confusion of metaphors, are but instances of the same thing, as this:

"Blest are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well commingled,
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please."

This feature mainly results, no doubt, from the Poet's aptness or endeavour to make his style of as highly symbolical a character as possible without smothering the sense. And by *symbolical* I here mean the taking a representative part of a thing, and using it in such a way as to convey the sense and virtue of the whole. Metaphors are the strongest and surest mode of doing this; and so keen was the Poet's quest of this, that his similes, in the very act of forming, often become half-metaphors, as from a sort of instinct. Thus, instead of fully forming a simile, he merely *suggests* it; throwing in just enough of it to start the thoughts on that track, and then condensing the whole into a semi-metaphorical shape. Which seems to explain why it is that these suggestions of similes, notwithstanding the stereotyped censures of a too formal criticism, seldom trouble any reader who is so unsophisticated as to care little for the form, so he be sure of the substance.

Please [click here](#) for Hudson's essential list of Shakespeare's greatest metaphors.

How to cite this article:

Hudson, Henry Norman. *Shakespeare: His Life, Art, and Characters, Volume I.* . New York: Ginn and Co., 1872. [Shakespeare Online](#). 20 Aug. 2009. (date when you accessed the information) < <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/biography/imagery.html> >.
