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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers often use non-literal language to invite readers to visualize events, view internal conflicts, glimpse social themes, or grasp abstract concepts like beauty, truth, or goodness. An author uses figurative or non-literal language to stretch our imaginations, challenging us to decode the references and meanings bound within images, similes, metaphors, and symbols. Such devices require a reader to participate actively in the novel, as the reader begins to (implicitly or explicitly) interpret non-literal elements of the story.

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups. Assign each group a selection of chapters from the novel so far, asking group members to identify figurative language used in those chapters. Students should specifically identify images, similes, and metaphors. In those chapters, how does the figurative language help tell the story? Have each group present its findings to the class, highlighting what it considers the best example. What is implied when a writer treats an inanimate object as if it were alive? Are there counter-examples where Steinbeck treats a creature as if it were a thing?

Writing Exercise

Sometimes Steinbeck uses a mix of sensory images to introduce a metaphor: “The ancient Hudson, with bent and scarred radiator screen, with grease in dusty globules at the worn edges of every moving part, with hub caps gone and caps of red dust in their places—this was the new hearth, the living center of the family” (pp. 99-100). Have students find some imagery in the text and make it into a metaphor, as Steinbeck makes the car into “the new hearth” in the passage above. When is an image merely an image, and when does an author place metaphorical weight on it?

Steinbeck uses metaphor when he writes the following: “66 is the mother road, the road of flight” (p. 118). Have students write two paragraphs about a road trip they have taken, using several examples of figurative language to color their account of the journey. Encourage students to include metaphors as well as similes.

Homework

Have students read Chapters 18-19 (pp. 201-239). Ask them to think about what California represents to the Joads. Challenge them to bring to class three quotes from the text that will help examine the Joads’ views of California.