metaphor

Once a student was finding it difficult to communicate her character's feelings of fear or sadness short of making his heart pound, or making him scream or cry. Since her character was scared and sad a lot, and since I deeply believe that one cry or once scream is enough for one novel, this became a problem for us. I said to her, move your reader, don't manipulate her. I said, too much crying – it's becoming maudlin. My comments were heavy on critique and light on principles for how to improve. It was frustrating for both of us because although I knew it wasn't working, I couldn't explain how to help her make it work.

To her great credit, my student did not let me off the hook. She persisted in trying to understand. She asked me over and over, so how do I do it then? How do I deepen the emotional elements of my story here without pounding hearts or constricting throats or all manner of breathings? How do I communicate my character's despair there without becoming manipulative or maudlin? I don't get it, Martine. Explain.

I tried various ways to explain over the course of the semester. Everything I said sounded airy-fairy and impractical. I hate airy-fairy and impractical. I persisted in pointing out that she wasn't getting it yet, and she persisted in reminding me that I was the teacher. Finally, in a moment of desperation, I wrote, "Use your metaphor!"

There was a pause. My poor student thought about this. After a time she admitted that while this sounded like it might be useful, in reality she had no idea what I meant. Upon reflection I realized that neither did I.

It is often out of these moments of feeling inadequate as a teacher that that my lectures are born. This lecture was my attempt to explain to my student, and myself, what I meant by "use your metaphor." As I peeled back the layers of my thinking about metaphor, I discovered that for me metaphor is much like a Swiss-army knife. You never know what little tool you're going to find in it that will save your life someday.

First let's back up a little and talk about metaphor's mom and dad and her somewhat complicated family tree, beginning with the literary term *figure of speech.*

A figure of speech is language that departs from the customary construction or significance of words in order to achieve special effects or meanings. There are two major kinds of figures of speech: *rhetorical figures* and *tropes*.

A *rhetorical figure of speech* departs from customary or standard uses of language to achieve special effects *without changing the basic meaning of the words*. I am not concerning myself with rhetorical figures in this lecture, but if you did some genealogy you would find that rhetorical figures have some of the following children:

- Apostrophe
- Rhetorical questions
- Chiasmus
- Polysyndeton – lots of conjunctions (he laughed and ran and jumped for joy)
- Asyndeton – no conjunctions (he laughed, ran, jumped for joy)
- Homeoteleuton
- Paralipsis
- Anaphora
- Hysteron proteron

These are just a few examples of rhetorical figures of speech. I especially love hysteron proteron, which sounds like a hormone replacement, but really means putting the last thing first. You would be doing a hysteron proteron if you got up in the morning and put on your shoes and socks rather than your socks and shoes. I think it would be cool to have a fictional character who speaks in hysteron proterons.

A *trope* is a figure of speech involving a *turn or change of sense* in a word other than its literal one. The word *trope* means turn or change in the old Greek. Some call it a *figure of thought*.

A *simile* is a trope. A simile, we all learned in fifth grade, is a comparison between two distinctly different things as indicated by the word *like* or *as.* An example from *Tom Finder*: "Jean's teeth flashed like a crescent moon." This is not a good or fresh or interesting simile, but luckily I am not discussing similes at length today. However, if you want to read a master of the simile, read Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*.

Another kind of trope is *metonymy,* the term for one thing being applied to another with which it has become closely connected. Commonly people explain metonymy by using the examples of "the crown" standing for the king, or "the pen is mightier than the sword" in which the pen stands for the power of the written word and the sword stands for violence. Metonymy can

also refer to the rhetorical strategy of describing something indirectly by referring to things contiguous to it, in either time or space.

An example from *Tom Finder*: “Tom ran. His feet and knees were dead of starvation, but his thighs worked, and he ran. He ran until his thighs died and the only thing left alive in him was his stomach, and it was crying.” We’ve got some personification or something going on here, but also a sort of example of metonomy. Tom’s thighs and stomach are contiguous with him. His dead thighs tell us that Tom’s whole body is weak with hunger, that he feels his physical self checking out, except for his stomach, which complains. One could have said, “Tom ran. He was hungry, but he managed to run anyway.” Instead one chose to be metonymous and it pleased one.

Personification, as you all know, is a trope that attributes human qualities to inanimate objects or abstract notions. Personification is a spice you don’t want to overdo, but which can add that *je ne sais quoi*. In Tom Finder, I establish that gravity is at least mildly malevolent, that it can win. But when I needed just a little more emotional punch, I upped the personification. From Tom: “This is what gravity could do to you if it decided to pick on you: … It made breathing take all your energy. Sitting up deserved applause. Tom was suddenly angry. He wasn’t going to let it. He was going to look up; he was going to look gravity in the eyeball, its heavy, round, slimy eyeball.”

I want to know why my editor let me get away with all those semicolons. I don’t think Tom thought in semicolons. But the point here is that in this passage, gravity, Tom’s nemesis, becomes more virulent when it is personified. Gravity’s eyeball is slimy, mucous-y, a tad revolting and perhaps even monstrous. We wonder, if it has a slimy eyeball, might it also have teeth? I could have said, “Tom felt depressed, but he was going to try and be brave.” But a sentence like that would break my heart. And it wouldn’t have expressed that Tom was depressed because he is living in a hostile and toothy universe. Also, personification can be a bit funny. Readers can read about the slimy eyeball and think, oh, Tom, you are a bit funny. Did I pick up my pen one day as I was writing *Tom Finder* and say, “Today I will personify.” No. But in that moment when I needed to portray deep emotion, I abandoned the literal and flirted shamelessly with the metaphorical.

Synecdoche is a trope that denotes a part of something being used to refer to the whole thing. Tom meets a girl named Pam who is wearing a T-shirt that makes her look good and which says somewhat crudely that she is Canadian. Thereafter he refers to her as the Canadian girl, even though everyone in the book is Canadian. “Tom saw the Canadian girl smile. She smiled the most perfectly beautiful Canadian smile Tom had ever seen.” Every time we see the word

Canadian, we think back to that T-shirt. The T-shirt part of Pam refers to all of her, and we are reminded, without fluttering, aching or pounding hearts, that Tom is attracted to her. He tries to persuade her that he is a poet because he suspects she has a weakness for them. I wrote, “After they left Tom wrote in his book, Tom found a girl. He closed the book, then opened it again. Tom is a poet, he wrote. A Canadian poet.” Tom could have written in his book, “I sure hope Pam likes me.” But that would have made Tom a boring writer. Did I pick up my pen one day as I was writing *Tom Finder* and say, “Today I feel a synecdoche coming on.” No. But, as I said before, when you are writing moments that are weighted with emotion, imaginatively feel what your character is feeling, and refuse to express it in an old way. Your subconscious may help you find the right trope. There are lots to choose from.

Irony is a trope. You have your verbal irony, dramatic irony, structural irony, cosmic irony, socratic irony and roman irony, romantic irony, comic irony and other less well-known ironies.

I also like snowclone, which is when you take a cliché and do something interesting with it – for example, “gray is the new black.” And then there’s zeugma, which means the use of a word to govern two or more words though appropriate to only one; "Mr. Pickwick took his hat and his leave.” Zeugma even has four babies – prozeugma, mesozeugma, hypozeugma and diazeugma.

I wondered, who makes up all these names? Can we blame the Greeks for every one? In spite of their exotic names, they are found commonly enough in poetry and TV commercials and many are rather lower-class under their snooty skins. But one trope is a genius among tropes. One is the favoured golden child, the heir apparent, the gifted one, and that is metaphor.

John Fowles bows before metaphor, saying that the best way to be realistic is to adhere to the unrealistic and metaphoric because “one cannot describe reality, only give metaphors that indicate it.” Julie mentioned in her lecture George Lakoff’s book *Metaphors We Live By.* He declares that our whole conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.

In my own words, it seems that the very ground we walk on is a metaphor and if you stamp hard enough you’ll punch through and who knows what you’ll find under there. This book is very high-brow and not the kind of book you’ll breeze through on a Saturday afternoon. About half way through my brain was worn out and I skipped to the ending. But I figured out something my reading this book. I figured out why writers generally get paid so little if you take in the hours. It’s because the world knows that as the inventors of metaphor, writers get to be in charge of reality, and they think that unspeakable perk should be quite enough. They may have a point.

Man Booker and Pulitzer prize laureate Cynthia Ozik said, “Metaphor is poetry's and fiction's great imperative, the engine of radical imagination. Every story is a kind of parable, or metaphor; metaphor is imagination – they are utterly fused. Just as you can't grasp anything without an opposable thumb, you can't write anything without the aid of metaphor. Metaphor is the mind's opposable thumb.“

And my favourite tribute, said succinctly by Gregory Bateson: Metaphor is right at the bottom of being alive.

Metaphor is a princess, and as a princess cannot sleep all night upon a pea, no matter how many mattresses between it and she. She is prone to many moods such as the following:

pataphor
simple or tight
conceptual
implicit
submerged
active
compound
absolute, including paralogical and antimetaphor
complex
root
extended or telescoping
implied
dormant
dying
and dead (one of her darker moods)

I am not going to discuss in public her dormant, dying and dead moods. You are probably familiar with them, and they are more the concern of English and communications majors. I am interested in how we can use metaphor to construct meaning in a work of fiction.

On its most basic level, as we all know, metaphor imaginatively identifies one object with another and ascribes to the first, one or more of the qualities of the second. A metaphor tells us something is, or is like, something that it clearly is not exactly like. A good metaphor surprises us with the unlikeness of the two things compared while at the same time convincing us of the aptness or truth of the likeness. In the process it should illuminate meaning. A metaphor makes

you see. James Wood in *How Fiction Works* says that metaphor speeds us toward new meaning. It is that leap toward the counter intuitive, toward the very opposite of the thing you are seeking to compare, that is the secret of the powerful metaphor.

Allow me to refer again to my banal simile in which I compare Jean's smile to a crescent moon. Later in the book I redeem myself a little and bump it up to a little metaphor.

"Jeans moon smile floated a moment in the spoon sky and was gone." I suppose I could have said, "Jeans gave one of those half-grins." Instead I chose to be metaphorical. Jeans smile is no longer *like* a moon, thank goodness, it *is* a moon. It is in the shape of a crescent moon, perhaps as bright as a moon. But it also suggests that Jeans might be a little out of this world, and that his smile might have pull to it, that it might exert at least a little gravity on a kid named Tom who is susceptible to its influence. I have no idea anymore what a spoon sky is. It meant something to me at the time. It might be something my editor should have caught. Or maybe it's one of those trope-y, counterintuitive moments, when a sky can be shiny and concave like a spoon, when one thinks of big dippers and other starry cutlery. Anyway, spoon rhymes with moon, which is nice.

This is an example of what I call a little metaphor. Yes, I have divided the grand notion of metaphor into the astute and ingenious names of big and little.

Here's another example of the little metaphor from *Tom Finder*. This is a character describing to Tom what it's like to be hooked on crack cocaine: "They get as high as heaven, but they can't stay there. They keep coming down to dead, and every time they come down they're deader than before. They try again, but heaven won't keep them, and people keep charging them for a peek."

Little metaphors are not little in importance. They make the language beautiful, or powerful, they give the story texture; they make you see. Metaphors are discovered in your own work as you walk around in your book for a while. As you read what you have written over and over, notice freshness of thought, patterns, interesting comparisons. Develop those ideas. Play with the language.

I want to move now to talking about what I call big metaphors, the ones that can be used in big ways, like tracking the theme of a work, or portraying the emotional landscape of your characters, or structuring your novel.

You won't find "mind of narrative" in a list of tropes and metaphors, and that's because Tim Wynne-Jones made it up. He invents it wonderfully in his article "Entropy Means Nothing to Me." Here is a quote from the paper: "The metaphor that I call the mind of narrative represents a characteristic of this particular trope that… tends to haunt the narrative in the sense that its presence can be felt in scenes even where the metaphor is not named but only intimated. It may be contiguous to the so-called controlling image that a large metaphor may have over a whole work of literature, but it is subtly different in that the schema, the image, by which the domain of the metaphor is impressed upon the reader may be only present in a fragmentary way and need not be reiterated very often in order for us to be reminded of its presence." Tim gives the example of the Ferris wheel in the opening page of Natalie Babbitt's Tuck Everlasting. The Ferris wheel does not appear by name again in the book except in a brief mention toward the end, and yet the image is ever present, minding the narrative.

Tim suggests that this is, quote "the real stuff of theme: the abstract idea of what a book is about… not rooted, free-floating."

You may not find objective correlative in a list of the types of metaphors, but the whole notion of the objective correlative is metaphorical in nature. It helps a writer indicate a reality that she cannot describe. It helps her leap toward the counter-intuitive, often toward the very opposite of the thing she is seeking to compare. It is one of the great imperatives of fiction and an opposable thumb of the mind.

The term objective correlative was coined initially by Washington Allston in 1840 and made popular by the poet T.S. Eliot. Eliot said, "the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; (which is) a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula for that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in a sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked." Eliot loved to be confusing: an objective correlative in its simplest form is simply an object that correlates to the emotional life of the character.

Once a student pointed to the workshop piece we were discussing and said excitedly, "Hey, that's an objective correlative!" While I loved her enthusiasm, in this case, it was not. It was a symbol. It's unlikely that knowing the precise difference between the two will suddenly make you a vastly better writer, but perhaps if one is going to graduate with a MFA it would be a point of pride to be a little clearer. Sometimes metaphors and objective correlatives and symbols are all muddled together in a book, but often by understanding what a thing is not we can come closer to understanding what it is.

A symbol, at its most plebeian level, is something visible that by association or convention represents something else that is invisible. For example, the eagle is a symbol of the United States. A symbol does not necessarily need to evoke an emotional response – the response can be merely intellectual. A symbol *can* become conventional or static, whereas an objective correlative can be effective only if it is unexpected in some way, if it is particular and not at all universal.

When I was first writing *Tom Finder* and didn't know who he really was or what kind of story I was writing, I wrote this passage:

"He walked until the shops turned into tiny dirty houses... The roofs sagged like they were going to fall in. It seemed strange to Tom that the skyscrapers, which should be too heavy for the earth to hold up, rose up as light as foil and bubble, defying gravity, while these little houses sagged under the weight of the air."

After that I took the concept of gravity out of the physics books and made it something real that Tom had to deal with before he could get his life together. I *objectified* the idea of gravity and made it *correlate* to Tom's inner world. It became an objective correlative. When I needed Tom to feel something, I often returned to my objective correlative. For example, when Tom gets beat up, his eardrum gets busted. How does he feel about that? Quote: "He could hear gravity seeping in through the tear in his eardrum, leaking into his brain. It was whispering to him, something close by his eardrum, but he couldn't quite get it."

I also used the street as an objective correlative. When Tom realizes the truth about his identity, I could have said, "Tom felt sad and defeated," but I didn't want my reader to observe that Tom was sad and defeated. I wanted my reader to *feel* sad and defeated *with* him. So I wrote:

"Gravity pulled him back, back to the Core. He wasn't running anymore. The sound of his feet echoed in the sewers. He wondered about sewers, if there were fumes down there that wouldn't let a candle burn, if there were tunnels down there, mazes, where you could wander your days into years and maybe walk away a hundred times and never go anywhere."

In the climax of the story, although I didn't use the word gravity, it is implied when Daniel comes to save him from the fire. I don't say Tom is suffering from smoke inhalation. I say he is sinking. The window is getting higher, out of reach, so high that he'll never get his leg over that sill. The window is floating up and Tom is sinking down to the floor and watching the window shrink into nothingness. Daniel finds him and lifts Tom as if he were made of smoke. Daniel tells

him that if he can lift his leg to the window ledge he'll get the rest of him out. It takes all Tom's strength and will to do it. This is Tom's ultimate battle with gravity. To mention Tom's despair, or his resignation in the face of death, would be to cheapen the moment. Often, when you need it the most, language becomes its most reductive. Gravity and the street as my objective correlatives not only became my best way to communicate the emotion of my main character, it gave the reader a clue as to what a happy ending might look like for Tom – that moment when against the full pressure of gravity, Tom summons the strength to overcome it.

In *Heck Superhero*, the objective correlative is quantum physics. When Heck wakes up in the hospital and remembers that Marion has killed himself, I could have said, "Heck was deeply shocked and upset." I could have said, Heck's heart squeezed and he began to sob. But that would have been deeply shocking and upsetting. Instead I wrote Heck thinking: "Someone had ripped up the fabric of space-time. He could see the whole stringy microverse before his eyes… He was so flat his heart was a collapsed star and everything was very clear. He was in the null zone, and as far as he could see, there were no events on his event horizon. Marion was dead."

It is in those intense moments of the deepest emotion that you want to reach for the metaphorical.

Now some of you do not have any trouble getting to the emotional heart of the story. For some of you the emotional part of the story is yum yum – you tell it slant, you do metaphor like breathing. But as in life in general, for some our strength can also become our weakness.

Sometimes, a writer can focus so much on the emotional story that nothing physical happens. The characters don't move around. They go from suffering to suffering in taxing and expansive ways, but nothing happens. Carolyn Coman has told us that she struggles with this – she storyboards her novels by chapters after she has a draft and often discovers that every picture shows two heads talking, or one head thinking. Similarly, I have sometimes read talented writers whose characters are vividly drawn, who speak to each other in fetching dialogue, who live in a world gorgeously described but… no plot. I say to my student, "but something has to happen… " He says, but I am really only concerned with the emotional story, with the internal journey of my character, that's what really matters to me. He says, how do I find an action line, or an external desire line, that will resonate with my emotional story?

And I say….

I say…

Well, for a long time I didn't say much except oh you'll figure it out, and I'm there for you, but no we can't just skip that little part and ack and argh and other such nurturing things. This question was very much on my mind as I was analyzing metaphor in preparation for this lecture. And I figured out that when I am searching for my concrete desire line, I do this trope-y thing, which I will now share with you.

I searched for weeks and couldn't find a name for it. Nobody that I know of has identified this thing many writers do or given it a name. I thought of calling it trope-y thing, but this seemed so quotidian in comparison to Eliot's dignified objective correlative. Also, I figured if someone could invent prozeugma, mesozeugma, hypozeugma and diazeugma, who was to say I couldn't make up one little name? So I have named it, for my own convenience and pride, *abstract concretion.*

Yes, abstract concretion, the name is ugly. But everybody thought objective correlative was ugly when Eliot first popularized it, too. I am coining the term to describe the way I discover my action story line by finding a metaphor for the emotional story line. I will try to explain with examples.

In chapter one of Tom Finder, Tom walks toward the downtown core, not knowing why, not remembering anything about his life. He accidently bumps into someone. "Loser," the person said without looking at him. It was the first thing in the world anyone had ever said to him as far as he knew.

I did not want my Tom to be a loser. I wanted him by the end of the book to be the opposite of a loser: a winner. So I put a trope-y twist on the word loser and found its other and less expected opposite, *finder.* Daniel Wolflegs has run away from home and has been on the streets for some time. Samuel, his father, despite all his efforts, can't find him. Samuel tells Tom that he has the power to find Samuel, and prophecies that Tom won't find his own home until he finds Daniel. What I did here was take the emotional or abstract object of desire, which is to be a winner, not a loser, and from it created a concrete desire line: Tom must *find* Daniel. All the events and action in the story are about Tom's efforts to find Daniel (and other cool stuff) and the whole time he is subtly going through the emotional work of finding himself, of seeing himself as a winner. I made the abstract emotional desire line into a concrete desire line. I made the abstract concrete.

An abstract concretion!

I found out there really is such a thing as a concretion, though it isn't abstract. It is these rocks they find just sitting around in different parts of the world completely round and mysterious and nobody not even geologists know where they came from. A perfect metaphor for my metaphor!

The difference between an objective correlative and an abstract concretion is this: an objective correlative takes a concrete thing and makes it mean something abstract, makes it stand for an emotion. Abstract concretion does the opposite: it takes the abstract emotion, and creates a concrete storyline out of it. I take the emotional desire and made it plotty.

In *Keturah and Lord Death*, Keturah's emotional desire is to find her true love. The problem with making finding love a concrete desire line is that you stand the risk of turning your main character into a needy stalker. So instead, I gave Keturah a charmed eyeball. Soor Lily tells Keturah that when the eyeball stops looking and moving, she will have found her true love. An action line of the story is Keturah checking various men against her eyeball. Lord Death is personification, the hart is a symbol, and the forest is an objective correlative. But the eyeball is an abstract concretion.

In *My Book of Life by Angel*, Angel is a prostitute who wants out of the life. Angel's emotional desire is to have some kind of divine or cosmic affirmation that she is not beyond redemption. One day her pimp brings home another girl, Melli, who is the same age as Angel's little brother. This is how I describe Melli:

Melli, a little girl
you could see her veins through
and her eyelids?
you could see the blue through
and her feet?
you could see the bones through
and her hair?
you could see the light through –

She was almost not there.
The air of this place
could crush such bones
          such blue.

I establish here that Melli is angel-like. Angel decides that she has to return Melli to her family. This becomes her concrete desire line – the abstract desire for an angel, her hope of redemption, becomes concrete in Melli. I want my reader to feel that in my character's effort to fulfill her concrete desire, that something healing or cathartic is happening to her emotionally. In *My Book of Life by Angel,* the angel is a symbol, the book of life is an objective correlative, and saving Melli is a metaphor for Angel trying to save herself. Melli is my abstract concretion.

Do I sit down to write and say, today I will do abstract concretion?

Yes. Yes I do. I haven't called it that before, but now I will.

So if you struggle with telling the emotional story, find your metaphor, find your objective correlative. If you struggle telling the action story, perhaps it would help to find your abstract concretion. And if my invented name does not amuse you, just think of it as a metaphorical approach to structuring your novel.

Whatever you struggle with in your writing, whether it is the emotional content or the plotty bits, it is likely that if you can reach toward the metaphorical, you might find a solution.

Immanuel Kant said: "Our metaphors comprise the conceptual spectacles through which we view the world. .... Underlying our vast network of interrelated literal meanings are those imaginative structures of understanding." On a smaller scale, I believe that metaphor is the imaginative structure underlying every story we write.

I will leave you with my final and favourite quote of all, from Jose Ortega y Gassett: "The metaphor is perhaps one of man's most fruitful potentialities. Its efficacy verges on magic, and it seems a tool for creation which God forgot inside one of His creatures when He made him."

Of all the tools you might need in your writer's toolbox, metaphor might just be the most useful of all.