



Achelous and Hercules (detail), 1947, Thomas Hart Benton, 62 7/8 x 264 1/8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of Allied Stores Corporation, and museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program

MEANINGS AND SECOND MEANINGS

Symbolism appears in both art and writing. *Simile* and *metaphor* appear only in writing. All of these devices are ways to convey meaning.

A simile compares one thing to another. (A simile usually has the word *like* or *as* in it.)

A metaphor calls one thing by the name of something else—something that is similar to the first thing in some way.

For example:

If you say to your friend, “You eat like a pig!” you’re using a simile.

If you say to him or her, “You’re a real pig!” you’re using a metaphor.

Similes and metaphors are *figures of speech*: they are descriptive ways of saying something—in this case, that

your friend eats sloppily. Everyone knows that a person is not really a farm animal.

If you write a story about a pig that could also be understood as a story about your friend—you have written a *symbolic story*. The pig stands for your friend. Those who know your friend might recognize him or her, even with floppy ears and a curly tail. Others might simply enjoy your story as the adventures of a pig.

In a story like that, the reader is meant to discover the second meaning. A good example is *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. On one level it is a story about animals on a farm. But it is also a story of life under an oppressive government.

As you look for symbols in the story of Achelous and Hercules, see if you can find a few similes and metaphors too. Jot them down.