

Making the Invisible Visible

By: Elizabeth Brown

Education level: Junior high (could be adapted for upper level elementary and/or high school)

Genre: Poetry

Time frame: One class period, but this can easily be expanded into two

Objective: For students to recognize and appreciate the value of figurative language.

Prior knowledge and skills: Students should have a facility for abstract thinking

Required materials: Paper, pencils, index cards, a container of some sort; and if desired, the attached worksheet(s)

Literary model: Emily Dickinson's "'Hope' is the thing with feathers," and Robert Burns' "A Red, Red Rose." Sometimes I add (especially for younger students) "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," and if there's time—or for another class that builds on this one—use Naimi Shahib Nye's "Kindness."

Sequence of activities:

15 minutes

I begin with a quote from Martin Espada: "Poetry makes the invisible, visible" and ask: *How does poetry do that seemingly impossible thing?*

We look at the poems. I ask a student to read the Emily Dickinson poem out loud. We discuss the poem. I ask, what is "hope" being compared to?" I try to explain some of the archaic phrases and anything that is confusing as we discuss or the poem. I then do the same with the Robert Burns' poem. What is the simile in "A Red, Red Rose"? (I explain the difference between metaphor and simile). What is "love" being compared to? Optional: you can also point out the hyperbole in the lines: "And I will luve thee still, my dear/ Till a' the seas gang dry" and help with the meanings of the more unusual words. In addition to the printed copy, there is a recording of someone singing "A Red, Red Rose" that my seventh-grade students loved:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMPR9g9IVzU>

Sometimes I ask if anyone has heard of the poem, "Row, Row, Your Boat." Students love to sing it out loud. I ask, what is "life" being compared to?

If there's time, we also include Naomi Shihab Nye's poem, "Kindness." In this poem, she uses a story to illustrate "kindness." (This poem can also be saved for a later class. I created a worksheet, which can be used for that class, which is attached below).

10 minutes

I talk briefly about the magic of figurative language, and how something can be—at the same time—not true but still true. I then show what I mean by writing an example poem (that I made up) on the board. (Feel free to use my example, or make up one of your own):

"I am a unicorn
in a herd of horses.
Nobody sees me,

nobody knows who I am.”

I go through the poem line by line. I read out the first line: “I am a unicorn,” and ask the students if I, the one standing before them, am a unicorn. Is that true? They love to yell out, “No!” “Right,” I say. “I am not a unicorn. I am a human being.” Then I proceed to read out the next line and ask, is this true? Again, students yell, “No!” “Right,” I say, “this is a classroom, full of students, not a herd of horses in a field.” I read the third line and ask, “Is it true that no one can see me?” “No!” they yell. “Right,” I say, and then read the last line, asking, “Do you know who I am?” (The answers can vary. because, in truth, who can know another fully?) Sometimes the students yell out “yes,” for all of these lines, getting ahead of me, but that’s fun, too. The point of the exercise is to show that these lines, though not literally true in themselves—when put together, show a figurative truth.

I then ask, “What do you think a person who wrote this poem might be *feeling*?” mentioning that, though I, personally, do not feel this way now, I might have in times past, and that perhaps they know someone who might feel (or has felt) his way. Students call out their answers: “The person feels lonely.” “Different.” “Like an outcast.” “They feel like no one understands them.”

I write their answers on the board next to the poem and point out that they are perfectly good descriptions of someone who might feel this way. I then talk about (or lead a discussion on) how the poem “shows” this emotion. How it makes abstract word like “loneliness” or “alienation” visible.

We talk a little about abstract words and I ask for more examples. The students (depending on the age level) might need help at first, but eventually they enthusiastically call out words like: “Friendship,” “Happiness,” “Sorrow,” “Anger,” “Boredom,” etc.

10 minutes (this can be extended, or expanded into subsequent classes)

I then take out a container. (I use a hollowed-out gourd, but you can use a box or basket or any kind of container.) I hand out index cards and ask the students to write an abstract word on the index card, and fold it in half. I collect the cards and put them in the gourd. Then I ask for a volunteer to pull a random card out of the gourd. The students are always enthusiastic and everyone is curious to see what their classmates have written, or if their own card will be chosen. We do this several times. After the chosen card is read, I write the word on the board. We then brainstorm as a class to for a way make the invisible (hard to picture) abstract word, visible with a concrete image: creating a metaphor or simile. (Sometimes a student has written a concrete image instead, so then we try to find an abstract word to go with it.) This activity is so popular that I save the unused cards for their next class or classes. It makes a great way to open a successive class and get the students excited about poetry.

15-20 minutes

Afterward, we spend time writing. I hand out the simile and metaphor worksheet and/or the worksheet based on “Kindness.” These worksheets are optional; students can write whatever is interesting to them, but many have found the worksheets a helpful starting place, and after filling them out, go on to create their own poem.

Simile and Metaphor Worksheet

1. Metaphor

_____ (fill in the blank with an abstract word—for example: Silence, Sorrow, Joy, Love)

is a _____

2. Simile

_____ (fill in with an abstract word)

is like a _____

3. Use a simile or metaphor or both

_____ (fill in with abstract word)

is (or is like) a _____

it is not (or is not) a _____

it is (or it is like) a _____

Please use whatever works for you. (The abstract word can also be a title to your poem.)

Write a poem in the manner of “Kindness” by Naomi Shihab Nye, adding you own words, lines, thoughts and feelings (or start from this and write a poem of your own on the back)

Before you know what _____ really is, you must

Before you learn _____

you must _____

You must see that _____

Before you know (repeat word from the beginning) _____ as the _____ thing,

you must know (pick another word) _____ as the other _____ thing.