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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.

Allegories and parables are forms of extended metaphors. An allegory uses characters, objects, and events to symbolize concepts of moral or social significance. Characters in allegorical stories are often personifications of abstract ideas such as envy, greed, or gluttony. Parables are metaphorical stories that use realistic characters and circumstances to make a point. They often carry a strong message that has meaning beyond its literal reading.

One of the most famous and important passages of *The Maltese Falcon* is a section in Chapter 7 known as “the Flitcraft parable.” Spade tells Brigid about a case he once worked on involving a man named Flitcraft who disappeared without warning. Hired by the wife to locate him, Spade finds him living—under an assumed name—a life very similar to the one he left behind. The man tells Spade that he was walking down the street after lunch one day when a beam fell “eight or ten stories down and smacked the sidewalk alongside him.” Shortly afterward, the man left his family in an attempt to adjust his life to reflect his newfound understanding of the random nature of the universe. Spade tells Brigid, “He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling” (p. 64).

Discussion Activities

Discuss what the parable means. What concept is Spade trying to relate to Brigid? Why would Spade choose to tell Brigid this story at this particular moment? What message does the story carry? Does Brigid seem to understand?

Writing Exercise

Ask your students to write a short story of no more than two pages that functions as a parable. They should pay close attention to characterization and imagery. What makes your story a parable? How does it explain something about your world?

Homework

Read Chapters 12-14 (pp. 112-139). In tonight’s reading, the students will learn more about the history and value of the Maltese falcon. Ask them to begin thinking of the ways the falcon works as a symbol within the novel.