

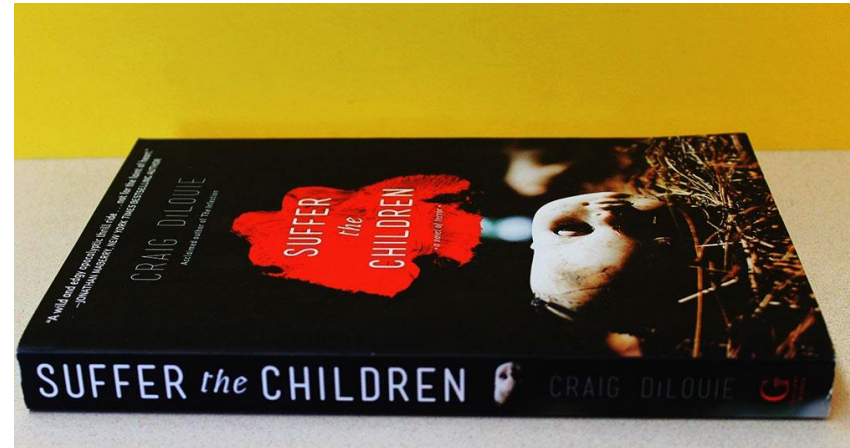
Engaging Readers with Theme, Symbolism, and Figurative Language



By Craig DiLouie

Genesis

- Vampire novel published by Simon & Schuster in 2014
- At HWA event attended a panel, where a writer advised to sell nonfiction concept
- For me, it was, “How far would you go for someone you love?”
- Became focus of its appeal

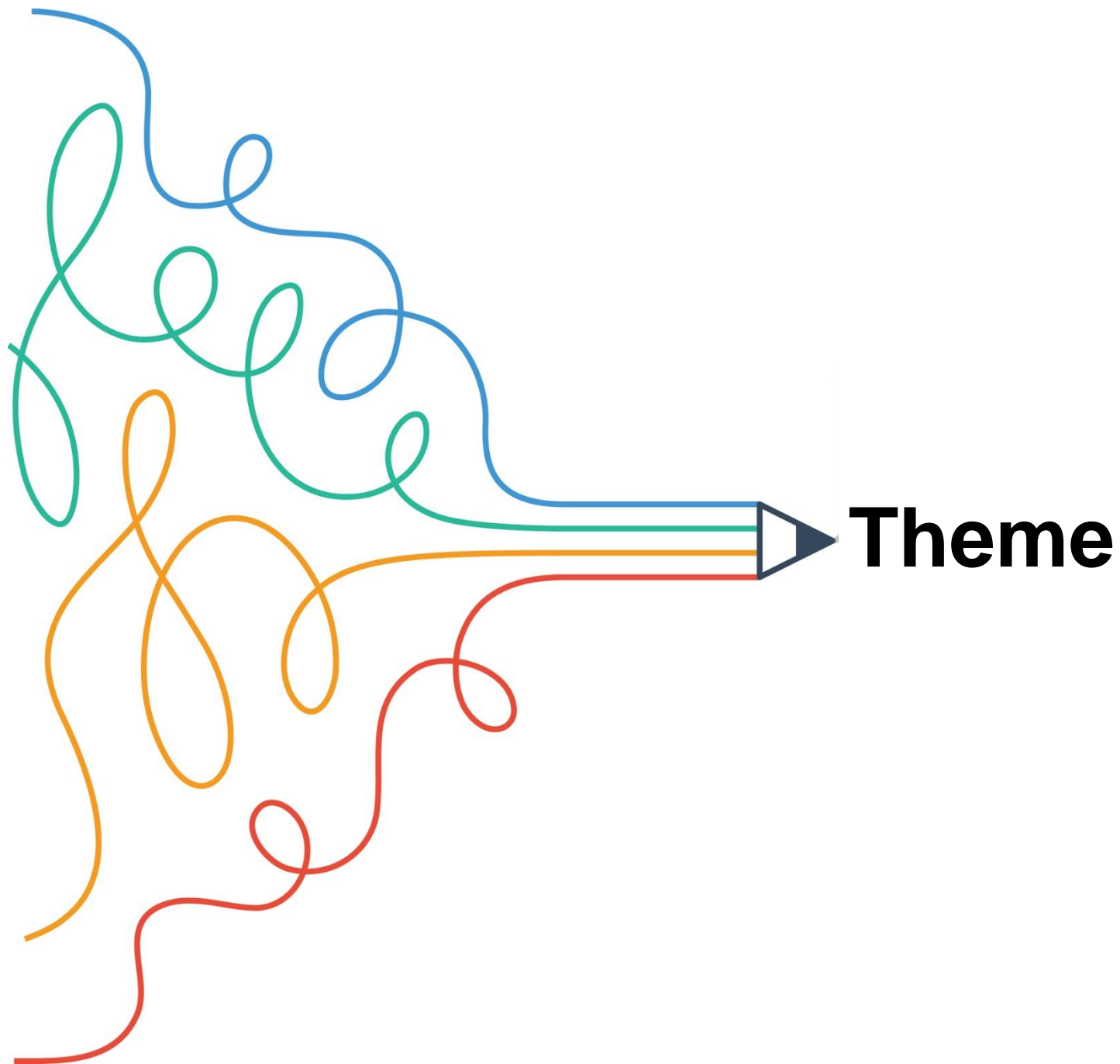




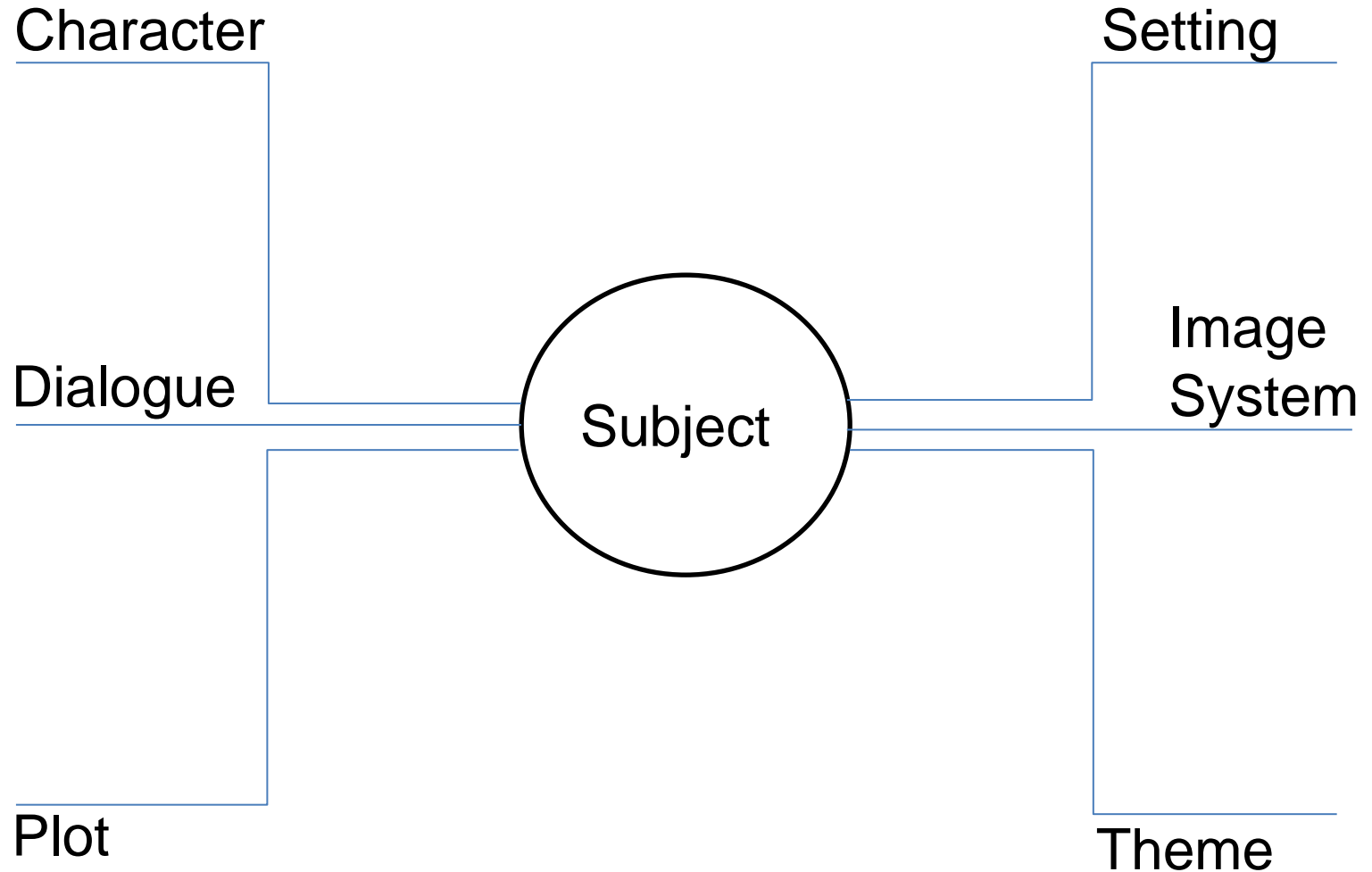
"I've found my voice, Penny. It's deep, wise, and compassionate."

Genesis

- Theme is not the product of genius but a writing tool
- Readers want it and they respond to it
- The tool is actually a toolbox of theme, symbolism, and figurative language

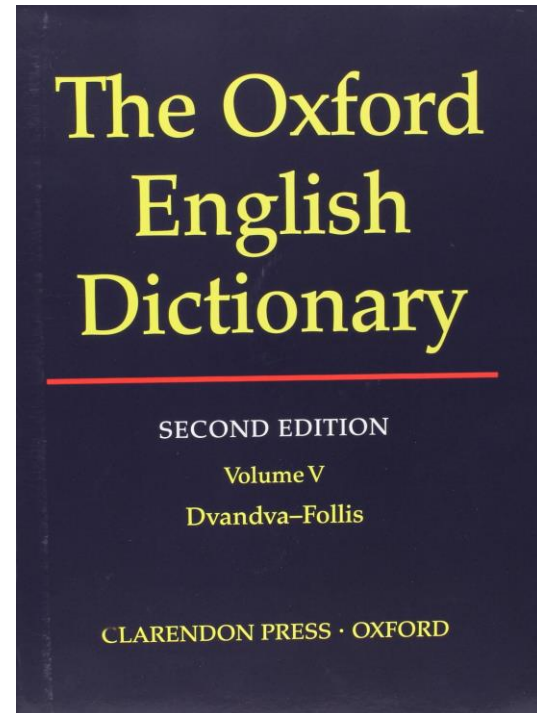


Mind Map



What is theme?

“An idea that recurs of pervades a work of art or literature.”



What is theme?

- The nonfiction concept of the story
- A unifying idea
- The moral of the story
- The story's soul
- A description of a story in a single sentence
- Multiple themes are possible



Plot

What happens



Character

Why it happens



Setting

Where it happens



Theme

What it all means




“So, what’s your book about?”

So, what's your book about?

It's about a group of people hunting a monster living around a lake. When a childhood friend goes missing, they realize they have no choice but to destroy it, taking them into a struggle to survive under the waters of the lake. There are three main characters, one them is like Captain Ahab and the monster is her Moby Dick, another is a scientist who wants to study the monster. But then they—no, wait, let me go further back...



A man and a woman are standing and talking. The man is on the left, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and dark trousers. The woman is on the right, wearing a grey cardigan over a white shirt. They are both looking at each other. There are three speech bubbles: one from the man, one from the woman, and one from the man again.

So, what's your book about?

It's a monster novel about finding redemption in paying off a debt to someone we lost.

Sounds cool!
Tell me more!

Ways to describe your story

- **Theme:** A single person can make all the difference in the world.
- **Premise:** An angel proves a suicidal man his value by showing him what the world would be like if he'd never been born.
- **Central conflict:** A man battling a rich banker is shown what the town would be like if he'd never been born and learns his value.



Why theme?

READER	WRITER
Teaches about life	More focused story
Adds dimension to engage with	Helps writer make choices
Something to think about after they finish	Way to test character's beliefs
Can inspire a review	Can help the book find its audience

Why theme?

“Three Keys To Telling Personal Stories That Move Hearts And Minds,” *Forbes*, May 2016:

#1: inciting incident


What happened that created adversity?

- #2: personal transformation

How did you arise to the challenge?

- #3: Life lesson

Connect a personal struggle and transformation to the broader world shared with the reader



Your book really
made me think. It
changed my life.

Thanks,
theme!

SUBJECT	THEME
Love and heartbreak	Love conquers all, but some people lose
Life and death	We don't know what comes after, so live life to the fullest
Good and evil	If you are good to other people, good things will happen to you
War and peace	We can condemn war while loving those who fight them
Coming of age	Giving in to peer pressure to be likeable can make you dislike yourself
Power	Power corrupts, so it should be limited
Individual and society	A society is only as good as how it treats its minorities
Order and chaos	If you try too hard to control events, you'll end up losing all control

How to use theme

- Find it as early as possible
- Express it as a single sentence
- Internalize it and let it speak through the story
- Can be explicit at beginning, via Ally character, or via protagonist around final transformation
- Avoid making an argument
- Reinforce with image system
- Should relate to central conflict and character arc
- Can be framed as a question aimed at reader
- Be prepared for different reader interpretations

Theme through moral choice

Protagonist can be given a moral choice relating to the theme.

In *The Maltese Falcon*, the theme is, “Honor comes before everything.”

Detective Sam Spade finds out his client murdered his partner to frame somebody else, but he’s fallen for her.

Spade is hired by criminals seeking the Falcon. They offer him a lot of money.

He turns them all in, choosing honor and justice over love and wealth.



Theme through opposing views

Theme: “If you obsess on making money to have a better life, you can miss out on a good life.”

Joe believes he must make a lot of money to get a girlfriend. He has three friends:



Kathy, who likes Joe, is usually broke but enjoys life.

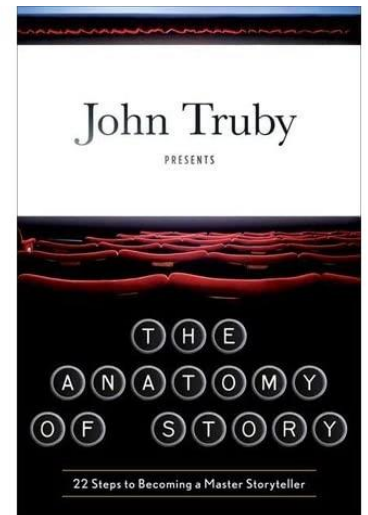
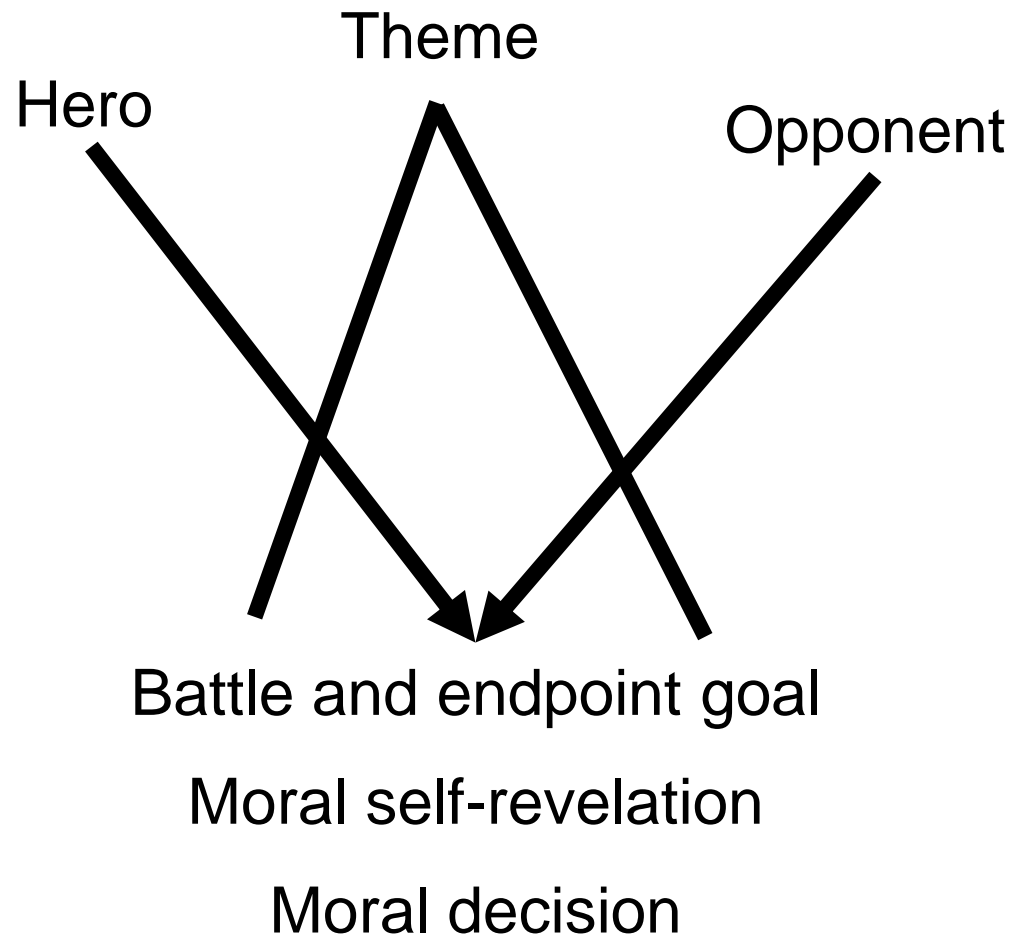


His brother Bob is a workaholic to provide for family he rarely spends time with.



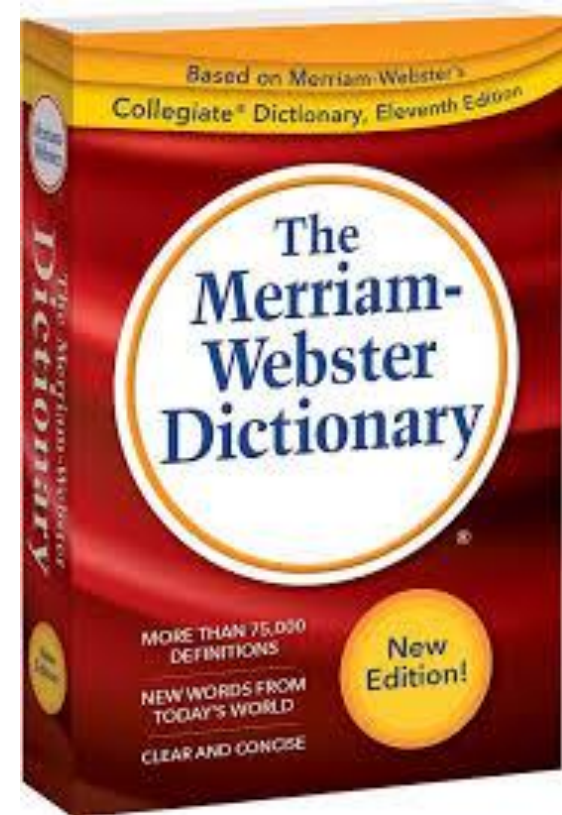
Pete is rich and chases fun, only to feel dissatisfied and bored.

Theme revealed through plot (John Truby)



What is allegory?

“The expression by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions of truths or generalizations about human existence. Also: an instance (as in a story or painting) of such expression.”

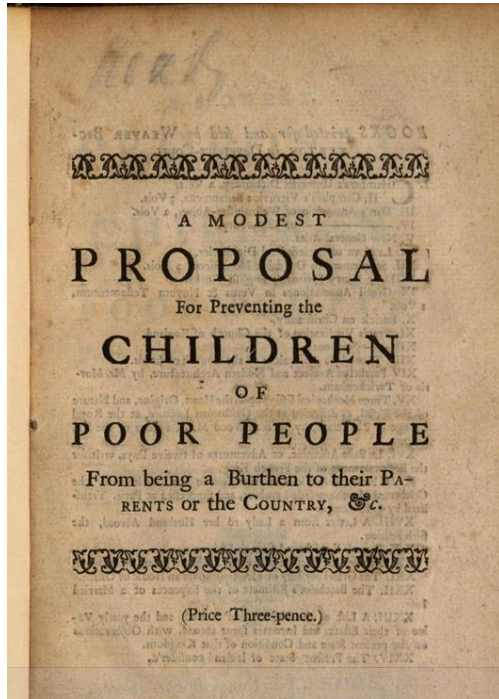


Features of allegory

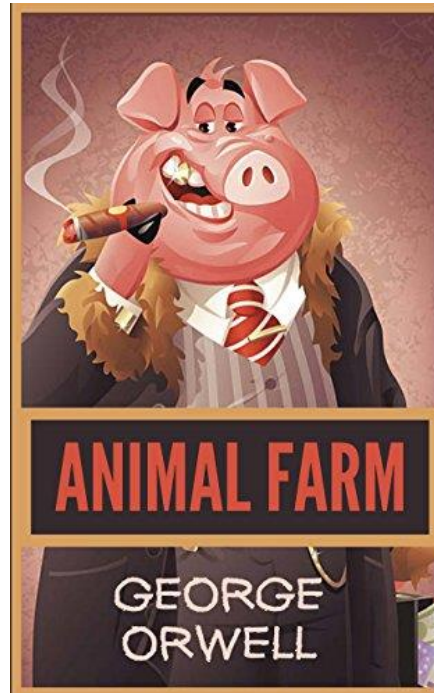
- Characters and events serve as symbols for deeper or larger meaning
- Idea drives the story and stands for itself and something else
- Satire, fables, parables



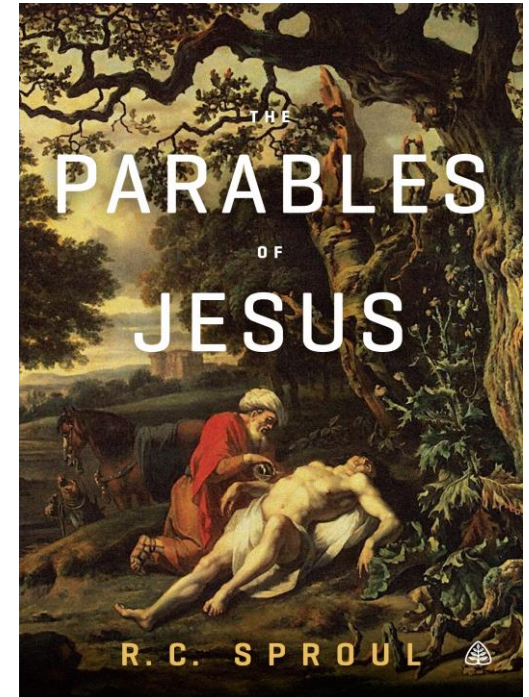
Examples



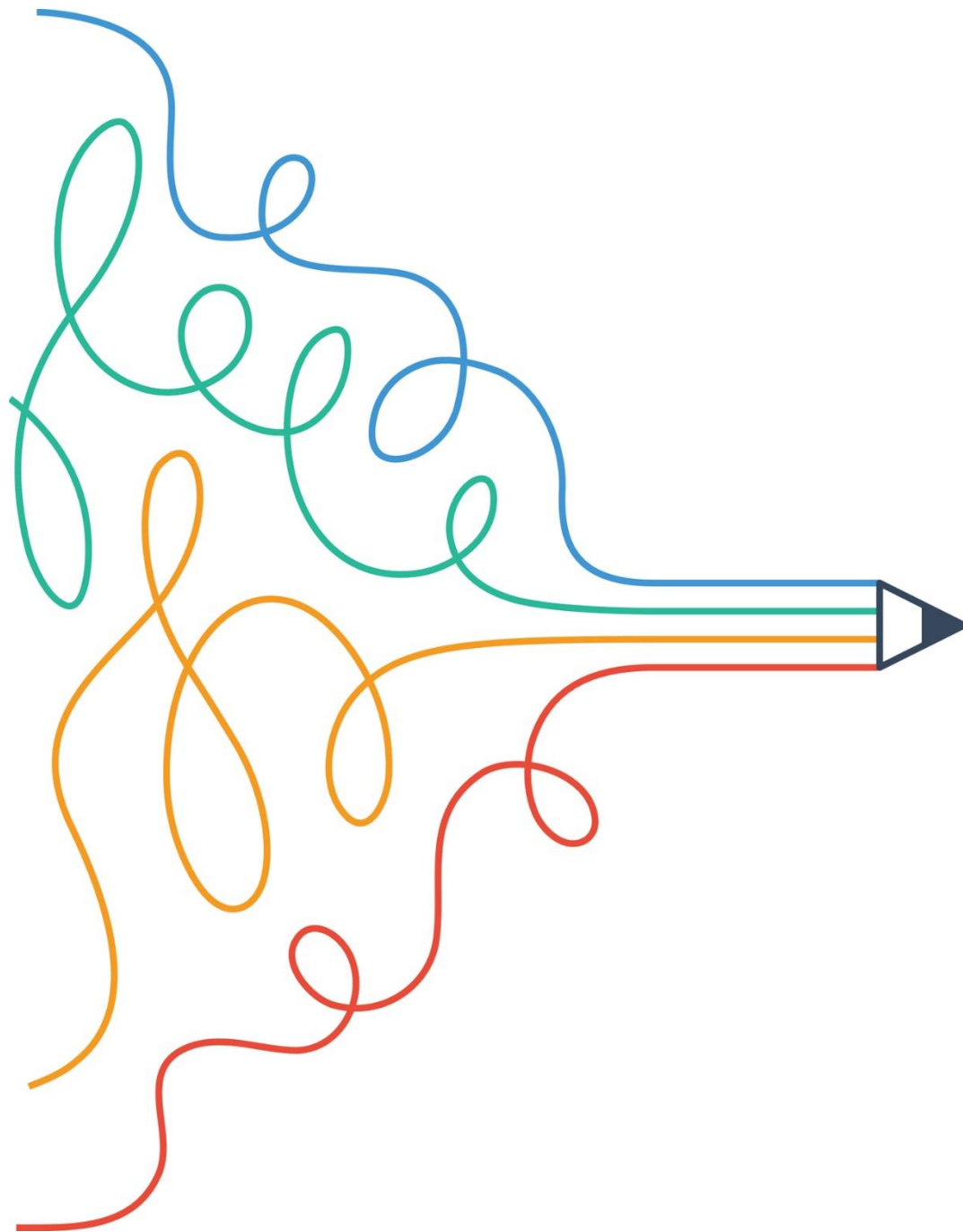
SATIRE



FABLES



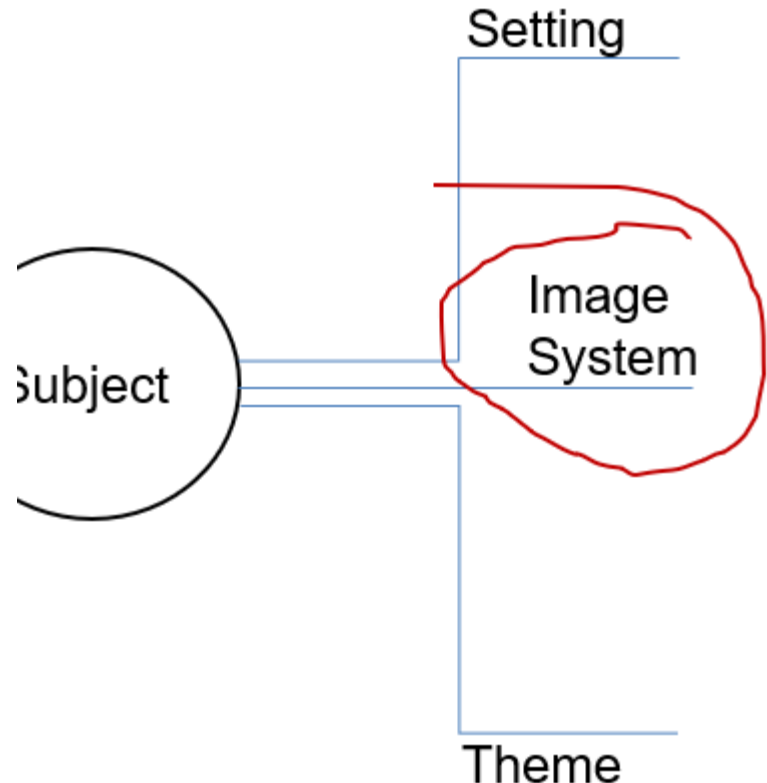
PARABLES



**Symbols
& Motifs**

The image system

- Symbols, motifs, and metaphors used to express tone and/or theme
- If themes are subliminal, think of the image system as subliminal advertising



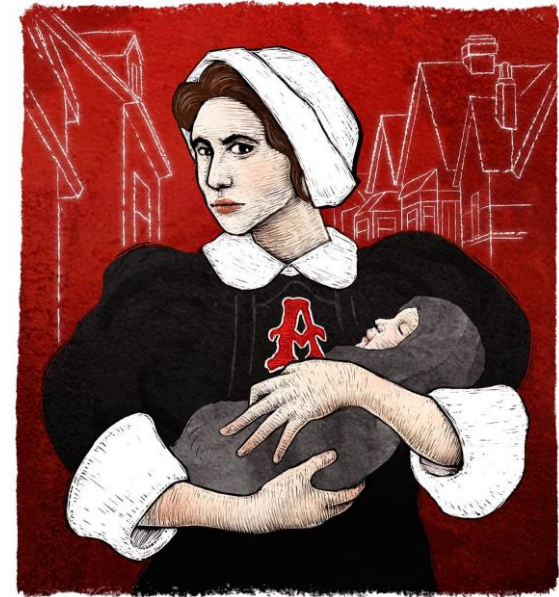
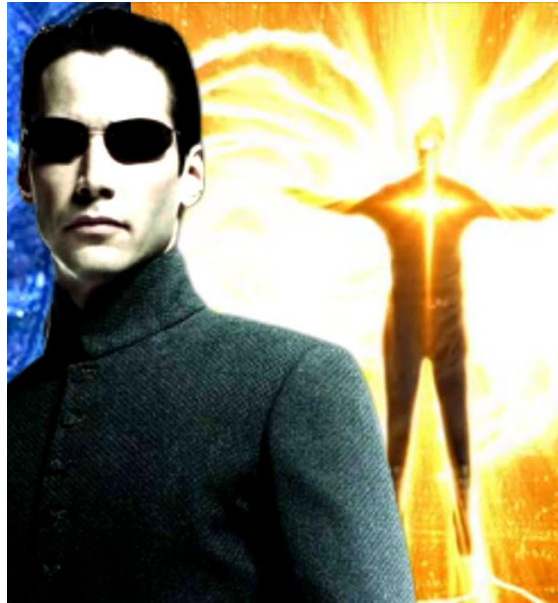
What is a symbol?

- An object, action, character, color, word, or event used to represent an abstract idea
- Communicates theme, tone, atmosphere, and emotion but hinting instead of spelling out
- A hidden language or code in the story



How to use symbolism

- Look for elements that express tone or theme
- Death example: coffin, hourglass, bells, orchids, winter, etc.
- Can be more subtle or assigned its own meaning
- If recurring, a motif



How to use symbolism

Colors

Black: death/evil

Red: passion/violence

Blue: calm

Flowers

Rose: love

Daisies: innocence

Objects

Ladder: connection

Mirror: vanity

Car: freedom

Weather

Fog: confusion/mystery

Storm: change/violence

How to use symbolism

- Some genres provide a symbol web
- Symbol web: prefabricated series of symbols loaded with meaning, and may be expected
- Western example: six-gun, horseman, badge, fence, saloon
- The web can be reversed for the unexpected (e.g., *Shrek*, *Columbo*)



How to use symbolism

- Let your characters focus on things that have symbolic value
- Plan elements, but be careful and as sparing as needed
- Or pants it, see what reveals itself, and tune in second draft
- Start with a feeling
- Trust your reader to get it



What is a motif?

- A motif is a recurring image, idea, or symbol that communicates or enhances theme
- Repetition is key but must be relevant by being meaningful
- While symbols are typically concrete, motif may be abstract
- MacGuffins are a type of motif but can be elevated using symbolism above mere device

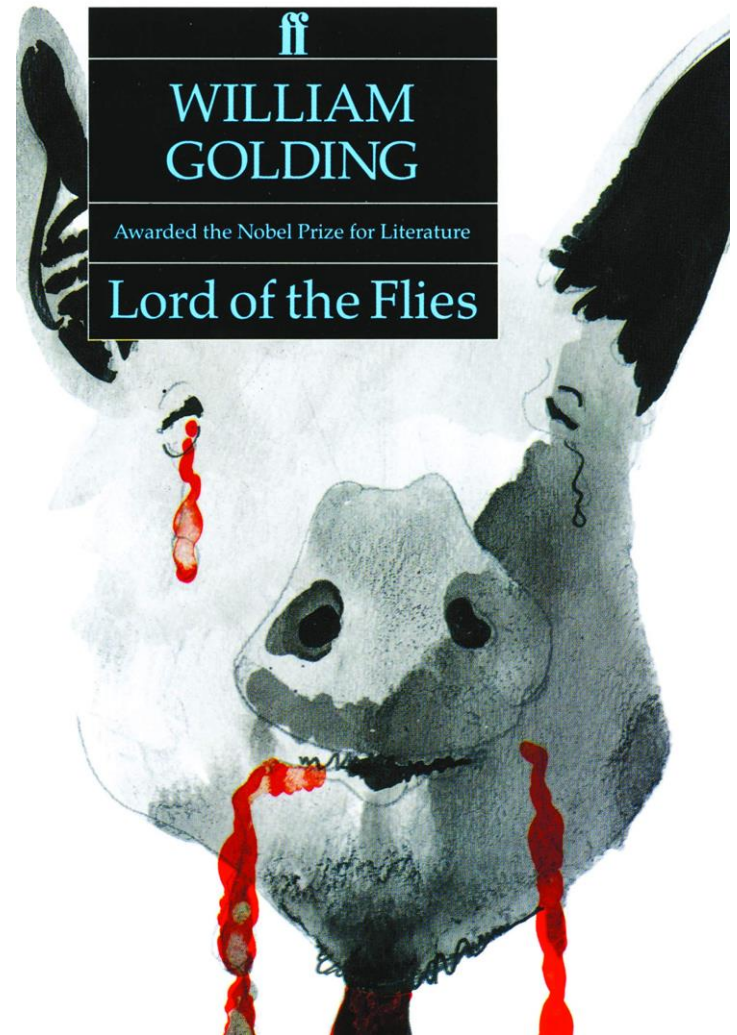


How to use motif

- Introduce the symbol in a matter-of-fact manner
- Reintroduce later in a different context that elevates the story and communicates theme while producing a stronger feeling
- Look to tie the end to the beginning
- Potentially connect to character change: introduce when character's flaw or need becomes known, reintroduce at moment of character's change with either new context or variation on the symbol

Example of motif

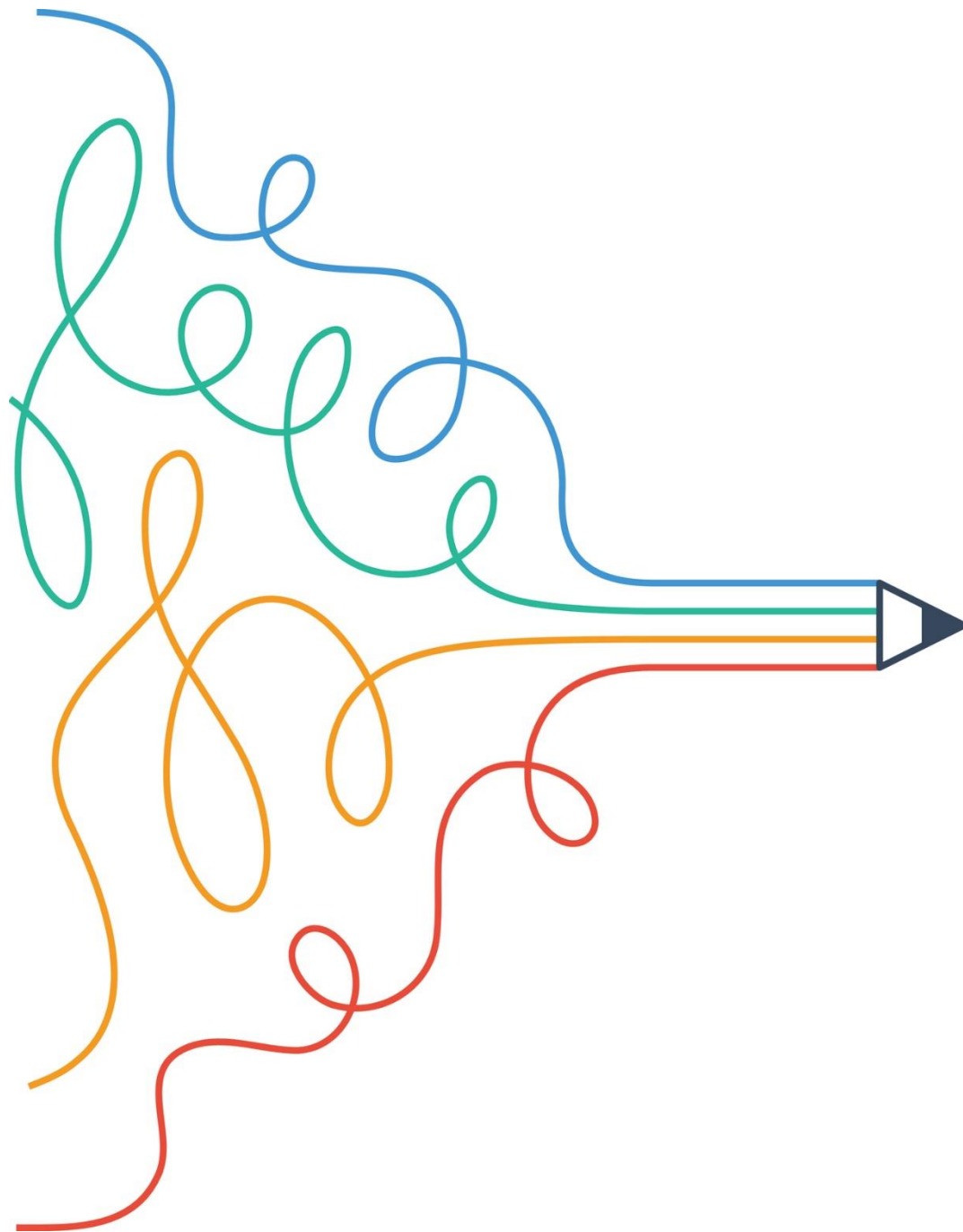
- A group of schoolboys are marooned on an island
- They use a conch shell in meetings, symbolizing order on the island
- The shell is later destroyed, creating feelings of loss
- Piggy's glasses are used to make fire, symbolizing civilization and rescue
- Glasses are broken: the boys are rejecting civilization



Using leitmotif

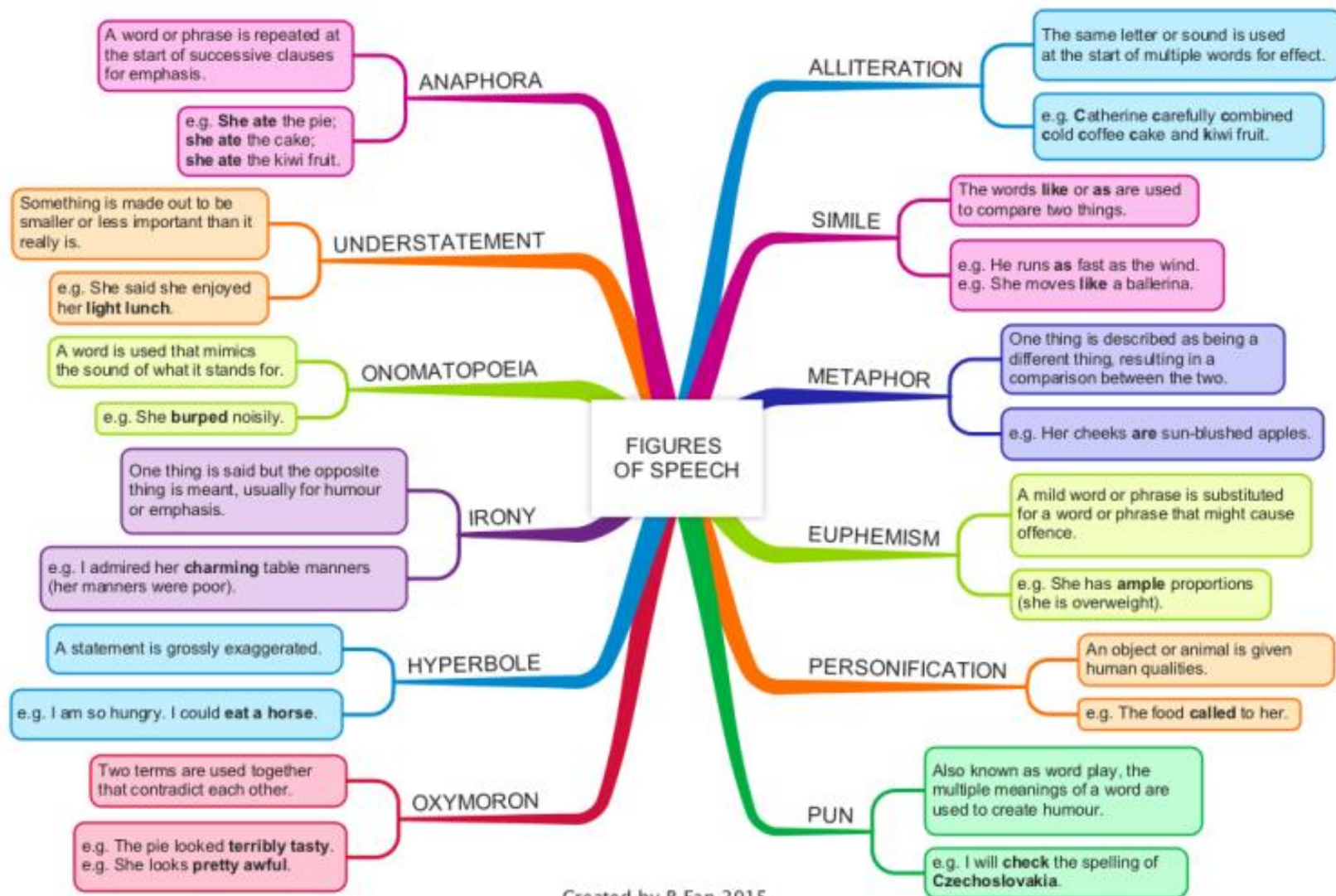
- Recurring image associated with a person, situation, or idea
- Roots in opera
- Think *bum-bum-bum-bum* in *Jaws* when shark is about to show up
- A change sends a big signal
- Example: when a monster is near the house, all the neighborhood dogs howl; one night, the howling becomes whining and dead silence





**Figurative
Language**

What is figurative language?



What is a metaphor?

- Describes something as being like something else even though it is not literally applicable
- Equated for symbolism or comparison
- Usually characterizes something unfamiliar with familiar terms or image
- Conveys meaning, mood, atmosphere, color, interest
- Implied metaphor is, well, implied (e.g., “It was another day playing my part with the same old script”)

All the
world's
a STAGE

William Shakespeare

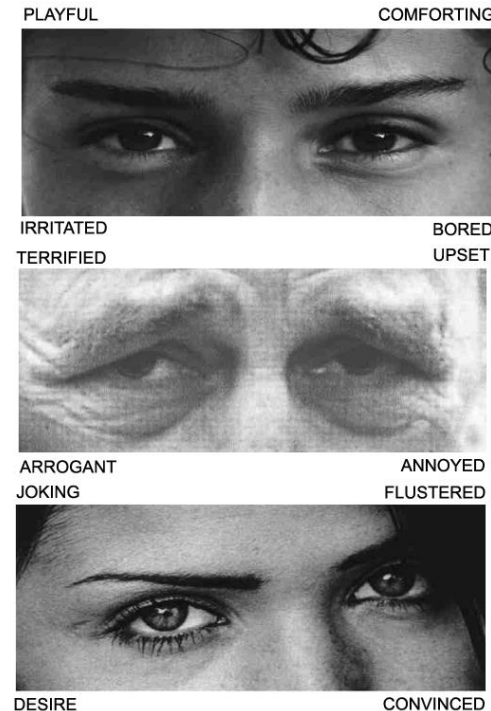
What is a simile?

- One thing is compared to a different kind of thing with a similar characteristic to make a description more vivid or make an explanatory point
- The key is use of “as” or “like”
- A type of metaphor; remove the “as” or “like” and you get metaphor
- Comparison is usually similar; if very different, it’s called a *conceit* instead of a *simile*



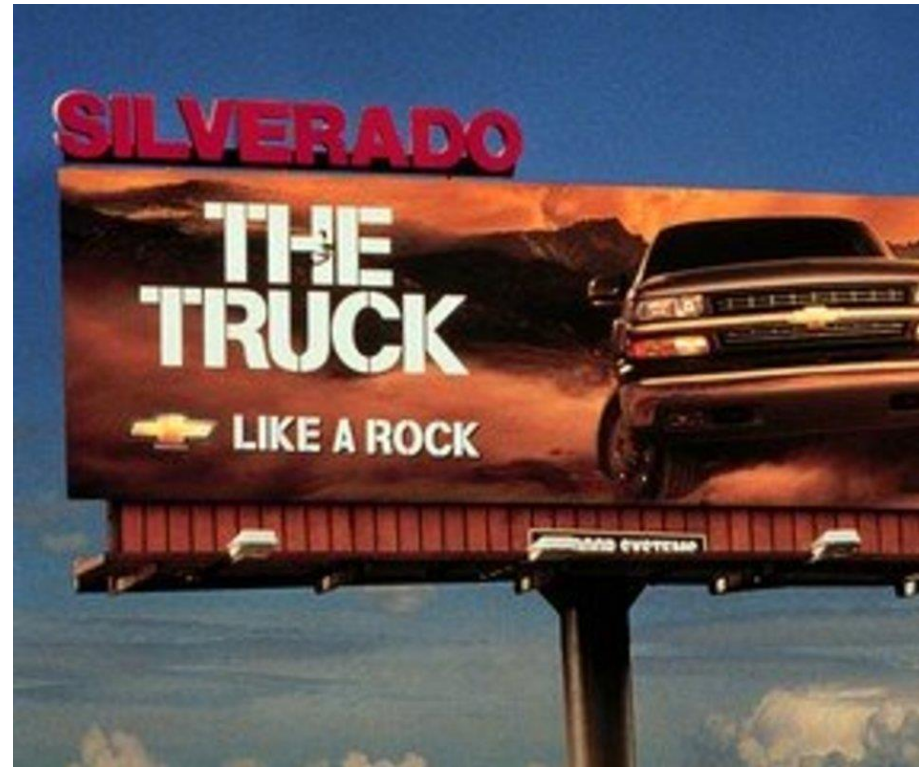
It really is stimulating

- University of Ontario study
- Participants read a story, some including metaphors, then evaluated photographs of 36 pairs of eyes to identify their true emotional state
- Those who read metaphors were significantly better at identifying the emotional state
- In second experiment listened to short stories being read and then rated speaker on various characteristics
- Those who used metaphors were judged to be friendlier and more intimate



Using metaphors and similes

- Avoid mixing in proximity
- Avoid cliches unless going for folksy tone or dialogue or stimulating juxtaposition
- Be provocative but clear, and make it functional
- Arouse the senses
- Make relatable to POV
- Support tone or theme
- You can make up new ones for a specific world or culture



Supporting tone or theme

Darkness fell like _____.

a suffocating curtain (horror)

an unpaid light bill (comedy)

a blindfold (romance)

the climax of a good drunk (Western)

one of the wizard's tricks (fantasy)

Endor's black rain (sci-fi)

the aftermath of a bullet (detective)

a sudden storm (thriller)

a surprise attack (war)



Simile versus analogy

- Analogy uses metaphor, simile, conceit to make a larger point
- Not a figure of speech but rather a type of argument
- “Writing a novel is like climbing Mount Everest. **Once you get through the hard part, it’s all downhill.**”
- “Life is like a box of chocolates. **You never know what you’re gonna get.**”



"A metaphor is something, a simile is like something, and an analogy explains how one thing being like another helps explain them both."

-Robert Lee Brewer

Other figures of speech

- **Personification:** a verb gives an object human qualities
“The *phone nagged* me all day.”
- **Hyperbole:** exaggerate for effect
“Then its ring *shredded my ears* again.”
- **Idiom:** expression that has different meaning than literal one
“If I answered it, I’d *murder two birds with one stone*—stop the endless calls and finish the game.”
- **Irony:** actual meaning is different than literal meaning to produce humor or emphasis
“It was the demon, greeting me in her *cheerful snarl*.”

Other figures of speech

- **Oxymoron:** two terms are used together that are contradictory

“At first, I couldn’t speak, remembering her *nightmare beauty*.”

- **Euphemism:** substitution for uncomfortable concept

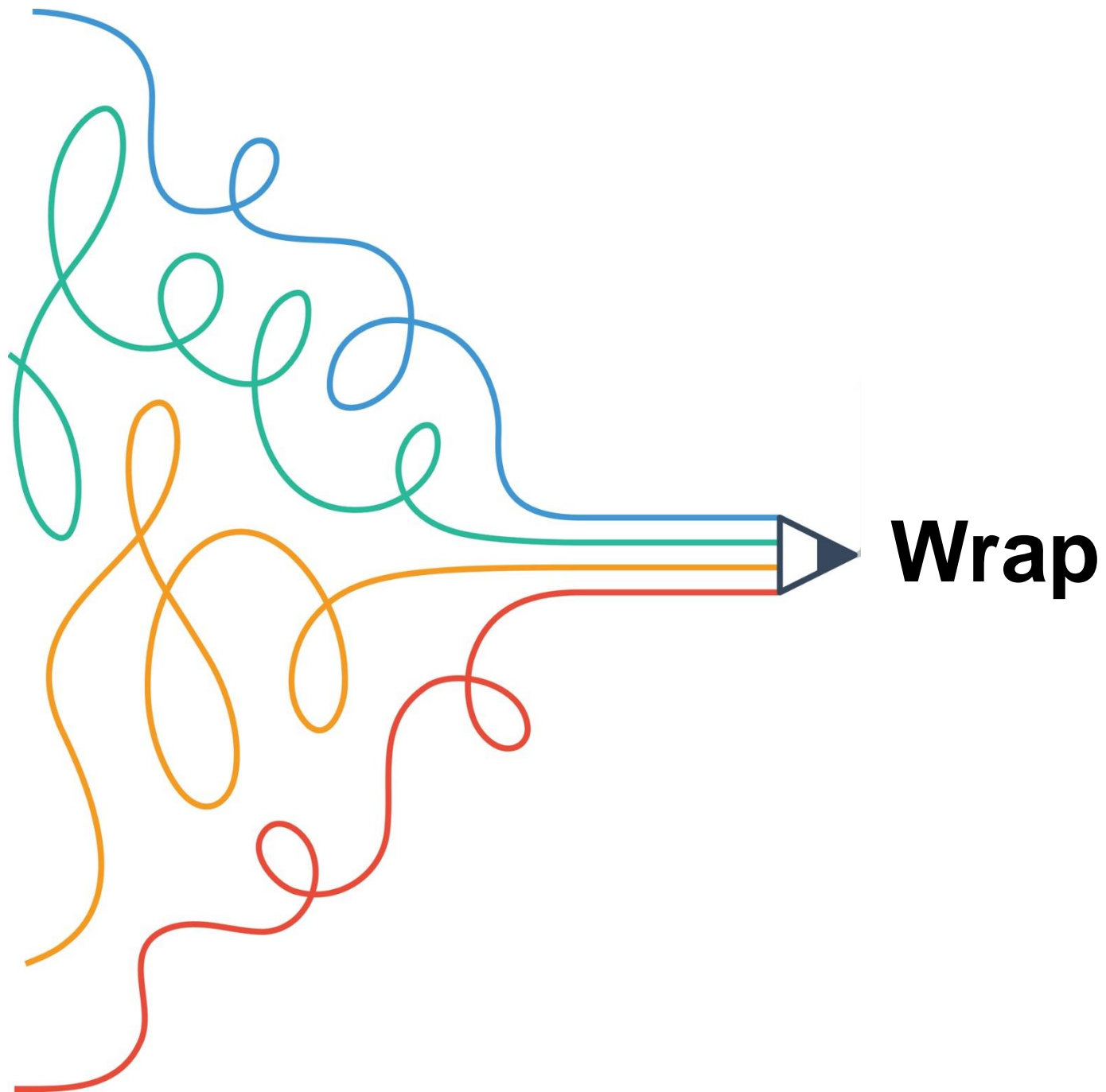
“My thoughts flew in an *indiscrete direction*.”

- **Alliteration:** repetitive use of initial letter or a sound for effect

“The *demon had called to demand* her *dice*.”

- **Anaphora:** repetitive use of word or clause for effect

“*She wanted* her dice and *she wanted* me roll them and *she wanted* to see if I won or lost everything.”



Thoughts on Theme

- Theme ain't just for English majors
- Theme is as important as character, dialogue, plot, and setting
- It's a tool for stronger storytelling, stronger reader engagement, and elevator pitches
- Find your theme as early as possible, internalize it, let it speak through the story without preaching
- Relate it to the central conflict and/or character arc
- Reinforce it with your image system

Thoughts on Symbolism

- Should express theme or tone
- If writing genre, use the symbol web traditionally or reverse it for intentional effect
- Start with a feeling
- Motif very effective for theme
- Use motif to signal character or plot change; by relating to theme, seemingly insignificant events will take on enormous meaning and feeling
- Leitmotif can be effective for conveying feeling or significance for recurring character or event

Thoughts on Figurative Language

- Can be stimulating and rich
- Can reinforce tone and theme
- Avoid cliches, arouse the senses, be provocative but functional and sparing as needed
- Make relatable to character POV and/or setting
- If dealing with an original world such as in fantasy or sci-fi, you can be inventive and reinforce setting

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