

# The Silken Tent: Metaphors in Life and Literature

## Overview

### Description

This assignment asks students to critically examine the nature of metaphor in language and literature. They will be asked to demonstrate an understanding of how a metaphor works, and to think critically about how metaphorical comparisons are fundamental to thinking, learning, and communicating.

**Final Product:** After making a list of metaphors encountered in daily life and studying “The Silken Tent” by Robert Frost\*, students will write a 2-3 page essay describing and analyzing the application of metaphor as a poetic and literary device to a poem of their selection.

\*Note: Although this CRA focuses on American poets, the structure and activities of this CRA can easily be adapted to include texts by British poets or poets from around the world.

### Subject

English III

### Task Level

Grade 11

### Objectives

Students will:

- Collect and evaluate relevant examples of figurative comparisons in common use.
- Participate productively working in groups.
- Explore the use of figurative comparisons in Robert Frost’s poem “A Silken Tent” and other instructor-selected poems.
- Construct written essays articulating insights gained about the use of figurative comparisons in literature and life.

### Preparation

- Prepare student copies of the Student Notes and Student Handouts pages.
- Consult texts on metaphorical learning, such as the book, *Metaphorical Ways of Knowing* (Pugh, Hicks and Davis), or consult online resources, such as the

Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL) link on using metaphor in creative writing: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/687/05>

- Arrange for student copies of Robert Frost’s “The Silken Tent.”
- Arrange for student access to a selection of poems that utilize metaphor or simile. Select for length and difficulty based on the skill level of your class, knowing they will have done a preliminary exercise with Frost’s “The Silken Tent.” A few possible poems to use with this assignment are Langston Hughes, “Mother to Son”; Billy Collins, “Introduction to Poetry”; and Emily Dickinson, “My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun.” All three of these poems are widely available.
- Because the assignment calls for students to go beyond reductive interpretations, you may want to refer to a few standard scholarly treatments of the poems you select (for your own background, not your students’). A good source for such background is the University of Illinois Modern American Poetry site: <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets.htm>. For “The Silken Tent,” see <http://poetry.poetryx.com/poems/274/xtras/>.

## Prior Knowledge

- Students should have a working definition of metaphor and a background that underscores how literary and linguistic concepts are not exclusive to literary and linguistic studies.
- Students should be comfortable using word processing software and have prior understanding of and practice in all parts of the writing process, including invention, drafting, revision, and proofreading.

## Key Concepts and Terms

- Analogy
- Extended metaphor or simile
- Figurative comparison
- Imagery
- Metaphor
- Simile

## Time Frame

Instructor’s introduction of the terminology and concepts: one class meeting. Student completion of Part One, the metaphor collection and written analysis: two days outside of class. Post-collection group discussions and introduction of the metaphorical concepts in “The Silken Tent” by Robert Frost: two class meetings. Assignment time can be adjusted as necessary for the selection of poetry for the final essay, and the drafting and revision of the final essay.

## *Instructional Plan*

### **Getting Started**

#### ***Learning Objectives***

Students will:

- Understand and be able to explain selected forms of figurative comparison, including metaphors, similes, and analogies.
- Identify everyday objects and natural phenomena that can be used metaphorically to express aspects of human life or experience.
- Explore and analyze the figurative comparisons found in Robert Frost's "The Silken Tent."

#### ***Procedure***

1. Initiate a class discussion on the topic of metaphors, similes and analogies. Prompt students to name common types of "life" metaphors based on items visible in the classroom (windows, walls, floor, parts of the body) or similes used in everyday descriptions ("as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs"). Emphasize the omnipresence of metaphors in language.
2. In pairs, have students generate interesting or vivid metaphors based on the natural environment or natural phenomena (rock bottom, watershed, eye of a storm, setting sun, etc).
3. Distribute copies of Robert Frost's poem "The Silken Tent."
4. After giving students time to read the poem, continue the class discussion about the "silken tent" as an extended comparison (technically a simile) for Robert Frost's relationship with his wife. Have students explain how each description of the tent reveals a particular aspect of the love that Frost and his wife share. Using the poem as the basis for a more pointed literary analysis will allow you to guide the discussion to emphasize metaphorical ways of knowing and expressing.

### **Investigating**

#### ***Learning Objectives***

Students will:

- Collect and evaluate relevant examples of figurative language in common use.
- Work productively in groups.
- Write a two-paragraph essay articulating insights they gained from collecting everyday examples of figurative language.

### ***Procedure***

1. Introduce the metaphor collection portion of the assignment. Instruct students to collect five natural or environmental metaphors from at least three different sources outside of class (television, popular music, family, non-literary reading, etc.).
2. Ask students to write a brief (three sentence) explanation of how each of their five metaphors functions. What is the comparison involved and what qualities of its object is it supposed to illuminate? How well does the metaphor work? For instance, is it a metaphor that was once fresh but has become a cliché from overuse? Instruct students to record their metaphors and descriptions on the *Metaphors in Nature* handout; then they should compose a two-paragraph examination of what they learned from the process of collecting and analyzing the metaphors.
3. Break students into groups on the day their metaphor collection assignment is due, and ask them to compare their results. Each group will choose one particularly interesting or useful metaphor from each participant for presentation to the entire class.

## **Drawing Conclusions**

### ***Learning Objectives***

Students will:

- Analyze how authors employ nuanced use of figurative language.
- Construct a written essay articulating the insights they have gained about language applications and the use of metaphor.

### ***Procedure***

1. Provide students with a selection of poems that use metaphors or other figurative comparisons. Ask them to read all the poems and choose one they would like to concentrate on for their final essay.
2. Prompt students to arrive at their own analytical conclusions about how specific figurative comparisons work in the poem and what, if anything, they all add up to. It may be helpful to guide students to certain significant lines, phrases, or words in the poem.
3. Assign students a 2–3 page essay in which they identify, describe, and analyze the author’s use of metaphor in the selected poem.
  - a. Instruct the students to plan, generate content for, and compose a first draft.
  - b. If feasible, hold a conference with each student to provide feedback on content, organization, audience accommodation, and style. Remind students to take notes during this conference.
  - c. Allow the students to share their work with peers.

- d. After students have made final revisions and edits, have them turn in the draft they presented at the conference, the notes they took at the conference, and a formatted, clean copy of their finished work.

## *Scaffolding/Instructional Support*

The goal of scaffolding is to provide support to encourage student success, independence, and self-management. Instructors can use these suggestions, in part or all together, to meet diverse student needs. The more skilled the student, however, the less scaffolding that he or she will need. Some examples of scaffolding that could apply to this assignment include:

- Conducting the first day's discussion at a level accessible to all students. They may need multiple examples of metaphors found in life; the richness of metaphor in sports and computer concepts should help. Avoid overly technical, difficult concepts (such as tenor and vehicle), and focus instead on the metaphors all around us (and used frequently by every member of the class).
- For English-language learners, attempting to discover metaphors in their first languages. ELL instructors may be able to provide help with this.
- Allowing enough time for a second attempt at the metaphor collection assignment for students who don't understand it the first time.
- Reading an essay on "The Silken Tent" can help students see more complex relationships between the imagery used in the poem and the kind of human connection it describes (see <http://poetry.poetryx.com/poems/274/xtras/>). Group discussion and discovery drafting (or journals) should identify students who are having difficulty with the nuances of Frost's poem. Focus on the language used in the poem, which should be accessible even to students who have difficulty with the interpretation of metaphorical nuances. Give time for a draft (and if necessary, peer reviews) to identify and aid students who are having difficulty.

The suggestions provided here are intended to address problems you may encounter when using this assignment or when evaluating student work associated with it. All assessment factors should be made clear to students at the beginning of the lesson.

The following factors may be considered when assessing students' performance on this assignment:

- Clear understanding of purpose.
- Clear understanding of the meaning of the metaphor chosen.
- Well-developed reasoning as to the application of metaphor to the nuances of meaning found in the selected poem.
- Unity and coherence of each paragraph and of the essay as a whole.
- Acceptable standards of academic writing (spelling, grammar, punctuation).

### TCCRS Cross-Disciplinary Standards Addressed

Performance Expectation	Getting Started	Investigating	Drawing Conclusions
<i>I. Key Cognitive Skills</i>			
A.1. Engage in scholarly inquiry and dialogue.	✓	✓	
B.1. Consider arguments and conclusions of self and others.		✓	✓
D.1. Self-monitor learning needs and seek assistance when needed.	✓	✓	✓
D.3. Strive for accuracy and precision.	✓	✓	✓
D.4. Persevere to complete and master tasks.	✓	✓	✓
E.1. Work independently.	✓	✓	✓
E.2. Work collaboratively.		✓	✓
<i>II. Foundational Skills</i>			
A.5. Analyze textual information critically.	✓	✓	✓
A.7. Adapt reading strategies according to structure of texts.	✓	✓	✓
B.1. Write clearly and coherently using standard writing conventions.			✓
B.3. Compose and revise drafts.		✓	✓

### TCCRS English/Language Arts Standards Addressed

Performance Expectation	Getting Started	Investigating	Drawing Conclusions
<i>I. Writing</i>			
A.1. Determine effective approaches, forms, and rhetorical techniques that demonstrate understanding of the writer's purpose and audience.	✓	✓	✓
A.2. Generate ideas and gather information relevant to the topic and purpose, keeping careful records of outside sources.	✓	✓	✓
A.3. Evaluate relevance, quality, sufficiency, and depth of preliminary ideas and information, organize material generated, and formulate a thesis.		✓	✓

A.4. Recognize the importance of revision as the key to effective writing. Each draft should refine key ideas and organize them more logically and fluidly, use language more precisely and effectively, and draw the reader to the author’s purpose.		✓	✓
A.5. Edit writing for proper voice, tense, and syntax, assuring that it conforms to standard English, when appropriate.		✓	✓
<b>II. Reading</b>			
A.4. Draw and support complex inferences from text to summarize, draw conclusions, and distinguish facts from simple assertions and opinions.	✓	✓	✓
A.6. Analyze imagery in literary texts.	✓	✓	✓
A.7. Evaluate the use of both literal and figurative language to inform and shape the perceptions of readers.	✓	✓	✓
A.10. Identify and analyze how an author’s use of language appeals to the senses, creates imagery, and suggests mood.	✓	✓	✓
B.1. Identify new words and concepts acquired through the study of their relationships to other words and concepts.	✓	✓	✓
<b>III. Speaking</b>			
B.2. Participate actively and effectively in group discussions.	✓	✓	✓
<b>IV. Listening</b>			
B.3. Listen actively and effectively in group discussions.	✓	✓	✓

### TEKS Standards Addressed

<b>The Silken Tent - Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS): English Language Arts and Reading</b>
110.34.b.1. Reading/Vocabulary Development. Students understand new vocabulary and use it when reading and writing. Students are expected to: 110.34.b.1.A. Determine the meaning of technical academic English words in multiple content areas (e.g., science, mathematics, social studies, the arts) derived from Latin, Greek, or other linguistic roots and affixes. 110.34.b.1.B. Analyze textual context (within a sentence and in larger sections of text) to draw

<b>The Silken Tent - Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS): English Language Arts and Reading</b>
<p>conclusions about the nuance in word meanings.</p> <p>110.34.b.1.E. Use general and specialized dictionaries, thesauri, histories of language, books of quotations, and other related references (printed or electronic) as needed.</p>
<p>110.34.b.3. Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Poetry. Students understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about the structure and elements of poetry and provide evidence from text to support their understanding. Students are expected to evaluate the changes in sound, form, figurative language, graphics, and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods.</p>
<p>110.34.b.13. Writing/Writing Process. Students use elements of the writing process (planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) to compose text. Students are expected to:</p> <p>110.34.b.13.A. Plan a first draft by selecting the correct genre for conveying the intended meaning to multiple audiences, determining appropriate topics through a range of strategies (e.g., discussion, background reading, personal interests, interviews), and developing a thesis or controlling idea.</p> <p>110.34.b.7.B. Structure ideas in a sustained and persuasive way (e.g., using outlines, note taking, graphic organizers, lists) and develop drafts in timed and open-ended situations that include transitions and the rhetorical devices to convey meaning.</p> <p>110.34.b.7.C. Revise drafts to clarify meaning and achieve specific rhetorical purposes, consistency of tone, and logical organization by rearranging the words, sentences, and paragraphs to employ tropes (e.g., metaphors, similes, analogies, hyperbole, understatement, rhetorical questions, irony), schemes (e.g., parallelism, antithesis, inverted word order, repetition, reversed structures), and by adding transitional words and phrases.</p> <p>110.34.b.7.D. Edit drafts for grammar, mechanics, and spelling.</p> <p>110.34.b.7.E. Revise final draft in response to feedback from peers and teacher and publish written work for appropriate audiences.</p>
<p>110.34.b.17. Oral and Written Conventions/Conventions. Students understand the function of and use the conventions of academic language when speaking and writing. Students will continue to apply earlier standards with greater complexity. Students are expected to:</p> <p>110.34.b.17.A. Use and understand the function of different types of clauses and phrases (e.g., adjectival, noun, adverbial clauses and phrases).</p> <p>110.34.b.17.B. Use a variety of correctly structured sentences (e.g., compound, complex, compound-complex).</p>
<p>110.34.b.18. Oral and Written Conventions/Handwriting, Capitalization, and Punctuation. Students write legibly and use appropriate capitalization and punctuation conventions in their compositions. Students are expected to correctly and consistently use conventions of punctuation and capitalization.</p>
<p>110.34.b.19. Oral and Written Conventions/Spelling. Students spell correctly. Students are expected to spell correctly, including using various resources to determine and check correct spellings.</p>
<p>110.34.b.24. Listening and Speaking/Listening. Students will use comprehension skills to listen attentively to others in formal and informal settings. Students will continue to apply earlier standards with greater complexity. Students are expected to:</p> <p>110.34.b.24.A. Listen responsively to a speaker by framing inquiries that reflect an understanding of the content and by identifying the positions taken and the evidence in support of those positions.</p> <p>110.34.b.24.B. Assess the persuasiveness of a presentation based on content, diction, rhetorical strategies, and delivery.</p>

**The Silken Tent - Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS): English Language Arts and Reading**

110.34.b.25. Listening and Speaking/Speaking. Students speak clearly and to the point, using the conventions of language. Students will continue to apply earlier standards with greater complexity. Students are expected to formulate sound arguments by using elements of classical speeches (e.g., introduction, first and second transitions, body, and conclusion), the art of persuasion, rhetorical devices, eye contact, speaking rate (e.g., pauses for effect), volume, enunciation, purposeful gestures, and conventions of language to communicate ideas effectively.

110.34.b.26. Listening and Speaking/Teamwork. Students work productively with others in teams. Students will continue to apply earlier standards with greater complexity. Students are expected to participate productively in teams, offering ideas or judgments that are purposeful in moving the team towards goals, asking relevant and insightful questions, tolerating a range of positions and ambiguity in decision-making, and evaluating the work of the group based on agreed-upon criteria.

# The Silken Tent: Metaphors in Life and Literature

## *Introduction*

Using figurative comparisons helps us vividly and insightfully describe objects, events, concepts, and other phenomena. Thus, metaphors are fundamentally important to the study of language. All languages have metaphors, and the use of metaphor is fundamental to critical thinking.

A metaphor connects two things together; in Robert Frost's terms, metaphor allows us to say one thing in terms of another. For instance, "the ship plows the sea" is a metaphor. A ship is not a plow, but this is a more creative way to describe the image than "a ship goes through the water and because of the density of the steel and the angle of attack, water spills out on either side of the bow." We use images like this constantly in common speech. You probably can't talk for 30 seconds without using some form of metaphor.

The first thing you need to determine with a metaphor is where it holds and where it breaks down. In other words, our ship is like a plow in that it is made of steel and splits the water the way a plow splits the earth. Our metaphor breaks down, however, as soon as we start to compare the ship to a tool used for agriculture. Unlike earth split by a plow, in which seeds can then be planted, water "plowed" by a boat immediately closes up again, and we do not try to plant seeds in the boat's wake. The process by which we understand how a metaphor works is the process of critical thinking—of noting similarities and differences.

This assignment will give you first-hand awareness about the extent to which you are surrounded by metaphors. You will collect and analyze metaphors that you discover in the world around you, and analyze the complexity of the metaphor contained within the poem "The Silken Tent" by Robert Frost (technically, a simile). Finally, you will select and analyze a poem in which the author uses metaphor to communicate his or her message.

## *Directions*

### **Getting Started**

1. Take part in a classroom discussion about metaphor. In this discussion, you will learn about metaphors and how often they occur in everyday speech. The last part of the discussion will focus on metaphors that appear in nature or the environment (e.g., "hitting rock bottom" or finding oneself "upstream without a paddle"). Many of these metaphors, of course, have been used so often that

they have degenerated into clichés. Poets try to find original metaphors that let us see something in a fresh way or with deeper insight.

2. Look up the differences between a metaphor, a simile, and an analogy.
3. Read Robert Frost's poem "The Silken Tent."
4. Participate in a class discussion in which you analyze the different parts of the poem's extended comparison between Frost's wife and a silken tent pitched in a field.

### Investigating

1. Out of class, collect five metaphors that use nature or the environment as the basis for comparison. You may discover these metaphors anywhere (home, schoolmates, television, music, your reading, or conversation). Use at least three different sources. Keep your ears open and record the details (where you hear it, who says it, and so on) on the *Metaphors in Nature* handout.
2. Write a three-sentence description of each metaphor you collect. Include details about the source, the meaning the metaphor conveys, and your thoughts about how effective the metaphor is. After completing the handout, compose a two-paragraph examination of what you learned from the process of collecting and analyzing the metaphors.
3. On the day your metaphor collection is due, meet in a group, and discuss your findings. As a group, choose metaphors to present to the class. Include one of the most interesting or useful metaphors from each group member's collection. Then, turn in your completed *Metaphors in Nature* handout along with your two-paragraph analysis.

### Drawing Conclusions

1. Read a selection of poems provided by your instructor. Choose one poem in which the poet's use of metaphor interests you. Use what you have learned about metaphors—particularly the "silken tent" metaphor in Frost's poem—to explore the poem.
2. Write a 2-3 page essay sharing your ideas about the poet's use of metaphor. Describe the metaphor or metaphors in detail, citing specific uses within the poem. Explain why you think the author chose this metaphor. Tell why you think it is effective or not.
3. Follow instructions provided by your teacher for paper conference, peer review, and final revision of your essay.

## Metaphors in Nature

Collect five metaphors that use nature or the environment as the basis for comparison. You may discover these metaphors anywhere (home, schoolmates, television, music, your reading, or conversation). Use at least three different sources. Write a three-sentence description of each metaphor you collect. Include the meaning the metaphor conveys and your thoughts about how effective the metaphor is. Then, compose a two-paragraph examination of what you learned from the process of collecting and analyzing the metaphors.

1. **Metaphor:** \_\_\_\_\_

A. Source: (where you heard it, who said it)

B. Description: (meaning, your reaction)

2. **Metaphor:** \_\_\_\_\_

A. Source: (where you heard it, who said it)

B. Description: (meaning, your reaction)

**3. Metaphor:** \_\_\_\_\_

A. Source: (where you heard it, who said it)

B. Description: (meaning, your reaction)

**4. Metaphor:** \_\_\_\_\_

C. Source: (where you heard it, who said it)

D. Description: (meaning, your reaction)

**5. Metaphor:** \_\_\_\_\_

E. Source: (where you heard it, who said it)

F. Description: (meaning, your reaction)