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## Lesson Five

### FOCUS: Figurative Language

An author uses images, similes, metaphors and symbols to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions contained within a story.

Cynthia Ozick believes figurative language is critical to understanding literature and uses it masterfully throughout *The Shawl*. In a 1998 *Atlantic Monthly* interview she said, “Just as you can’t grasp anything without an opposable thumb, you can’t write anything without the aid of metaphor. Metaphor is the mind’s opposable thumb.” In her essay “Metaphor and Memory” she writes, “Without the metaphor of memory and history, we cannot imagine the life of the Other. We cannot imagine what it is to be someone else. Metaphor is the reciprocal agent, the universalizing force: it makes possible the power to envision the stranger’s heart.”

### Discussion Activities

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. Stella calls Rosa a “parable maker.” In her last letter to Magda, Rosa recounts a story about a woman with a head of lettuce traveling through Warsaw on the tramcar. Read aloud from the last paragraph on page 67 to the break on page 69.

Rosa writes, “The most astounding thing was that the most ordinary streetcar, bumping along on the most ordinary trolley tracks, and carrying the most ordinary citizens going from one section of Warsaw to another, ran straight into the place of our misery. Every day, and several times a day, we had these witnesses” (p. 68). Ask your students why Poles traveling through the ghetto on the tramcar might have been unwilling to help the Jews. Do they believe people today would react differently? Why or why not?

What does Rosa mean when she writes, “And in this place now I am like the woman who held the lettuce in the tramcar. I said all this in my store, talking to the deaf” (p. 69)? Why would a head of lettuce be so important to Rosa? What lessons does the parable of the woman with the lettuce teach? Why is it important to Rosa that her story is heard?

### Writing Exercise

Write Ozick’s quotes on metaphor on the blackboard. Ask your students to write three paragraphs considering why Rosa refuses forget what happened during the Holocaust. Why does she feel she must tell others what happened? How does bearing witness to these events help Rosa cope with horrible memories of life in the Warsaw ghetto and the extermination camp?

### Homework

Have students page through the book to find examples of objects that could be considered symbolic. Ask them to write two paragraphs about one of the book’s symbols. How is the symbolic meaning different from the literal value of the object? How does this inform our understanding of the story or characters?