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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.

Cather frequently uses figurative language. A description of the Nebraska Divide incorporates metaphor, simile, and personification:

“As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the colour of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running.”

Cather’s metaphors describe the landscape:

“[Sunflowers] made a gold ribbon across the prairie.”

Cather uses simile to expand her ideas:

“The grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island.”

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups. Assign each group a different chapter from Book One, and ask them to identify several images, similes, and metaphors that are vivid, evocative, and beautiful. How important is figurative language to Willa Cather’s writing style? Groups will present their findings to the class, highlighting their favorite example.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to reflect on and write about an important memory of their childhood, using imagery—words that draw on the five senses—to take a reader beyond a literal description.

Homework

Read *My Ántonia*, Book Two, Chapters 13-15 (pp. 170-189).

What happens to Jim when he spends the night at Wick Cutter’s? Why does Jim respond with hatred for Ántonia?