

Handout for  
*Similes in Homer and Plato:*  
*Similarities and Significant Differences*  
by John E. Ziolkowski (George Washington University)  
Section E: Greek Philosophy 1:15-3:00 pm (April 12, 2018)

1 Definitions: The following terms identify the parts of a simile (“an explicit figurative comparison of two essentially unlike things”): prothesis (underlined), *tenor* (italicized), vehicle (underlined and italicized), and **apothesis** (boldface):

The *armies* rushed forward like *thick tribes of bees* . . . even so did their many tribes march from their ships. (*Iliad* 1.86-93)

**Let us define a simile further as ‘a figurative comparison in which both *tenor* and *vehicle* are expressed (with or without a *prothesis*)’ while a metaphor is ‘an implied comparison in which only the *vehicle* is stated’** (e.g., “plunge beneath the broad *bosom* of the sea “ [Il 18.140]).

2 Similes in Plato (ca. 500):

- (a) Visualization of verbs, nouns and adjectives: everyone gazed at *Charmides* like *a statue*. (*Charm.* 154c)
- (b) Humorous exaggeration: *I* began to turn like *a fish caught in a net*. (*Euthy.* 302)
- (c) Distinctions made: *wisdom* is NOT like *water* (*Symp.* 175d)
- (d) Abstractions clarified: *evil* in the soul is like a *disease* (*Sophist* 227d)
- (e) Literary references: like *Creon* in Euripides’ play (*Alc.* 2, 151b)

3 Similes in Homer (ca. 344 in *Iliad* and 128 in *Odyssey*):

Most would be classified under category (a) above, either short phrases or scenes (e.g., Trojans are compared to cranes shrieking at *Il* 3.2-7). A few examples of (b) humorous exaggeration and (c) distinctions with negatives occur, but no abstractions defined (d) or literary references (e) in similes.

4 Homer’s Similes: A Compendium of Similes in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* GWU, ScholarSpace (2016): <https://scholarspace.library.gwu.edu/files/rx913p90h>

Plato’s Similes: A Compendium of 500 Similes in 35 Dialogues. Published by the Center for Hellenic Studies (2014): <https://wp.chs.harvard.edu/ziolkowski>