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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the stylistic power of a tall tale serves to extend and deepen the story, characters, and themes. The most frequent stylistic effect is hyperbole—exaggeration, usually for comic purposes and often enhanced by biblical or Shakespearean echoes. With hyperbole, Twain makes a point by overstating it. This reflects the influence of the frontier tradition of the tall tale, as well as the rhetorical extravagance of Artemus Ward, Petroleum V. Nasby, and other popular humorists of Twain’s time.

Discussion Activities

Split the class into groups. Review the first sixteen chapters. How many tall tales can you find? Which ones are the best, and why? Do these tall tales serve as metaphors? Do they provide us with additional insight into Tom’s world? What does it take for Tom to weave a successful tall tale?

Writing Exercise

Read the class the hilarious account of Peter the cat’s reaction to the spoonful of Pain-killer (p. 90). Have them practice using hyperbole by writing a brief account of an ordinary incident enlivened by comically exaggerated descriptions. Ask several students to read their accounts aloud in class.

Homework

Distribute Handout Three: The Mighty Mississippi. Read Chapters XVII–XXII (pp. 120–149). What is the larger significance of Tom’s brass andiron-knob, and of the schoolmaster’s anatomy book?