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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Metaphor

“My Life with the Wave” by Octavio Paz

Writers use figurative language to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions. Imagery, a word or series of words that refers to any sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste), helps create a visceral experience for the reader. Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. A simile is a comparison between two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have a significant resemblance. Similes employ a connective, usually “like,” “as,” or “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor states that one thing is something else in order to extend and expand the meaning of one of those objects. By asserting that a thing is something else, metaphors create a close association that underscores some important similarity.

Personification is a figure of speech in which a thing, an animal, or an abstract term (truth, death, the past, etc.) takes on human qualities. Understanding this story depends on paying attention to both the literal and figurative elements that Paz evokes.

Discussion Activities

What specific images does Paz use to describe the presence of the wave in the narrator’s life at the beginning, and how do these images change by the story’s end? How do the later, darker images contrast with the literal descriptions of clothing, trains, police officers, a jail cell, and an ice bucket?

Identify specific moments where the wave is described with human qualities. How do these moments of personification—along with the bizarre physical details of her elemental nature—give “My Life with the Wave” a surreal quality?

As a class, list three possible interpretations of the story’s last two paragraphs. Why might the narrator say that the wave “was an implacable whip that lashed and lashed”? Ask several students to read their homework assignment aloud. Do they agree or disagree with Diane Thiel’s point of view expressed in Handout Three?

Writing Exercise

In their reader’s journals, ask students to list several places in “My Life with the Wave” where words can refer (whether directly or simply by suggestion) to both a woman and a wave. In two paragraphs, describe how a full appreciation of the story depends on noticing its literal and figurative qualities.

Homework

Have students read “Chac-Mool” by Carlos Fuentes. Ask them to pay special attention to its unusual form, consisting of a diary nested inside another character’s first-person narration.