

Non-literal language can take multiple forms, many of which are *figurative* language. "Figures of speech" are often used in poetry. *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature* says that figurative language can be classified in five categories: resemblance or relationship, emphasis or understatement, figures of sound, verbal games, and errors.

A **simile** is a comparison of two things, indicated by some connective, usually "like" or "as."

- Non-literal: "His cheeks were *like roses*, his nose *like a cherry*.../And the beard on his chin was *as white as the snow*."—Clement Clark Moore
- Literal: His cheeks and nose were red from the cold.

A **metaphor** is figure of speech in which two essentially unlike things are shown to have a type of resemblance or create a new image. The similarities between the objects being compared may be implied rather than directly stated.

- Non-literal: "Fog comes on little cat feet"—Carl Sandburg
- Literal: Fog quietly formed over the city.

An **extended metaphor** is metaphor that is continued over multiple sentences.

- Non-literal: "The sky steps out of her daywear/Slips into her shot-silk evening dress./An entourage of bats whirr and swing at her hem, ...She's tried on every item in her wardrobe."—Dilys Rose
- Literal: The earth revolved until the sun was no longer visible. Being nocturnal, bats flew around at night.

Onomatopoeia is a word designed to be an imitation of a sound.

- Non-literal: "Bark! Bark!" went the dog as he chased the car that vroomed past.
- Literal: The dog emitted a sharp, explosive sound as it chased a car driving by.

Personification is the attribution of a personal nature or character to inanimate objects or abstract notions.

- Non-literal: "Because I could not stop for Death,/He kindly stopped for me;/The carriage held but just ourselves/And Immortality."—Emily Dickinson. Dickinson portrays death as a carriage driver.
- Literal: I died.

An **oxymoron** is a figure of speech in which a pair of opposite or contradictory terms is used together for emphasis.

- Non-literal: Organized chaos, same difference, bittersweet, student-teacher, jumbo shrimp
- Literal: very large decapod crustacean (jumbo shrimp)

A **paradox** is a statement or proposition which is self-contradictory, unreasonable, or illogical.

- Non-literal: This statement is a lie.
- Literal: This statement is a statement.

Hyperbole is a figure of speech which uses an extravagant or exaggerated statement to express strong feelings.

- Non-literal: Afraid he would be late, John drove at light speed.
- Literal: Afraid he would be late, John exceeded the speed limit.

Allusion is a reference to a famous character or event.

- Non-literal: A single step can take you through the looking glass if you're not careful.
- Literal: If you don't tread carefully, you might find yourself in an unexpected place.

An **idiom** is an expression that has a figurative meaning unrelated to the literal meaning of the phrase.

- Non-literal: You should keep an eye out for him.
- Literal: Watch for him.

A **pun** is an expression intended for a humorous or rhetorical effect by exploiting different meanings of words.

- Non-literal: I wondered why the ball was getting bigger. Then it hit me. (*This can mean two different things.*)
- Literal: I wondered why the ball was getting bigger. Then I realized why the ball was getting bigger.

"Where I'm From" Example

Non-literal: "...I am from the dirt under the back porch. (Black, glistening, it tasted like beets.)/I am from the forsythia bush, the Dutch elm whose long-gone limbs I remember as if they were my own...."

Literal: I remember the black dirt under the porch tasted like beets. I remember the forsythia bush and the Dutch elm tree. The limbs of the tree were chopped off [or the tree died] a long time ago, but I still remember them very clearly.

There are many ways non-literal language can be used in your "Where I'm From" poem, but the important thing to remember is that non-literal (figurative) language implies far more than the words themselves actually state, and thus it is far more interesting to read.