Before Reading

Simile: Willow and Ginkgo
Poem by Eve Merriam

Introduction to Poetry
Poem by Billy Collins

How can **WORDS** create pictures?

Have you ever seen the movie version of a book you’ve already read? Then you probably have had the experience of being surprised when a character didn’t look the way you had pictured him or her. Words can create such distinct and powerful images that what you imagine while reading can seem as “real” as what you see. The poems you are about to read might help you see words themselves in a fresh, new way.

**QUICKWRITE** Choose a photograph from a magazine. Try to think of the way the pictured item might feel, sound, smell, or taste, in addition to how it appears. In a brief paragraph, create a vivid description of the image. Read your paragraph to a partner and ask which words best help him or her picture what you’re describing. Then show the image.
Meet the Authors

Eve Merriam
1916–1992
Always a Poet
Eve Merriam began writing poetry when she was about eight years old, and she never considered any other career. “It’s like . . . oxygen,” she said, “when I hear rhymes and word play.” Although at times during her life she was forced to take other jobs, she continued writing poetry. Her first collection of poetry for adults, *Family Circle*, won the 1946 Yale Younger Poets Prize. Later in her career, Merriam focused on writing poetry for children.

Billy Collins
born 1941
America’s Most Popular Poet
In the United States, even the top poets can be unknown to most of the public. Billy Collins, however, is well known and well loved. His rise to fame began when Collins became a regular guest on radio programs, where his humor and welcoming manner won him a loyal following. He has since become one of the best-selling poets of his generation and regularly attracts standing-room-only crowds to his poetry readings. When he served as the Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001 to 2003, he created the 180 Project, which provided high schools across the country with poems to be read along with daily announcements. His goal was to make poetry part of everyday life for young people.

**POETIC FORM: STANZA**
Many poems are divided into stanzas, or groupings of two or more lines that form a unit. In poetry, a stanza serves a similar purpose to a paragraph in prose. Stanzas may be used to separate ideas, add emphasis, or create a certain appearance on the page.

**LITERARY ANALYSIS: METAPHOR AND SIMILE**
Have you ever heard an expression that didn’t mean exactly what it said? The expression probably contained figurative language. Figurative language consists of words used in an imaginative way to communicate meaning beyond their strict definitions. The following are three types of figurative language:

- **Similes** use *like* or *as* to compare two unlike things. For example: *The frozen lake is like glass.*
- **Metaphors** make comparisons without the word *like* or *as.* For example: *All the world is a stage.*
- **Extended metaphors** extend over several lines, stanzas, or an entire poem.

As you read the following poems, look for examples of metaphors and similes and note how the poets use them to create an emotional response, present vibrant images, or express complex ideas with a few words.

**READING STRATEGY: VISUALIZE**
One way to help yourself enjoy the richness of a poem is to take the time to visualize the words, or form pictures in your mind. To visualize, pay attention to details that help you imagine how something looks, sounds, smells, feels, or even tastes. Combine these details with your own knowledge and experiences. As you read these poems, keep track of what you visualize in a chart like the one shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What I Visualize</th>
<th>Words and Phrases That Helped</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dark, jerky lines</td>
<td>“crude sketch”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
The willow is like an etching,
Fine-lined against the sky.
The ginkgo is like a crude sketch,
Hardly worthy to be signed.

5  The willow’s music is like a soprano,
   Delicate and thin.
The ginkgo’s tune is like a chorus
   With everyone joining in.

The willow is sleek as a velvet-nosed calf;
The ginkgo is leathery as an old bull.
The willow’s branches are like silken thread;
The ginkgo’s like stubby rough wool.

10 The willow is like a nymph with streaming hair;
Wherever it grows, there is green and gold and fair.
The willow dips to the water,
Protected and precious, like the king’s favorite daughter.

15 The ginkgo forces its way through gray concrete;
Like a city child, it grows up in the street.
Thrust against the metal sky,
Somehow it survives and even thrives.  

My eyes feast upon the willow,
But my heart goes to the ginkgo.
leathery, branches like rough wool (can use fine art)
old art from lol is nice
I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.  

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,
or walk inside the poem’s room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author’s name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

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**VISUALIZE**
Reread lines 1–4. What words help you visualize what the poet describes? To which senses do the details appeal?

**METAPHOR AND SIMILE**
In lines 12–14, what extended metaphor is used to describe the poem?
After Reading

Comprehension

1. Recall In “Simile: Willow and Ginkgo,” which tree does the speaker think is more beautiful?

2. Recall What does the speaker in “Introduction to Poetry” want readers to do on the surface of a poem?

Literary Analysis

3. Visualize Review the chart you made as you read. Select two examples that were especially effective in helping you make visualizations. What words helped you “see” images in your mind?

4. Identify Simile and Metaphor For each poem, identify as many figurative comparisons as you can. In a chart like the one shown, list what is being described and what it is compared to. Then identify whether the comparison is a simile or a metaphor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line(s)</th>
<th>What Is Being Described</th>
<th>What It Is Compared To</th>
<th>Simile or Metaphor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2–3</td>
<td>poem</td>
<td>color slide</td>
<td>simile</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Interpret a Line Reread the last two lines of “Simile: Willow and Ginkgo.” Why do you think the speaker’s “heart goes to the ginkgo”? Support your answer with words and phrases from the poem.

6. Compare Stanzas Look back at the stanzas in “Introduction to Poetry.” How are the poem’s stanzas alike? How are they different? Consider their length as well as their content.

7. Analyze Metaphors to Interpret a Poem In the first five stanzas of “Introduction to Poetry,” Collins uses metaphors to convey how he would like readers to relate to a poem. In the last two stanzas, he uses an extended metaphor to communicate what he thinks most readers want to do with a poem. Identify the items to which Collins likens a poem in lines 1–11. Then, in your own words, restate his message.

Extension and Challenge

8. Creative Project: Poem Write your own poem about reading poetry. Include at least one metaphor and one simile.

How can WORDS create pictures?

Which words in the two poems created the most vivid images for you?