



Metaphor and Simile

Unit: Henry as Author

Topic: Metaphors and similes

Thoreau Quotation

“We are all schoolmasters, and the schoolhouse is our universe.”

—*Journal*, 15 October, 1859

Background

Henry David Thoreau is recognized around the world as one of the most skilled and influential American writers—certainly of the 19th century and perhaps throughout history. His command of words and ability to convey his impressions of both natural and social phenomena make him one of the most well-read and frequently quoted authors. One of the most impressive aspects of Thoreau’s work is how effectively he employed such a wide range of literary devices. His writings are brimming with masterful metaphors and similes. Almost always, those metaphors and similes use an object in nature as at least one (if not both) of the objects that are being compared or connected.

Objectives

1. To understand the definitions of and be able to effectively employ the literary devices metaphor and simile.
2. To be able to identify the meanings of several metaphors and similes in a selection of Henry David Thoreau’s writing.
3. To further skills of observation and descriptive writing.

Method

Students will receive a lesson on the definitions of metaphor and simile. They will be given a series of Henry David Thoreau quotations that demonstrate the use of both literary devices. Students will then be asked to create their own metaphors and similes, using found natural objects as their inspiration.

Time Required

90 minutes

Materials

- Field notebook or journal, pencil

- Any found natural object
- Worksheet with Thoreau metaphors and similes (included under Additional Resources)

Procedure

1. Start by going over the definitions of metaphor and simile. Hand out the worksheet with examples of both metaphors and similes in Henry David Thoreau's work. Either as a big group or in small groups, ask students to talk through each example, using context to infer meanings of words or phrases that are unfamiliar.
2. Ideally, the remainder of this lesson can take place outside. If that is possible, take the students to a place with a wide variety of natural objects (trees, rocks, grasses and shrubs, etc.). Ask students to spread out, so they are not within five feet of their closest neighbor.
3. If this lesson cannot be conducted as an outdoor activity, ask students to select a natural object as a homework assignment. Alternatively, the instructor can bring in an assortment of natural found objects that can be distributed to students to do the lesson indoors during class time.
4. Whether doing this activity outdoors, in the classroom, or as homework, ask students to describe their chosen/found object in as much detail as possible. If desired, here are some questions to prompt their observations and writing:
 - a. Describe the size of the object. How big/little is it relative to other objects around it?
 - b. How many different colors are on your object? Describe them.
 - c. Describe the texture(s) of the object. Touch the object, if helpful.
 - d. How old do you think the object is?
 - e. Does your object have a smell?
 - f. If your object is still where you found it in nature, how is it interacting with other objects around it? (for example, is it growing *on* something or stuck *to* anything else?)
 - g. Are there any signs that your object has been affected in any way by humans or animals?
 - h. Do you think your object was once part of something bigger (for instance, a leaf that fell off a tree, or a rock that might have been part of a boulder)?
 - i. Does your object move or is it stationary?
5. Once the students have spent 5-10 minutes (or longer, if needed) describing their object in as many ways as possible, ask them to review what they observed about their object, in preparation for the next part of the activity.
6. Considering the various characteristics of their object, students are first asked to write one simile and one metaphor that use their object and themselves as the two things that are being compared/equated. (Example metaphor: *I am a leaf dancing in the wind.* Example simile: *I am like a hard-working ant, getting the job done with the help of others.*)
7. As Henry often compared natural objects to matters in society, then ask students to write one simile and one metaphor about their family, their community or society as a whole, relative to their object. (Example metaphor: *My family members are like the petals on a daisy, surrounding me with love.* Example simile: *The different colors, sizes and shapes of the rocks in the sand are like the people in our nation, coming together.*)
8. The instructor may want to come up with examples using his or her own found natural object to share with students before asking students to write their own.

Reflect and Explain

- Invite students to share their work with each other (either in small groups or big group), if desired.
- Reflect: Was it easy or hard to come up with ways to describe yourself relative to your object?
- Reflect: Was it easy or hard to come up with ways to describe your community (society) relative to your object?

Extensions

1. Have the students expand on their similes/metaphors and develop them into short, descriptive essays.
2. Henry often made quick sketches of the objects he was observing and describing in his journal. As an interdisciplinary extension, you could invite students to come up with a drawing that demonstrates the way in which they made a connection between themselves and their object. For example, if a student said s/he was like a tree that is surrounded by other trees because s/he likes to be surrounded by friends, s/he could do a drawing that depicts himself or herself and his/her friends as trees.

Vocabulary

metaphor - a figure of speech that refers to one thing by another in order to identify similarities between the two, implicitly equating the two otherwise unlike things. (or use definition from your textbook/materials).

simile - a figure of speech that draws a direct comparison between two things, showing similarities between those two things with the use of the words “like” or “as.” (or use definition from your textbook/materials).

Common Core Standards

English Language Anchor Standards (all grades)

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1](#)
Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.4](#)
Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6](#)
Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.10](#)
Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4](#)
Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.7](#)
Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.10](#)
Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1](#)
Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.6](#)
Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.1](#)
Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.2](#)
Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.3](#)
Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.4](#)
Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.5](#)
Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

Additional Resources

[Metaphor and Simile Handout \(see next page\)](#)

A Selection of Metaphors and Similes

by Henry David Thoreau

Metaphors

“The day is the epitome of the year. The night is the winter, the morning and evening are the spring and fall, and the noon is the summer.” (*Walden*)

“We are all schoolmasters, and the schoolhouse is our universe.” (*Journal*, 15 October, 1859)

“When the leaves fall, the whole earth is a cemetery pleasant to walk in. I love to wander and muse over them in their graves.” (*Autumnal Tints*)

“The library is a wilderness of books.” (*Journal*, 16 March, 1852)

“Genius is a light which makes the darkness visible, like the lightning’s flash...” (*Walking*)

“Most men can be easily transplanted from here there, for they have so little root—no tap root—or their roots penetrate so little way that you can thrust a shovel quite under them and take them up roots and all.” (*Journal*, 14 May, 1852)

Similes

“A truly good book is something as natural, and as unexpectedly and unaccountably fair and perfect, as a wild-flower discovered on the prairies of the West or in the jungles of the East.” (*Walking*)

“My life at this moment is like a summer morning when birds are singing.” (*Journal*, 9 February, 1841)

“My loftiest thought is somewhat like an eagle that suddenly comes into the field of view, suggesting great things and thrilling the beholder, as if it were bound hitherward with a message for me; but it comes no nearer, but circles and soars away, growing dimmer, disappointing me, till it is lost behind a cliff or a cloud.” (*Journal*, 26 October, 1857)

“Genius is a light which makes the darkness visible, like the lightning’s flash...” (*Walking*)

“Children appear to me as raw as the fresh fungi on a fence rail.” (*Journal*, 7 November, 1839)

“In the summer we lay up a stock of experiences for the winter, as the squirrel of nuts,--something for conversation in winter evenings.” (*Journal*, 4 September, 1851)

“The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly.” (*Walden*)

[Describing the flight of a hawk] “It did not simply flutter like a butterfly, nor soar like the larger hawks, but it sported with proud reliance in the fields of air; mounting again and again with its strange chuckle, it repeated its free and beautiful fall, turning over and over like a kite...” (*Walden*)