

MINI-LESSON – FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE – METAPHOR

Using *ALL THAT'S MISSING* as a Mentor Text

Appropriate for Grades 5-8

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE: “Figurative language is language that’s intended to create an image, association or other effect in the mind of the listener or reader that goes beyond the literal meaning or expected use of the words involved.” www.dictionary.com This effect is achieved through the use of literary devices such as metaphor, simile, alliteration and onomatopoeia, among others.

1. Introduce the text – For purposes of this lesson, I have chosen to focus on **metaphors** and **similes**. Tell students you are going to share a passage from a novel to talk about using a figure of speech called a **metaphor**. You may want to take some time to review the difference between **metaphors** and **similes**.

Sometimes it helps to point out that the terminology is not meant to make reading sound complicated. They are simply names for devices that writers use to make their writing more vivid and to make direct connections with readers. Remind students that we all use similes and metaphors in everyday speech when we tell stories or relate what happens to us at school. “Mike was stuffing pizza in his mouth like a starving hippopotamus.” “My little sister is a pig at the breakfast table.”

Tell students that, as they listen to the scene you are about to read, you want them to pay particular attention to the images that the words conjure in their minds and to the sounds of the words. You want them to listen to verbs the writer has chosen to use and think about the effect these word choices have.

Here are some working definitions:

Metaphor: “A metaphor is an implied comparison between two usually unrelated things indicating a likeness or analogy between attributes found in both things. A metaphor, unlike a simile, does not use **like** or **as** to indicate the comparison.”

Simile: “A simile is a direct or explicit comparison between two usually unrelated things. . . using **like** or **as** to indicate the comparison.”

Fundamentals of Poetry, William Leahy, Kenneth Publishing, 1963, (pp. 18-19).

Tell students that, after you finish reading, you are going to ask them to share an image or particular words that stick in their minds.

2. Read the scene at the beginning of chapter 2 – starting with the first sentence in the chapter to the end of this quote below. (p. 10-11).

“Sometimes Arlo felt like one of those mud-and-stick dams he and Sam liked

to build in the creek. They mounded sand and dirt together with twigs and stones and waited for the water to break through. The current welled into tiny pools that pressed against the dam. They broke away a twig here or a pebble there. But the dam usually held. *Usually.*

Poppo's mixed-up brain was breaking away twigs and pebbles in Arlo's life. So far, his dam had held. But how long before Mrs. Gretsky or someone else at school found out? How long before Arlo's dam sprang a leak and the water came gushing through? (p. 10-11)

3. Begin examining craft, i.e., what the author was doing in crafting those images or selecting those particular words.

- Ask students to share striking images and words.
- Allow students to react as readers first. i.e., How does Arlo feel about his life? What is going on in the text to make him feel this way? How does the writer show this?
- Ask students how they believe the author communicates to readers how Arlo feels at the beginning of this chapter.
- Take note of action verbs, for example.
 - i. "Arlo *dragged* his feet walking home."
 - ii. Poppo *squinted* at the face in the photograph.
 - iii. "Arlo's throat *swelled, blocking* off his breath."

Notice how much work these verbs do to communicate how uncomfortable Arlo feels at home.

"lying to teachers"

"covering up the truth"

All of these verbs work to communicate to readers that Arlo is in an untenable position, as opposed to saying –

Arlo hated reminding Poppo about sad things. He hated knowing that sometimes Poppo didn't remember Arlo or Arlo's mother, even though she had been Poppo's only child. It scared Arlo to think that he was responsible for taking care of himself and Poppo

without any help from anyone else.

4. FORM A THEORY – Examine the quoted passage again. Ask students how those images or words support the idea of the story.

If students are unfamiliar with talking about “craft,” start by defining what is meant by “writing craft.” “A writer’s craft is a particular way of doing something; it’s a knowledge a writer has about *how* to do something.” *Wondrous Words*, Katie Wood Ray, NCTE, 1999 (p. 25) *(sometimes a brief review of this concept is helpful too.)*

Notice how the author uses the image of a fragile “mud-and-stick dam” to communicate how fragile Arlo’s life is at the moment.

Notice how the tension in the first part of the scene builds to the mud-and-stick dam metaphor. Readers feel Arlo struggling to keep the dam intact and hold his life together.

If students read more of the novel, you can ask them to look for other places where the mud-and-stick dam metaphor shows up again and notice how the author uses it to communicate Arlo’s feelings to readers. [The image of the fragile mud-and-stick dam becomes a signifier for Arlo’s feelings of vulnerability.]

5. Explore Other Authors – Ask students if they can think of other books or poems where there are similar examples of figurative language. Ideally, you will have books that have been read aloud or discussed in class.

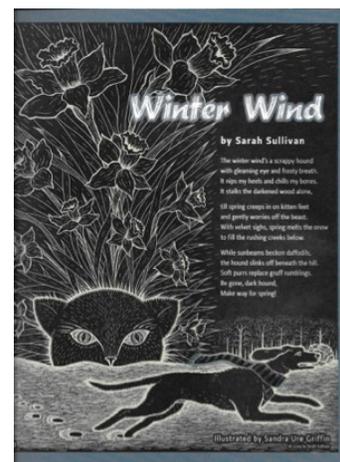
Other examples:

“Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes, Look for Viola Davis's reading on YouTube.

“Hope is the thing with feathers” by Emily Dickinson
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SitTvcclusz0>

“Winter Wind” by Sarah Sullivan

The winter wind’s a scrappy hound
with gleaming eye and frosty breath.
It nips my heels and chills my bones.
It stalks the darkened wood alone,
till spring creeps in on kitten feet
and gently worries off the beast.
With velvet breath, spring melts the snow
to fill the rushing creeks below.



While sunbeams beckon daffodils,
the hound slinks off beneath the hill.
Soft purrs replace gruff rumblings.
Be gone, dark hound,
Make way for spring!

Cricket, February, 2009 (p. 10)

6. Think About Your Own Writing – Tell students that now that they have some experience with recognizing metaphors and how they are used, it's time to think about how they might use figurative language in their own writing.

If students are in a writing workshop or have writing notebooks, ask them to look at their own work and see if they can imagine a way in which the use of metaphor or simile might enrich and/or enliven their writing.

Try a writing exercise, such as the one below.

WRITING EXERCISE

Sarah Sullivan uses a mud-and-stick dam as a metaphor for the fragile state of Arlo's home and school life. If you had to describe your own life right now with a metaphor, what would you compare your life to? In the Langston Hughes poem, the mother speaking to her son says her life "ain't been no crystal stair." Once you've picked the object (or creature) to compare your life to, describe how your life resembles that object or creature in a sentence or two. (You can use a simile if that's easier, and write the phrase "My life feels like a _____" as a way to get started.) (Optional: You may also work what you've written into a poem as you consider ways to use the metaphor or simile you've chosen.)

Note: Brainstorming as a class often helps reluctant writers get started. Ask students for suggestions of how people might feel about life. i.e., happy, sad, scared, confused, anxious, excited. If necessary, you can continue brainstorming by beginning a discussion of what objects might represent the different kinds of feelings.

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All That's Missing, Candlewick, 2013

"an outstanding debut novel." VOYA

*starred review – *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*

A Day for Skating, Candlewick, 2019

Bank Street College Best Children's Books

Passing The Music Down, ill. Barry Root, Candlewick, 2011

N.C.T.E. Notable Children's Book in the Language Arts

Bank Street College Best Children's Books

FIGURING OUT FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Sarah Sullivan

Examples of figurative language in *All That's Missing*, Candlewick, 2013

SIMILE

"Poppo made the words twist and turn like the bends in the Greenbrier River."

"more like a prison than a home." p. 53

"He had bushy eyebrows, like antennae, that flopped up and down every time he opened his mouth." p. 54

"With his stooped shoulders and lanky arms, he looked a lot like a praying mantis."
p. 54

"From a block away, the bus station looked like a crazy spaceship . . ." p. 71

"Inside, the air was hazy with dust that sparkled when the light hit it, like mica in granite..." p. 71

"When she sat down, her skirt billowed up, exposing ankles so swollen that they looked like balloons." p. 78

"Compact cars looked like bugs." p. 80

"In a few weeks, these woods would look like bowls of hard candy, all yellow and red with the green of the pine trees mixed in." p. 82

"Arlo's shoulders felt like hollowed-out pastries, those crème-filled éclairs, only without the filling inside." p. 85

"The jutting-out-chin lady slid to the edge of her chair, craning her neck like a buzzard swooping down on road kill." p. 110

"Everything about her was sharp and poky, like a pile of old bones." p. 123

"Her voice was strong and gentle, like water lapping at the shore." p. 203

"Mr. Tretheway pushed his thumbs against each other like poles holding up a tent."
p. 273

"Who wouldn't want to hear the creaks and moans the walls made at night, as if they were lulling you to sleep?" p. 274

"smart as a whip." p. 330

METAPHOR

“Sometimes Arlo felt like one of those mud-and-stick dams he and Sam liked to build in the creek. They mounded sand and dirt together with twigs and stones and waited for the water to break through. The current welled into tiny pools that pressed again the dam. They broke away a twig here or a pebble there. But the dam usually held. *Usually.*

Poppo’s mixed-up brain was breaking away twigs and pebbles in Arlo’s life. So far, his dam had held. But how long before Mrs. Gretzky or someone else at school found out? How long before Arlo’s dam sprang a leak and the water came gushing through?” p. 11

ARLO’S MUD-AND-STICK DAM – METAPHOR FOR HIS FEELINGS OF VULNERABILITY AND BEING AT-RISK OF BEING PUT IN A DANGEROUS OR UNHAPPY SITUATION

“Forget the mud-and-stick dam. He was drowning.” p. 40

“he had to keep the water from crashing over his mud-and-stick dam.” p. 69

“As long as his dam held the water back a few more hours, everything would be fine.” p. 82

“Water sloshed again Arlo’s dam. That was the good news?” p. 139

“Water surged. Plink. There went a twig. And then a clump of mud.” p. 140

“His mud-and-twig dam was beginning to feel squishy again. What it needed was a little fortification, to use one of Matthew’s words, something to make sure it stayed strong enough to withstand a full-blown wave.” p. 192

“A measly mud-and-stick dam wasn’t much protection.” p. 244

“Water surged against Arlo’s dam, ripping away mud and twigs, sweeping over the top, then sliding back and pulling particles of dirt with it. What he was about to say to Poppo – the words forming in his mouth constituted the worst lie Arlo had ever told in his life.” p. 256

“He quit trying to hold back the flood. He let it come. He let water pour and spill and ravage and consume.” p. 256

“Just when everything seemed perfect, at that moment when Arlo stopped worrying, Mr. Tretheway appeared at Ida’s door with news that made the walls of Arlo’s dam begin to quiver all over again.” p. 272

“Arlo felt water pounding against his dam. The walls shook, threatening to let loose everything he’d held inside.” p. 328

"The flood inside had subsided now and somehow, miraculously, Arlo's dam was still intact, a little pockmarked maybe, but still standing." p. 332

"The thing about families, Arlo thought, was that there was always some question nobody wanted to answer for you, and it was like a stray thread pulling loose in a sweater. You could tug at it all you wanted, but in the end, all you'd have was a pile of twisted yarn.

Ida was a stray thread in Arlo's life." p. 28

"Arlo felt the cornflakes he'd eaten for dinner form a rock in his stomach." p. 35

"waves of blood pumping through Arlo's head." p. 44

PERSONIFICATION

"Sloppy goop sucked at the soles of Arlo's shoes, releasing them with a loud *pop* that sent mud spatters up the back of his legs." p. 14

"Sweat pooled . . ." p. 95

"... in a clearing where a gloomy house stared down at them. *Leered*, actually. As if it were daring them to step inside." p. 221

"Meanwhile, a sharp voice scratched the air behind them." p. 187

"Her sharp old-lady's voice sliced at him again." p. 195

"Arlo couldn't help noticing little prickles of anger creeping up his spine." p. 327

"Arlo's heart pushed against the back of his throat." p. 332

"Shadows climbed the trunks of the pine trees as the sun sank lower in the sky." p. 354

ALLITERATION

"Sloppy goop sucked at the soles of Arlo's shoes" p. 14

"sickening splash" p. 15

"story-spinning adrenaline gushing through his brain . . ." p. 75

ONOMATOPOEIA

"Sloppy goop sucked at the soles of Arlo's shoes, releasing them with a loud *pop* that sent mud spatters up the back of his legs." p. 14

"Water surged. *Plink*." 140.

HYPERBOLE

“The lady’s jaw jutted out so sharply, it could slice off his nose.” p. 105

“The lady didn’t look convinced. Two minutes ago, she’d been Mrs. Santa Claus. Now she was the Wicked Witch of the West.” p. 105

IMAGERY

“A clammy feeling seeped into Arlo’s stomach, as if he had stepped into a dark tunnel and was breathing damp, mold-encrusted air.” p. 51

“Arlo jumped as if someone had fired off a gun.” p. 52

“It felt like someone had tied a rope around his chest.” p. 86

“It was as if someone had turned a windup crank in her back that was connected directly to her lids.” p. 111

“Poppo was in danger. And here Arlo was, 350 miles away, staying with a woman who was supposed to care about him but who seemed to have the heart of an armadillo.” p. 141

“Her voice was sharp again. All angles and bones. Every time Arlo thought she might be turning less prickly, something happened and the pointy edges came poking back out.” p. 167

“It was late afternoon – that slow time when light turns into a golden haze on the leaves.” p. 224

“He felt like the walls were closing in on him.” p. 257

“Her face had a bruised look, as if tiny blood vessels had burst beneath her skin.” p. 328

“Arlo felt as if the earth had taken a momentary pause from spinning on its axis.” p. 332