

ENGL 1102
Spring 2008
Prof. Bishop

Thinking Metaphorically

Metaphors are the building blocks for a life of language, whether that life is professional or personal. To understand metaphor is to see the world's connections in a certain slant. To make metaphor is to make the world your own. Metaphor, then, is the connection that holds your world together.

Philip Wheelwrightⁱ argues:

Wallace Stevens, employing a somewhat different vocabulary, speaks of “the symbolic language of metamorphosis”; the purpose of such metamorphosis, he says, is to intensify one's sense of reality. [...]

What really matters in a metaphor is the psychic depth at which the things of the world, whether actual or fancied, are transmutedⁱⁱ by the cool heat of the imagination. The transmutative process that is involved may be described as semantic motion; the idea of which is implicit in the very word “metaphor,” since the motion (*phora*) that the word connotes is a semantic motion—the double imaginative act of outreaching and combining that essentially marks the metaphoric process. The outreaching and combining, which are the two main elements of metaphoric activity, appear most effectively in combination. (71-72)

Here Wheelwright claims that the metaphor itself is a process (much like writing as we study it), but the process is deeply involved with the writer/reader inasmuch as the writer/reader must create meaning. Sound familiar? He goes on to claim, a bit later, that while metaphor uses comparison to establish a relationship, it achieves “the creation of new meaning by juxtaposition and synthesis” (72).

Metaphor works by creating relationships that typically we do not think about, though many great metaphors have been diminished in meaning because they have become clichéd. Through the course of language development, linguistic evolution if you will, authors have tried to explain complicated notions by comparing those notions to other, perhaps, more familiar things. One of the most common, and easily recognized metaphors is the metaphor of the rose: My love is a red, red rose—this is, of course, paraphrased from Burns' ubiquitous poem “A Red Red Rose.” Love, transcendental signifier that it is, is a shifty term. We “know” it when we “feel” it, but how does one articulate this? Metaphor, of course, is the way. The rose is now a clichéd symbol of love in most circles, but this was not always the case. At some point, some yahoo had to say, “You know what, I think love is like a rose.” This was likely met with a reply such as, “What?” But think about the metaphor critically: is a rose something beautiful? Most would agree that it is. The soft velvety petals, the deep earthy scent of the rose, the bright red color all work to symbolize something greater than a flower. But so, too, do the thorns of the rose. Brittle protectors of love's fragile petals, the thorns serve as a warning and guard against attack. Perhaps this is the true nature of love's connection to the rose. One must be wary of the thorns surrounding it. Alas, this is *just* a flower we're talking about, though, right?

What makes, or at least *made* this metaphor work is the connection to the world. Love exists, sure, but can we all agree upon what it looks like, feels like? Never. But we can see the significance and feel the significance of the rose. Metaphors must be apt to work. Think about this one: Snow blankets the cars. At some point, someone said, “Hey, you know what, snow looks like a blanket on the ground.” And it does, too, right? What about this simile, which is a specific kind of metaphor? “I’m mad as hell.” What does this conjure? Images of fire and villainy and screams of anguish? Does it embody the feeling of being “mad” (which, by the way, should read: angry as hell, technically speaking)? Metaphor is our way of putting into language that which is hard to define, thus we define by comparison (remember those good old rhetorical modes from 1101?). Metaphor is our way of making the world understandable. We use what we know to describe those things that are, on some level, unknowable. We also use metaphor to make those things that are commonplace vital, unique, and interesting again.

ⁱ Wheelwright, Philip. Metaphor & Reality. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1962.

ⁱⁱ To alter or change in nature, properties, appearance, or form; to transform, convert, turn. www.oed.com