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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 tale.

Carson McCullers' writing style tends to be straightforward and unadorned, but sometimes uses figurative language to describe emotion.


A metaphor compares one thing to another. By revealing similarity, metaphors provide insight to a character, an event, or an issue. Metaphors do not use the words "like" or "as." Here, McCullers uses a metaphor to describe Mick's private thoughts and feelings:

She sat down on the steps and laid her head on her knees. She went into the inside room. With her it was like there was two places—the inside room and the outside room. School and the family and the things that happened every day were in the outside room. Mister Singer was in both rooms. [...] The songs she thought about were there. And the symphony (p. 163).

A simile expresses the resemblance between different things, and usually begins with "like" or "as." McCullers uses a simile to describe how music, like candy, affects Mick:

There was one special fellow's music that made her heart shrink up every time she heard it. Sometimes this fellow's music was like little colored pieces of crystal candy, and other times it was the softest, saddest thing she had ever imagined about (p. 35).

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise

 The reader is privy to Mick's private thoughts and feelings as well as her public reactions. Why would McCullers want us to see what is in Mick's "inside room?" Ask your students to describe music that sounds like "little colored pieces of crystal candy." McCullers consciously chose to have Mick think of music as candy. Why is this comparison appropriate? What does it reveal about Mick's personality?

Metaphorical titles provide clues to a novel's meaning. Ask students to write a one-page essay on how the novel's title informs our understanding of the book. Can a person's heart be like a hunter? Is the word "lonely" important? Would another adjective (such as weary, hungry, or fierce) have the same effect? Ask them to suggest other metaphors and similes that could describe the novel or one of its characters.

Homework

Read Part Two, Chapters 6-7 (pp. 181-223). What special present does Singer give to his four friends? How does each of them react? What do their different reactions reveal about their personalities?