

Lesson Nine: The Use of Metaphors during Ratification

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR INSTRUCTOR

In any public debate, metaphor is often used in an attempt to persuade. Throughout the ratification debates, writers and speakers would frequently employ this literary device. Many were favorable assessments while others were used in an attempt to convince the public of the dangers associated with the Constitution. Many of these assume an audience that was well read since many of these metaphors reference Biblical passages, literature, mythology, and architecture. Both sides were prone to hyperbole.

As the national debates enveloped the country, the discussions were not confined within the framework of the formal essay; the high-toned writings of writers like Publius or Brutus. Pauline Maier has rightly noted in her book *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788* that, “the debate raged in newspapers, taverns, coffeehouses and over dinner tables as well as in the Confederation Congress, state legislatures and state ratifying conventions.” Many newspapers featured sections specifically devoted to poetry and frequently ran pieces relating to the Constitution and the ratification process. At times the offerings in these publications were not genteel.

Both the supporters and critics of the Constitution used rhetorical flourishes in poems, songs, and essays when describing the Constitution during the ratification debates. In their attempts to convince the public of the dangers associated with the Constitution, Antifederalist employed imagery associated with monsters, demons, and poisons. William Grayson went so far as to suggest that the Constitution was “a most ridiculous piece of business—something like the legs of Nebuchadnezzar.”

Federalist Francis Hopkinson’s extended allegorical poem, “The New Roof” and song “The Raising: A New Song for the Federal Mechanics” both praised the benefits of the Constitution using dozens of architectural terms. Temples, grand domes, and magnificent arch were other architectural motifs used by Federalists.

METAPHORS IN PRIMARY SOURCES

ABLE ADVOCATE

“Conscious of the rectitude of his own intentions however, and trusting that ‘in searching after error truth will appear,’ he flatters himself he should be excused, were he to leave the merits of this cause to that more able ADVOCATE, the CONSTITUTION itself.”

ARCH

“If the Constitution should be finally accepted and established, it will complete the temple of American liberty: and like the key stone of a grand and magnificent arch, be the bond of union to keep all the parts firm, and compacted together.”

BANTLING

“Whether the *bantling* would be *black* or *white*, was not to be a matter of *free* discussion with the people, but *they*, forsooth, must at all hazards *adopt* and *foster* the new-born ruler, in whatever *garb* it might come attired.”

BOON FROM HEAVEN

“It is ardently to be wished, writes a correspondent, that the little nest of villains, who inhabit the petty territory of R. I. may not have the grace to accept of the CONSTITUTION—that boon from heaven.”

BRAT

“The above mentioned letter, our correspondent asserts, is sufficient of itself, to stifle this brat in the moment of its birth.”

CHILD OF FORTUNE

“It is now a Child of fortune, to be fostered by some and buffeted by others, what will be the General opinion on, or the reception of it, is not for me to, decide, nor shall I say any thing for or against it.”

CHILD OF HEAVEN

“Exert, yourself labor hard for without this child of Heaven our days in future will not be worth Counting.”

CHILD OF MUTUAL CONCESSIONS

“I have no doubt but that you will discover some imperfections in it, but when it is considered that it is the child of mutual concessions between States different in Situation and Interest, and that without some Efficient Government we must shortly be involved in Anarchy that certain road to Despotism.”

COLOSSUS WITH A SWORD OF TYRANNY

“exceeds the description of the wonderful Colossus at Rhodes . . . and instead of holding a light-house in its hand, holds forth to the people the sword of tyranny.”

DAZZLING SUN

“you will find its excellencies eclipsed, like the faint lustre of the *moon*, by the dazzling splendor of the *sun*.”

DEADLY SERPENT

“under this specious covering lurks a deadly serpent, which like Aaron’s, will swallow up the liberties of your country!”

EDIFICE

“It thus appears that either Virginia or New Hampshire is to [have?] the honor of establishing an edifice.”

ENGINE OF DESTRUCTION

“a pretty considerable band consists of those who hold it as the engine of destruction—& never think or speak of it but with detestation and abhorrence.”

FABRICK

“We may now contemplate this Fabrick as erected, and permit me my dear Friend to congratulate you upon the event.”

FAMILY (PARAPHRASE)

“Let us be familiar, it is demonstrable by a family; although the father, or master, may prefer mildness in his family.”

FEDERAL BUILDING

“the Federal Building goes on rapidly, considering its extent and magnitude; and we doubt not, but in a short time we shall have the pleasure of announcing its entire completion.”

FEDERAL EDIFICE

“Virginia will shortly become one of the brightest pillars of the federal edifice.”

FEDERAL FABRIC

“That citizen who feels and avows such a maxim, need not apologize for collecting the following observations on the foederal fabric.”

FEDERAL PILLARS

“The Fed’ral pillars firmly stand.”

FEDERAL TEMPLE

“I cannot avoid hoping, and believing, to use the fashionable phraze that Virginia will make the ninth column in the foederal Temple.”

FIERY HIGH-BLOODED STEED

“I really at this time think there is a decided majority for anterior amendments that is, who do not think it prudent to mount a fiery high-blooded Steed without a bridle.”

FOETUS

“Tis not a birth, my dear Sir, ’tis a Fœtus only.”

GILDED PILL

“When the gilded Pill was swallowed by a Majority of Ten out of one hundred and four Members present.”

GILDED TRAP

“they have insidiously attempted to confine and cramp by palming this “*gilded trap*” the new breeches on me.”

GREAT NATIONAL DOME

“and to give it a place as one of the noble PILLARS of the GREAT NATIONAL DOME.”

HARBOR ATTAINABLE

“Our situation is like that of a ship at sea, the harbour attainable, but the crew divided by a ridiculous feud.”

HEAVY MANNA

“On the other hand should she accept the heavenly manna, her decision will be enstamped on the page of time.”

HOME-BRED MONSTER

“now tamely submit to the home bread Monster of a form equally detestable if viewed when striped of its disguise.”

LEGS OF NEBUCHADNEZZAR’S IMAGE

“I look upon the new system as a most ridiculous piece of business—something (*entre nous*) like the legs of Nebuchadnezzar’s image.”

MAGNA CARTA

“The Constitution therefore defines those powers which in the grants for regulating trade were indefinite; thereby it secures and perpetuates the liberty of the people, and becomes the Magna Charta of the Union to check any encroachments of our rights.”

MANY-HEADED LEVIATHAN

“the *new leviathan* or proposed constitution for the United States, has exhibited the talents of the Americans in a most exalted point of view.”

MASTER-PIECE OF POLITICAL WISDOM

“and there is no doubt but that a few revolving months will set this master-piece of political wisdom in motion.”

MENSTRUOUS CLOTH

“The new constitution therefore is cast out of that state (to use the strong expression of the prophet) AS A MENSTRUOUS CLOTH.”

MONSTER

“Truly sir, I do not see in it those features of a monster.”

NEW BORN RULER

“Whether the *bantling* would be *black* or *white*, was not to be a matter of *free* discussion with the people, but *they*, forsooth, must at all hazards *adopt* and *foster* the new-born ruler.”

NEW BREECHES

“these cursed new breeches would utterly ruin me; they are calculated to enslave my thighs, to confine my waist, and totally to destroy the liberty of my knees, by buttoning tightly around them.”

NEW LEVIATHAN

“to cajole and betray the honest yeomanry of our country into the horrid fangs of the new leviathan of power.”

NEW MACHINE

“advocates for the requisite measures for setting the new machine at work may be needed as much in Congress as in this State.”

NEW ROOF

“This proposal of a new roof, it may well be supposed, became the principal subject of conversation in the family, and the opinions upon it were various according to the judgment, interest, or ignorance of the disputants.”

NEW SHIP

“I tell you, my friend, the Politicians in general blame the Carpenters for not launching the Hull of the new Ship.”

NEW SYSTEM OF SLAVERY

“Not a single newspaper that contains essays or intelligence against the new system of slavery.”

NEW WHEEL

“I find it is the general opinion that the New wheel will revolve.”

NOBLE EDIFICE

“and in all probability this state will very soon be called on to raise a Pillar to the Noble Edifice.”

ONE GREAT COLOSSUS

“one great Collosus erected in the Room thereof which shall stand astride of all the States.”

ORPHAN

“It goes forth among us in the unprotected situation of an *orphan*, with a modest request to all, entreating, that it may be heard, before it is abused, and examined, before it is condemned.”

OUR HOLY RELIGION

“The Fœderal Constitution, like our holy religion, knows no invidious distinctions.”

OUR INTENDED

“I have received your welcome favor giving a partial account of the Procession in your City on the 4th. inst. in honor of our *Intended*.”

PANDORA'S BOX

“like Pandora’s box, pregnant with every evil, full of design, a fatal tendency, and diametrically repugnant to the true interests, happiness, and safety of the United States.”

PATIENT SICK OF PREJUDICE AND MISREPRESENTATION BUT GETTING BETTER

“The Constitution thrives—it has been Extremely sick of prejudice and misrepresentation, but it is daily growing better and better.”

PHOENIX

“but I hope, Phoenix like, a better will soon rise out of its ashes.”

POLITICAL MONSTER

“it is a political monster of absurdity.”

PYRAMID

“It rises to view like a pyramid, whose broad foundation is the people.”

RISING FABRIC

“and give stability to the rising fabric with the greatest rapidity and least difficulty.”

RISING PILLAR OF GOVERNMENT

“Various towns in this state have also shewn the same friendly disposition, on the great jubilee of America, the fourth of July, towards the rising pillar of government.”

RISING SUN

“the NEW FEDERAL CONSTITUTION as the rising SUN of the western world.”

ROCK OF OUR POLITICAL SALVATION

“he [George Washington] looks up to it as the rock of our political salvation.”

ROCK OF OUR SALVATION

“Should it however fail in the first instance I hope it will prove a Rock of Salvation on which we may rest in our career to that fatal extreme.”

ROOF

“*Columbia's* standard on HER ROOF display.”

SACRED PALLADIUM

“this sacred palladium that can effectually secure us and our posterity from the odious tyranny of an aristocratic government.”

STATELY PALACE

“they built a stately palace after their own fancies, and in every convenient part of the floor, and of the foundation, securely planted the seeds of monarchy.”

TEMPLE

“a temple built by men equally mortal.”

TEMPLE OF LIBERTY

“the firmest and fairest Temple to LIBERTY, that has ever yet dignified this Globe.”

THIRTEEN PILLARS

“permit the thirteen Pillars to be bent down, in Stead of being supported.”

TOTTERING PILE

“for the present generation have too strong a sense of the rights of nature, of the sufferings experienced for their re-establishment, to set down passively under a tottering pile.”

TRAP

“I shall rely on the good sense of the public to keep themselves out of the trap.”

TREE OF LIFE

“that it is *the Tree of Life*, whose Fruit will enthrone this western Empire high among the Nations, and raise the firmest and fairest Temple to LIBERTY, that has ever yet dignified this Globe.”

TRIUMPHANT ARCH OF FREEDOM’S TEMPLE

“And when once the triumphant arch is erected.”

UNGOVERNABLE MONSTER

“an ungovernable monster, without constitutional checks, deplorable and to be deplored, dangerous and destructive.”

VIOLENT DOSE

“the case is sufficiently desperate when we consider that violent as the dose is, the best thing we can do is to swallow it.”

VIOLENT REMEDY

“We all know however the more desperate any disease has become, so much more violent must be the remedy.”

WEDDING SUIT

“I am daily making Calculations for the United States to be adorned with her new *wedding Suit*.”

WIFE AND PEOPLE AS HUSBAND (PARAPHRASE)

“The great Body of the People in every Free Government, must always be considered as the Husband of the Constitution thereof, and consequently that as long as such Constitution performs the duties of Love Honor and Obedience to Her great Constituent Body, or Political Husband, She is entitled to be Kept both in sickness and in Health, with all possible Love and Fidelity by such her said Husband and that on a breach of her Duty she must expect to incur the Pains and Penalties of *Divorce*.”

YOUNG LION

“To you perhaps our America must owe the indelible Honour of chaining and reducing within proper Bounds this young Lion.”

THE LESSON PLAN—Who Said What and Who’s Overreacting?

OBJECTIVES OF THE LESSON

- * Students will be able to see how the Federalists and Antifederalists used metaphors to communicate their opinions about the Constitution.
- * Students will consider the effectiveness of using hyperbole in political speech.

THE LESSON

1. Divide the class into groups of 3-5 students.
2. Each group should have access to the complete list of metaphors.
3. Distribute the graphic organizer below to each student.

Federalist Metaphor	How Extreme is it? (1-5 scale)		Antifederalist Metaphor
	Federalist Rank	Antifederalist Rank	
1.			1.
2.			2.
3.			3.
4.			4.
5.			5.

4. Have each group read through the list and select ten metaphors. Using the first and fourth columns of the graphic organizer, they should list their selections after discussion whether they believe each selection is from a Federalist or from an Antifederalist perspective.
5. After each group has made their ten selections they should rank each item they have selected and consider a ranking for each. Students can use the second and third columns to record their rankings. In their discussions they should reflect on which items they considered as hyperbole. Groups should be able to explain the reasons they used to come to their assessments.
6. After groups have completed their work you can have each group report their findings to the class.
7. You can conclude the lesson by leading a discussion using the following questions.
 - a) Are there any metaphors that might be considered having a balanced perspective?
 - b) Are there patterns or trends that are noticeable among the Federalist metaphors? Among the Antifederalist metaphors?
 - c) Which side do you consider the most prone to using hyperbole? Why might this be the case?
 - d) In your opinion, is hyperbole an effective strategy in a political debate?

8. As an extension activity, you may want to have students create political cartoons based on a metaphor.