A metaphor is a figure of speech in which two things are equated with each other as identical, in distinction from a simile, in which the two things are said to be alike. As long ago as Aristotle wrote his Rhetoric it was pointed out that the poetic metaphor was intimately related to the riddle. The true riddle—identified by that adjective to distinguish it from conundrums, sham riddles, etc.—is an extended statement, usually but not always in rhyme, giving information about an object the identity of which must be guessed.

Old Mother Twitchett has but one eye
And a long tail which she lets fly;
Every time she goes through a gap
A bit of her tail she leaves in a trap.

The answer to this riddle is that Old Mother Twitchett is a needle. It will be observed that the riddle contains several clues to its solution. The one eye is the needle's eye; the long tail is the thread; the gap is the hole which the needle makes in the material as it is pushed through; and the trap is the stitch, for each stitch shortens by a little the length of the thread which the needle trails behind it.

Compare this with a metaphor from Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale":

O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth...

What is Keats calling for? A beaker is a kind of vessel, used for containing liquid. Hippocrene was a fountain on Mount Helicon, said to have sprung up out of a hoofprint of Pegasus, the winged horse; its waters were considered a source of poetic inspiration. But this Hippocrene of which Keats speaks must be different from ordinary, because Keats calls it the "true" one. Certainly we are dealing with a liquid, for there are bubbles, like beads, at the brim of the beaker;
as these bubbles break, they seem to wink. What kind of liquid is it that comes from the warm South, causes the complexion to grow flushed, and stains the mouth purple? Wine, of course; and when we guess the riddle, we notice also the minor point that wine is itself as warming as the South it comes from, as well as the major one that the true source of poetic inspiration, in Keats's view, is wine, not any kind of water—even that from Hippocrene. Keats, we see, agrees with Samuel Butler, who called on a cup of ale to be his muse in Hudibras.

The process that has been used in arriving at the meaning of these lines from Keats has been called by many "explication." We may equally well call it "guessing riddles."

Metaphors as used in poetry are apt to be difficult and complex. In order to understand the function and use of metaphor, let us turn to those used in folksongs, which we can assume are easier and simpler. What can we learn from an examination of these?

The Fort Hays Kansas State College Folklore Collection contains at present 103 songs in manuscript, counting variant versions as separate songs, in addition to a number on tape which have not been transcribed. Although it is difficult always to be sure that a given expression is a metaphor, for language itself is metaphorical, I have compiled a list of what seemed to me to be the metaphors in these 103 songs. They yielded only 87 metaphors, ranging in length from one word to a four-line stanza, an indication that metaphors are not very common in folksongs. Moreover, these 87 metaphors occurred in only 28 of the songs; 75 folksongs contained no metaphors I could recognize. This is an indication that while most folksongs are sparing in the use of metaphor, a few songs are very highly metaphorical.

How do these metaphors work? To begin with, although metaphor is often defined as a statement that one thing is another, as for instance in "All the world's a stage," only five of these metaphors contain forms of the verb "to be." For instance, in C338.02 ("Don't Be in Too Much of a Hurry"), of gossip it is said, "'Tis a game at which more might be playing / If the truth were all told about you." Although the antecedent of "it" is not clear, what underlies the lines is the metaphor, "Gossip is a game."

If in only a negligible number of folksongs do we find metaphors in which the identity of two things is expressed, how is the idea of identity, which is the characteristic of a metaphor, communicated? In most of the metaphors in folksong—and I feel sure this would hold
true for poetry as well—the identity is assumed. One thing is spoken of as if it were another. The commonest way in which this is done, accounting for 48 metaphors, is by simple substitution of one thing for another, either one noun for another, one verb for another, or both. Twenty-three of these involve substitutions of nouns only, eight of verbs, and seventeen of both.

Some particularly striking examples of the substitution of one noun or noun phrase for another will be given here. In C300.03 (“Trip Lightly”) it is asked, “Why sigh o’er blossoms dead?” in which the dead blossoms are past misfortunes. In C300.08 (“The Cowboy’s Dream”) Judgment Day is called “a great roundup” and “the great final sale,” God is called “the Boss of the Riders,” the devil is referred to as “another big owner,” and a lost soul appears both as “A maverick, unbranded on high,” and as “a stray yearling.” Some of the most interesting substitutions are those made for “heaven.” In C300.08, following the twenty-third psalm, heaven is “the green pastures”; in C327.2 (“Too Late”) it is “where the skies are bright and clear”; and in C370.05 (“I Think When I Read That Sweet Story”) it is “that beautiful place He has gone to prepare / For all who are washed and forgiv’n.”

Half the substitutions of verbs are euphemisms for “to die,” showing that perhaps the relationship between metaphor and euphemism would repay exploration. In C325.02 (“Put My Little Shoes Away”) two are used, “I will be an angel” and “I am going to leave you.” “Fall asleep” is used in C325.01 (“A Packet of Old Love Letters”), and in C200.01 (“Old Dan Tucker”) “Old Dan he has had his last ride.” Very close to these is “I’m ready, come drive me away,” which means “take me to heaven,” in C300.08. The same song uses “get branded” for “be converted.” C322.06 (“Will You Love Me When I’m Old”) uses “lean” for “depend,” and C338.04 (“Drive the Nails”) says “stumble” when it means “fail.”

The metaphors which substitute both noun and verb are, of course, more complex than those which substitute only one element. The song C322.06 uses “Life’s morn will soon be waning” to say “Youth will soon pass.” In the same song the lines “Hoping some bright morn to anchor / Safe beyond the surging tide” suggest that our lives are boats which will reach the haven of eternal life after passing through the “surging tide” of this world. C338.04 contains two stanzas in which a whole situation stands as metaphor for another situation. One of these is as follows:

Standing at the foot, Boys,
Gazing at the sky,
How can you get up, Boys,
If you never try?

We envision the boys standing at the foot of the mountain, which represents life, gazing up at the sky beyond its summit, which stands for success. What the song means is that success will not come without effort—or, as it puts it metaphorically in another stanza, "They who reach the top, Boys, / First must climb the hill."

Some of these metaphors are deceptively difficult. At first sight "Today our sky is cloudless," a line from C322.06 simply means "we are happy." But what is the sky? Presumably the prospect of that part of our lives which still lies ahead of us. What are the clouds which it lacks? These may be obstacles, sorrows, difficulties of many kinds. Then the song goes on, "But the night may clouds unfold / And its storms may gather round us." Again, on the surface, this seems simply to mean "we may be unhappy." But when the metaphor is worked out in detail, there is a greater complexity. The passage of time has brought us now to that part of our lives which earlier we had viewed as the future, just as it brings night after day. The clouds have "unfolded"—a metaphor within a metaphor—and now we are threatened with those obstacles, sorrows, and difficulties which could not then be foreseen. As long as we can still consider these as "clouds," we are not actually touched by them, although they impend; but when they become "storms," then we are pelted with them, drenched with them as with rain.

We have been considering those metaphors which are communicated by the substitution of one word or phrase for another, a class which on the evidence of these folksongs is so large that it must be considered the most characteristic structural type. But there are a considerable number of other devices which the folksongs use to establish that identity of one thing with another which is the mark of metaphor.

Of these miscellaneous devices, the most common is that in which a verb appropriate to one noun is used for another to suggest an identity between them. In books on poetic devices and figures of speech, this is usually considered a form of "submerged metaphor." Thirteen metaphors from the folksongs fall into this category. In C338.05 ("Say I Will") occur the lines "Do not dim your purpose true / With your sighing." The verb "dim" is appropriate to a light, so that "purpose" is here being spoken of as if it were a light. In C338.02 it is said that the tongue has "slain" hundreds; since "slain" is appropriate to a weapon, it is implied that the tongue is a weapon.
Another type of "submerged metaphor," accounting for eight examples, is that in which one thing is said to have an attribute of another thing. In C328.806 ("The Lady in Red") it is said that "sin has left its sad scar"; sin, then, is seen as a wound, since it is a wound that leaves a scar. And the song C200.04 ("Flowers Must Die With the Year") refers to "winter's cold sting," which implies an identity between winter and a bee. Of the central character of C200.9 ("Deacon Brown") it is said that "There was not a stain on his fair renown," suggesting that renown is a kind of garment; this is a particularly interesting one, because the implication that as a garment may disguise the person wearing it, so may renown hide the real character of a person, is carried out by the song itself.

The final type of "submerged metaphor" occurred only once; it is that in which an adjective appropriate to one noun is applied to another. A name sometimes given to this device is "transferred epithet." The song C200.04 refers to "the swift flying hours." The adjective or epithet "flying" is appropriate to birds and thus suggests an identity between birds and hours.

In addition to metaphors proper, the folksongs reveal the use of other figures of speech which are actually special classes of metaphor—personification and synecdoche.

A personification is a kind of metaphor in which one of the elements equated is a human being. There are six personifications among these folksongs, although, since two appear in both of two versions of the same song and are thus repeated, only four separate personifications can be found. The two which are repeated are in two versions of C324.01 ("The New Moon"); one refers to the moon as "she," a common personification, and the other speaks of the "toes" of the stars. In the other two personifications, it is abstractions that are personified. In C325.03 ("Kitty Wells") death is spoken of as a human being: "When death came in my cabin door / And took from me my joy and pride." The song C300.03 asks, "Why clasp woe's hands so tightly?" giving to woe the attributes of a person.

Synecdoche is a kind of metaphor in which the two things equated stand in a special relationship, as for instance one may be a part of the other, or the material out of which the other is made, or an attribute of the other. Six examples are found in the folksongs studied. In both C300.7 ("The Little Old Sod Shanty") and C322.06 the heart is allowed to stand for the whole person; the former song has "To cheer our hearts with honest pride of fame," and the latter has "But my heart will know no sadness." In C200.13 ("Jack and Joe") it is said,
"He sailed for home across the foam," in which "foam" stands for the ocean. The line "And raised a marble fair" occurs in C200.07 ("The Blind Child"); here "marble" stands for "tombstone." When in C327.2 it is observed, "Your chestnut hair is tinged with snow," what is implied is an attribute of snow, its whiteness. One of the examples of synecdoche is that special case called by rhetoricians "metonymy," in which one of the things equated is the cause of the other. The song C322.05 ("Down Deep in the Green Valley"), a variant of "The Jealous Lover," contains the lines, "And deep into her bosom / He plunged a fatal knife." It is the wound, not the knife, that is fatal, but the knife is the cause of the wound.

It is generally considered that the purpose of metaphor is to add to the color and vividness of the imagery, and a considerable number of the metaphors studied do fulfill that function to a greater or less extent. For instance, C322.06 contains the lines "I would lean upon some loved one." The concrete word "lean" gives a clearer picture than the abstract "depend" would. I would like to suggest, however, that the metaphors also perform another function, closely related to the connection between metaphor and riddle established at the beginning of the paper. This is that they communicate meaning by posing riddles which the reader or listener has to guess.

The song C338.02, for example, contains the lines, "It takes but a slight little flurry / To blow fallen leaves far away." What does this mean? Clearly on one level it refers to the fact that in autumn a small gust of wind can blow fallen leaves a considerable distance. Yet in the context of the song this meaning, the surface meaning, is irrelevant. Because it is the context which vetoes the obvious reading, and because it is to the context that we must turn for whatever clues will enable us to guess the riddle, let us turn to the first stanza of the song, in which our metaphor appears:

```
Don't be in too much of a hurry
To credit what other folks say.
It takes but a slight little flurry
To blow fallen leaves far away.
The tongue is an unruly member,
Full of deadly and poisonous bane;
Its babble sears worse than an ember;
By hundreds your number it's slain.
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Clearly the subject is gossip. What relationship does gossip have to wind and leaves? How can we guess the riddle? By measuring the metaphorical statement against our own experience and observation
of gossip, we can find three ways in which the wind-and-leaves meta-
phor may be equated to a gossip situation: first, the slight little flurry
of an initial telling of an item of gossip can blow the leaves—that is,
the elements of the story—far from their original location, so that
they will be heard by a great many people; second, in this process
the leaves may be turned over and scattered from each other, so that
the elements of the story will not be exactly the same or in the same
relationship to each other as at the first telling; and third, the damage
inflicted on the life of the person gossiped about may be out of propor-
tion to the size of the original flurry. All three readings have in com-
mon the idea that the consequences of the initial action are proportion-
ately greater than the action and that if we realized the consequences
we would not perform the action.

Which of our three readings is the “correct” answer to the riddle?
William Empson, in The Seven Types of Ambiguity, has shown us the
way to reply that they all are. The riddle is ambiguous, and in that
very ambiguity lies its value. Let us observe to begin with that the
riddle is concrete; that is, that wind and leaves are objects capable
of being perceived through the senses. This enables the metaphor to
give a specific image, largely visual and tactile, although with some
auditory overtones. A gossip situation is also concrete. As we search
our brains to try to find what the two concrete things have in common,
we are forced abstract, and by the time we have abstracted the state-
ment “that the consequences of the initial action are proportionately
greater than the action and that if we realized the consequences we
would not perform the action,” we have come a long way. We can no-
tice that this statement is both longer and vaguer than the metaphor
with which we started. Metaphorical statement, therefore, allows
language to be both more concise and more specific than it would other-
wise be.

But we have said that a gossip situation is also concrete. Could
not the song have devoted these two lines to a specific gossip situation?
Perhaps those two lines should have read, “You but whisper a word to
your neighbor, / And tomorrow the tale’s far away.” The disadvantage
of such non-metaphorical concreteness is that we have limited what the
lines communicate to only one of the three alternative answers which
our ingenuity provided to the riddle. What this shows is that the meta-
phor is more suggestive than any non-metaphorical statement could be,
because only through metaphorical language can more than one general-
ization be communicated by a single statement.

It should also be pointed out that the very cleverness of the meta-
phor is another positive value which it possesses. In the songs studied
this is particularly noticeable in C300.08; for instance, the third stanza reads as follows:

They say there will be a great roundup,
And cowboys, like dogies, will stand
To be marked by the Riders of Judgment
Who are posted and know every brand.

You hear the song, or read it, with admiration for its cleverness; and at the same time each of the riddles, or metaphors, poses a challenge to you. What's the great roundup? Judgment Day. Who are the Riders of Judgment? These must be the angels. What does it mean that they "know every brand"? Probably that they know how each of us has marked himself by the course of his life. And so on. It seems to me important to note that none of the challenges is terribly difficult, and each makes the next one easier because of the steadily growing context, so that to the pleasure of facing the challenge is added the pleasure of facing it successfully. And thus, to your admiration for the cleverness of the song's author, you can add your admiration for your own. It would be a mistake to underestimate this element of the song's appeal—that it is fun as an intellectual contest loaded slightly in the hearer's favor but still difficult enough to give a sense of accomplishment.

We have been discussing metaphors which must be solved by the hearer or reader from the context of the song and from what he brings to it from his own experiences and observations. This is the method used most often. A few songs, however, do not rely on this means to answer the riddles they pose; in one way or another they provide the answers themselves. Certainly these songs gain in clarity, and presumably this advantage was the one sought by their composers, but equally certainly they lose the other values we have been discussing. The five metaphors already cited as containing a form of the verb "to be" of course provide the answer to the riddle by equating it with the riddle itself. C338.02 asks the question, "Wouldn't... living be less of a load?" The underlying metaphor is "Living is a load." "What is a load?" is the implied riddle; its answer is "living." Here the answer is given not only with the riddle, but even before it. In addition, four songs use a possessive construction, either a genitive or an "of" phrase, to answer the riddle at the point of asking it. C200.07 speaks of "life's long weary way." What is the long weary way? Life. Similarly C322.06 refers to "the stream of life." C200.9 mentions "the soothing balm / Of the breeze and the sunshine." In C300.03 the line "We've pearls to strings [string?] of gladness" answers its riddle the same way. A third method is to use a pronoun which refers to an antecedent; in both versions of C324.01 the personification lies in the pronoun "she," which refers to the moon.
If metaphor is riddle, do metaphors draw on standard riddles or vice versa? The 87 metaphors which for the subject of this study were checked against a collection of 283 riddles from western Kansas, the same locale as that in which the songs were collected, and the conclusion drawn that there is on the whole no relationship between metaphors and riddles in terms of content. The riddle which came closest to any metaphor in this study was a personification of a star, as in C324.01:

I have a little sister; they call her Peep, Peep, Peep.  
She wades in the waters, deep deep deep;  
She climbs the mountains, high high high.  
Poor little thing has but one eye.2

This riddle does not, however, mention the star's toes, which was the element of personification in the song.

One can see that the composer of folksong might be unable to fit riddles into his subjects or his rhymes, but it would not be impossible for the influence to work in the other direction.

While the folksongs do not draw to any appreciable extent on the common stock of riddles, several use certain metaphors which are so common as to have become trite, largely through their reappearance in many songs. The idea of “flying hours,” in C200.04, is common; “foam” for “ocean,” which occurs in C200.13, is equally common; another is “snow” for “white,” in C327.2; a sweetheart may be either “your heart’s own delight,” as in C200.02 (“Seven Long Years in State Prison”), or “my joy and my pride,” as in C325.03; the notion of selling honor, which appears in C200.18 (“Ballad of the Berry Boys”), is no new one; for a word to touch the heart, as in C200.15 (“Mother Was a Lady”), is a cliché; some of the euphemisms for “die” are far from uncommon, as for instance “fall asleep” in C325.01, a variant of “The Little Rosebud Casket”; and the metaphors for “life” are in general trite—“life’s long weary way” in C200.07 and “the stream of life” in C322.06. Indeed, even in this limited study, the same metaphor is found twice in two songs. The heart stands for the whole person in both C300.7 and C322.06 and a clouded sky stands for unhappiness in both the latter song and C338.05. It would be interesting to search for other trite metaphors to see what could be learned from them.

Although none of the metaphors betray literary origins, two of them seem to draw on the twenty-third psalm; “the green pastures” for heaven in C300.08 and “In the valley as I go” for “as I live” in C322.06. In C338.04 there is a stanza showing an interesting combination of two proverbial expressions, “Hit the nail on the head” and “Strike while the iron is hot”: 
Drive the nail aright, [Boys],
Hit it on the head;
Strike with all your might, Boys,
While the iron's red.

The commonness of these metaphors undoubtedly contributes to the ease with which the songs containing them are understood. On the other hand, while no single metaphor in this study impressed me as striking, a great many did seem original and clever, especially those in C300.08.

We have learned that in folksongs the identity of the two elements of the metaphor is assumed rather than expressed. They function by posing riddles which the hearer must guess in order to comprehend the meaning of the song. By doing so, metaphor enables language to be more concise, more concrete, and more suggestive than it would otherwise be. It adds to the appeal of poetry admiration for the poet's cleverness and an intellectual challenge which it is gratifying to be able to meet. While most metaphors rely on the context in which they appear and the hearer's or reader's own background for the answers to the riddles which they pose, some use such grammatical devices as a form of "to be," a genitive construction, or pronouns to communicate the answers at the same time as the riddles are asked. Although metaphors in folksongs do not draw on standard riddles, or vice versa, some of them are trite, and their triteness makes them easy to understand.³

NOTES

3. This paper was originally presented at a meeting of the American Folklore Society at Logan, Utah, in July 1963.
The numbers preceding the song titles are those assigned to deposited items in the Fort Hays Kansas State College Folklore Collection.

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