

5

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups. Assign each group a selection of chapters (1–17) from the novel, asking group members to identify figurative language used in those chapters. Students should identify specific examples of imagery, 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.