Skill Category 5-6: Figurative Language

Figurative language—language not meant to be taken literally—is an essential element of literature, as prose writers and poets often employ figures of speech to convey meaning. For example, the phrase "elephant in the room" is a metaphor for a major problem or controversial issue that is obviously present but avoided as a subject for discussion because it is more comfortable to do so. Although the AP English Literature and Composition Exam won't ask you to define or identify figures of speech, it will require you to interpret an author's individual word choices and symbols and understand meanings created by figures of speech such as simile, metaphor, personification, and allusion. This unit, which focuses on figurative language used in poems, will help you practice questions over these elements.

5.A–B Meaning and Function of Words and Phrases

Ambiguity
Hyperbole
Alliteration
Antecedent

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.
I say it just
Begins to live
That day.

—Emily Dickinson

In poetry and prose, individual words and phrases can seem to come alive, as the poet Emily Dickinson suggests. Because words often have both denotations (dictionary meanings) and connotations (associations and suggestions), they can create depth and complexity, emphasis and connections, and different understandings and interpretations.

Key Concepts

The words and phrases authors and poets choose often suggest multiple meanings and connotations.

Words with similar meanings may have very different connotations, as is the case with "childish," a word with negative associations of immaturity, and "childlike," which suggests positive qualities like innocence. Also, the meanings that a word or phrase suggests can be dependent upon context; that is, the words and phrases that come before and follow the word or phrase in question will influence its meaning.

- The first stanza of Edward Arlington Robinson's poem "Richard Cory" employs words that suggest royal status:

  > Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
  > We people on the pavement looked at him:
  > He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
  > Clean favored, and imperially slim.

  One meaning of "crown" is the top of one's head, but the poet's use of "crown, which suggests royalty, "instead of "head" and "imperially" both suggest how the townspeople viewed Cory as someone to admire and respect.

  Also, when the humorously clever Mercutio lies dying in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, he says, "Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man," suggesting two meanings for "grave"—he will become much more serious, and he will lie in his final resting place.

A word's or phrase's ambiguity (capacity to be understood in more than one way) can result in different understandings.

Because poetry is a much more compact form than a novel or short story, assume that each word in a poem has been carefully chosen for the various meanings it may suggest.

- The first line of John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" contains an example of ambiguity: "Thou **still** unravish'd bride of quietness." The word "still" is ambiguous because it carries the meaning of "at rest" as well as "yet unchanged."

- The title of Damon Knight's story "To Serve Man" contains a dramatic ambiguity. The book *To Serve Man*, brought to Earth by an alien, suggests a benevolent meaning, "to assist man." However, in the story's climax, a scientist discovers the horrific fact that the book is actually a cookbook whose title refers to the meaning, "to prepare and cook man."

Sometimes ambiguity is created when nouns, pronouns, adjectives, phrases, or clauses refer to more than one antecedent (preceding words, phrases, or clauses).

Again, consider the context by examining the lines in which the reference occurs.

- Paul Laurence Dunbar is known for his poems that examine the Black experience in America. The first stanza of his poem "We Wear the Mask" opens with the pronoun "we," which is ambiguous because the speaker doesn't provide an antecedent:

  > We wear the mask that grins and lies,
  > It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
  > This debt we pay to human guile;
  > With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
  > And mouth with myriad subtleties.

  Dunbar's "we" could refer to his identifying himself with the Black race, but the pronoun also suggests his membership in the human race and, thus, universalizes the poem for all people. Because of its ambiguity, "we" takes on more than one meaning.

- In the following lines from F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, the pronoun "that" is used ambiguously as it can refer to both a billboard and Wilson's statement about God:

> Standing behind him, Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night.
>
> "God sees everything," repeated Wilson.
>
> "That's an advertisement," Michaelis assured him.

The ambiguity of the antecedent for "that" points to a billboard for an optician, but it also suggests that the idea "God sees everything" is merely an advertisement, hinting at a commercialized view of God that comments ominously on the loss of spirituality in the novel's world.

Repetition of initial sounds (alliteration), words, or phrases can create emphasis or connect ideas.

While alliteration is often pleasing to the ear, lending a musical quality to a poem, connecting words through similar sounds can also reinforce a line's meaning, as can assonance (repetition of vowel sounds) and consonance (repetition of final consonant sounds).

- Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "God's Grandeur" alliterates *g* sounds in the first and third lines, connecting the words "grandeur," "God," "gather," and "greatness" to celebrate nature's sacredness. Repetition of *f* and *sh* sounds in line 2 recreates the energized, electric sound of flames and foil. The fifth line's repetition of "have trod" creates a sense of the repeated abuse of the Earth. The speaker's disgust with humankind's abuse of nature is echoed in the alliterative "smeared," "smudge," and "smell" in lines 6–7:

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
> It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
> It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
> Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
> Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
> And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
> And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell...

Adjectives, adverbs, and other descriptive words affect the interpretation of a text, bringing into focus the picture the poet wants the reader to imagine.

- In his poem "Those Winter Sundays," Robert Hayden's description of the morning's fierce cold and his father's sore hands emphasizes a father's devoted efforts to warm the family's house:

> Sundays too my father got up early
> And put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
> then with cracked hands that ached
> from labor in the weekday weather made
> banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

The speaker's use of the adverb "too" emphasizes how his father even rose early on his off day to warm the family home. The adjective "blueblack" adds a visual dimension to the cold, and "cracked" describes the pain his father endured from work in the "weekday weather."

- Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem "England in 1819" opens with a series of adjectives that express the speaker's scorn for King George III. This description of the king is followed in lines 2 and 3 by a description of his royal bloodline as a "dull race" that has sprung from "a muddy spring":

> An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying King;
> Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
> Through public scorn,—mud from a muddy spring;

Exaggerating something (hyperbole) or treating something as less than it is (understatement) can create emphasis and express a perspective.

Hyperbole draws attention to the poem's subject, while understatement may create irony by describing something as less than it is usually thought of.

- Hamlet uses hyperbolic descriptions for his deceased father, comparing him to Greek and Roman gods as a way to express his deep disappointment with his mother's remarriage to Hamlet's inferior uncle:

> See, what a grace was seated on this brow;
> Hyperion's curls; the front of Jove himself;
> An eye like Mars, to threaten and command;
> A station like the herald Mercury
> New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill;
> A combination and a form indeed,
> Where every god did seem to set his seal,
> To give the world assurance of a man:

- In J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield describes his dormitory with this hyperbole: "At Pencey, you either froze to death or died of the heat." But when lying about why he is leaving his school, he tells a woman, "I have to have this operation. It isn't very serious. I have this tiny little tumor on the brain," ironically understating the seriousness of the operation. Throughout the novel, Holden's tendency to exaggerate or understate things expresses his immature perspective.

What to Look for

As you encounter questions about how words and phrases function in a poem or passage, look for the following:

- Words and phrases whose context suggests more than one meaning
- Words and phrases that can be interpreted in different ways
- Repeated sounds, words, or phrases that draw attention to parts of the text
- Descriptive words that qualify or modify things
- Hyperboles and understatements that reveal meaning and perspective

Practice Activity

Directions: After reading the poem "Happiness," published in 2020 by Christopher Jane Corkery, highlight and annotate the items on the list below, explaining what the words and phrases mean. Note: Not all elements will be found in the poem.

- Words that lack a specific antecedent
- Adjectives, adverbs, and descriptive words that evoke strong emotion
- Hyperboles
- Words and phrases that suggest more than one meaning or can be interpreted in different ways

Happiness

The two-year old holds a broom, as if a guitar.
He is not far from a place in the stars
Where music is air, food, and water.
The two-year old plays his guitar

And feels the broomstraws brush his fingers.
One day he'll feel the curl and bristle
Of his girlfriend's hair. They'll sit, entwined,
By a river and watch, there, on the water

Swans twirl. It's only May
And the dark asters that will command
His grief in later years are only
Buds. He'll think he is a swan

Upon the water (for they are young).
And she, too, a swan, but something
More. Then that thing's gone, an air
Played, somewhere, under stars.

Yet where? For stars are everywhere.
And to some they always speak, and the man
Always will think, whenever he holds
His guitar, thus, between chest and arm,

Of his first happiness, of the girl, of his sure
Baby grip, and the flick of his fingers.
It was happiness, next to a window he could not
Yet see out of, but which his mother

Had polished, and left, full of stars.

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