

Figurative Language in Poetry

Duration

Two 40-minute class sessions

Resources

1. Student Handout: "Thine Own" by Josephine D. Heard & Activity
2. Student Handout: "We Wear the Mask" by Paul Laurence Dunbar & Activity
3. Teacher Handout: Poems with sample activity responses



Objectives of the Lesson

- To identify and interpret metaphors in poetry
- To explain the purpose and impact of metaphors upon poem meaning

College Board Objectives from the 2020–21 CED

- **Skill FIG 6.B:** Identify and explain the function of a metaphor.
 - **Essential Knowledge: FIG-1.S:** Comparisons not only communicate literal meaning but may also convey figurative meaning or transmit a perspective.
 - **Essential Knowledge: FIG-1.T:** An extended metaphor is created when the comparison of a main subject and comparison subject persists through parts of or an entire text, and when the comparison is expanded through additional details, similes, and images.

Student Activities

- Students will read "Thine Own" by Josephine D. Heard and identify the figurative language in the poem. Students will then analyze each example on the literal and figurative level and write a paragraph response explaining how the use of metaphor reveals the speaker's perspective.
- Students will read "We Wear the Mask" by Paul Laurence Dunbar and to analyze his use of extended metaphor and imagery. Students will answer three short-answer responses and then create an argument for the prompt, "How does the use of figurative language reveal the speaker's perspective on life?" Students will complete an argument organizer with a claim, two textual details for evidence, and commentary explaining why that textual detail supports their claim.

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Lesson Plan

This lesson is geared around identifying and interpreting metaphors within poetry. The first poem will be more straightforward to allow time for students to practice moving from the literal meaning to the figurative meaning. The second poem will push them to think about the purpose of extended metaphors within a poem. This will prepare students for conceits, which will be introduced in Unit 8.

When students complete this activity, they should annotate the poems and write on the Student Handout for the activity. If you are teaching virtually, there are extensions that allow students to write directly onto PDFs, or students can print the documents, handwrite their responses, and then upload pictures of their completed work to you.

This lesson is broken into steps below, and potential responses are filled in on the Teacher Handout page.

Day One

Important Context: Depending on students' knowledge of Josephine Heard, it may be helpful to share the following context prior to reading the poem:

- She was born in 1861 in Salisbury, North Carolina.
- Both of her parents were slaves, and she married a freed slave.
- She published a collection of poems called "Morning Glories" in 1890 that received little attention.

Step One

Read "Thine Own" aloud with students and have them just listen for aesthetics. Then, instruct students to read more closely on their own and annotate for figurative language (similes, metaphor, personification, etc.).

Step Two

Instruct students to find all of the comparisons the author makes in "Thine Own" and list them in the chart. Then, have students translate them on the literal level. What does this figurative language mean on the surface? Encourage students to think about the imagery as they answer.

Step Three

Instruct students to take each example and analyze it for the figurative meaning. What is the poet trying to say with this comparison? Encourage students to consider connotations of the items used in the comparison. If you are able, you could

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have students work in groups to divide up the chart and work on just one or two rows individually, then combine their work to complete the rest of the chart.

Step Four

Have students respond individually to the prompt, “Write a paragraph explaining how the use of metaphor helps the speaker convey her perspective.” Students can share their answers with a group, the class, or turn in for a formative assessment check.

Day Two

Important Context: Depending on students’ knowledge of Paul Laurence Dunbar, it may be helpful to share the following context prior to reading the poem:

- He was born in 1872 in Kentucky to parents who were freed slaves.
- He is an esteemed black writer who has published many poems, short stories, and essays.
- This poem, “We Wear the Mask,” is absolutely influenced by his experience as a black American living in a post-Civil War time still rife with racism and segregation, but he writes in such a way to leave it more universally applicable to all people.

Step One

Hand out the “We Wear the Mask” handout and activity. Read the poem aloud for aesthetics and just have students listen without writing anything. Then, instruct students to reread the poem individually and annotate it, paying particular attention to figurative language and imagery.

Step Two

Next, students will answer the three response questions in reaction to the poem. They can do this individually or in partners/groups. If they complete them individually, they might benefit from some discussion after answering them.

Step Three

Students will then construct an argument based upon the poem using the prompt, “How does the use of figurative language reveal the speaker’s perspective on life?” Using the provided organizer, students will write the claim, identify two text details to support that claim, and explain the connection between the two.

Extension Opportunity: Have students complete a second claim with evidence.

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Step Four

Lastly, have students share their claims with a group or with the class. Discuss the selection of textual details and the effectiveness of well-chosen evidence to support a claim. If class is being held virtually, consider a discussion board format and encourage students to respond to one another with feedback.

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Passage and Activity (with sample responses)

Thine Own

By Josephine Delphine Henderson **Heard**

To live and not be **Thine Own**,
 Like Springtime is when birds are flown;
 Or liberty in prison bars,
 Or evening skies without the stars;
 Like diamonds that are lusterless,
 Or rest when there's no weariness;
 Like lovely flower that have no scent,
 Or music when the **sound is spent**.

Source: *She Wields a Pen: American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century* (University of Iowa Press, 1997).

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Annotations

- 1 Heard appeals to the senses:
 - the "taste" of liberty
 - the "feel" of prison bars and weariness
 - the "sight" of a starless sky and lusterless diamond
 - the "scent" (or lack thereof) of an odorless flower
 - the "sound" (or lack thereof) of music
- 2 Rhyming couplets throughout lends to greater cohesion between the figurative language, connecting the ideas.
- 3 Two possible interpretations here:
 1. Thine Own meaning a believer in God
 2. Thine Own meaning self-empowered
- 4 Ending with the auditory imagery is poignant at the end of the poem itself—the "sound is spent" in the speaker's own voice. This is further enhanced by the repeated alliteration and consonance of the letter "s."

Now, complete the chart below.

| Figurative Language—“To live and not be Thine Own”—is like: | Literal meaning | Figurative meaning/perspective |
|--|---|---|
| <i>“Springtime when birds are flown”</i> | <i>Spring without any birds, birds have all migrated</i> | |
| <i>“Liberty in prison bars”</i> | <i>Freedom without actually being free</i> | <i>Ironic perspective, thinking yourself as free while being in prison</i> |
| <i>“Evening skies without the stars”</i> | <i>Empty, black sky</i> | <i>Someone with so much potential and nothing to show for it</i> |
| <i>“Diamonds that are lusterless”</i> | <i>Cloudy diamonds without a sparkle, a precious stone that doesn’t showcase its beauty</i> | <i>Being a beautiful or valuable person who doesn’t shine or showcase that importance</i> |
| <i>“Rest when there’s no weariness”</i> | <i>Not being tired by still resting, like being lazy</i> | <i>Wasting time in idleness, not achieving goals</i> |
| <i>“Lovely flower that have no scent”</i> | <i>Flowers beautiful to look at but without substance</i> | <i>Life that seems attractive but not having any substance</i> |
| <i>“Music when the sound is spent”</i> | <i>Music is pointless without any sound</i> | <i>An empty life, missing anything of value or what makes it music</i> |

Write a paragraph explaining how the use of metaphor helps the speaker convey her perspective.

Write or type your response in this area.

In “Thine Own,” the speaker uses multiple metaphors to emphasize how living without ownership over your own life is an empty life, missing meaning, beauty, and purpose. The comparisons she uses describe what life should be like springtime, liberty, a beautiful evening sky, diamonds, rest, flowers, or music. These chosen descriptions give a more rich understanding of how she views the importance of life as something that is beautiful and meaningful. In contrast, the lack of ownership over her own life becomes more tragic through their descriptions: birdless, prison, starless, lusterless, wearinessless, scentless, and soundless. A life without self-ownership is fundamentally lacking. In order to have a life of beauty and purpose, a person must have self-ownership.

We Wear the Mask

By Paul Laurence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.
Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.
We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!

Source: Paul Laurence Dunbar, “*We Wear the Mask*”
from *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*
(New York: Dodd, Mead and Company).

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Annotations

- Two important notes about this title:
 - Because of Dunbar’s experience, there is a hint of reference to blackface or minstrel performances prevalent at the time.
 - As freed black people living in a racist society, he writes about the tension of performing positively when still feeling the pain of racism and segregation.
- This sets up a “we” versus “them” scenario.
- Connotation of grin is not a truly happy smile, but something else.
- The eyes usually reveal the truth, but the mask shades it and hides that from view.
- This debt—the cost of hiding our true selves is owed to our own nature; the cost is the pain and suffering that deceit itself creates.
- It’s human nature to be deceitful.
- Despite the internal suffering and pain, we pretend to be happy and make polite conversation. It’s not just sadness, hearts are “torn” and “bleeding.”
- Again with the violent imagery—“tortured souls”
- The clay reference could be biblical, a reference to man being made from clay (coinciding with the reference to Christ), an argument that the earth from which we come is vile as the soul longs for heaven.
- The word dream suggests the world is ignorant of reality, living in a fantasy because they are unaware of the truth.
- Shift in punctuation—the exclamation point gives some power here, some vibrancy to this idea. The mask-wearer gets to control who sees this pain and suffering.

Now, respond to the three questions below with complete, thoughtful, and well-written responses:

1. What is the primary extended metaphor in this poem?

Write or type your response in this area.

Dunbar describes the way people wear masks to hide their pain and suffering, putting on a show of joy and positivity to prevent people from seeing the real emotion within. It's not a literal mask, but a metaphorical one that keeps peoples' suffering private from those we don't want to see it.

2. How does the imagery describing the "mask" add to our understanding of this metaphor?

Write or type your response in this area.

The mask is not a positive thing—it "grins and lies," hides the truth, and creates a debt that must be paid. It creates a separation between us/we and them. Inside, we are left to deal with our torn, bleeding, tortured hearts alone, or with Christ, as the speaker indicates.

3. What other strategies does Dunbar use to add complexity to the poem?

Write or type your response in this area.

He uses a shift in the last two lines of the poem to reframe the idea of wearing a mask from something that is isolating and perhaps begrudging into something more triumphant, that those wearing the mask have more knowledge about the truth of reality than those who are being deceived by it. The exclamation point makes it seem more powerful than before.

After sharing your responses to the question above, complete the following chart by 1) writing a claim statement (remember to be specific in your response), 2) by choosing two textual details that will provide the best evidence for your claim, and 3) by defending those choices by writing a one-sentence explanation for why you chose them.

| PROMPT: HOW DOES THE USE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE REVEAL THE SPEAKER'S PERSPECTIVE ON LIFE? | |
|---|--|
| CLAIM: | |
| <p><i>Write or type your response in this area.</i></p> <p>The shifting tone about the metaphor of the mask reveals that while there is pain, there is also power in concealing your suffering from others.</p> | |
| FIRST TEXTUAL DETAIL THAT BEST SUPPORTS THIS CLAIM: | SECOND TEXTUAL DETAIL THAT BEST SUPPORTS THIS CLAIM: |
| <p><i>Write or type your response in this area.</i></p> <p>The mask "grins and lies," "hides," "shades," and creates a debt.</p> | <p><i>Write or type your response in this area.</i></p> <p>"But let the world dream otherwise, We wear the mask!"</p> |
| WHY DOES THIS DETAIL BEST SUPPORT YOUR CLAIM? | WHY DOES THIS DETAIL BEST SUPPORT YOUR CLAIM? |
| <p><i>Write or type your response in this area.</i></p> <p>The opening details of the poem paint the mask as something negative and foreboding, almost giving the impression of an empty skull that hides cheeks and shades eyes. It creates a debt that has to be paid, so the metaphor at first seems to be one that costs us too much.</p> | <p><i>Write or type your response in this area.</i></p> <p>At the end of the poem, the tone about this metaphorical mask shifts as the speaker says to "let the world dream otherwise," indicating that the people seeing this mask are naive to the truth or reality, and the speaker likes it that way. In fact, now the punctuation gives some power to this statement about wearing this mask, as it gives control and power to the person wearing the mask—they control who sees the real emotion within.</p> |

Instructions: Read and annotate the poem while looking specifically for figurative language.

We Wear the Mask

By Paul Laurence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
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We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!

Source: Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask” from *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company).

Now, respond to the three questions below with complete, thoughtful, and well-written responses:

1. What is the primary extended metaphor in this poem?

Write or type your response in this area.

2. How does the imagery describing the “mask” add to our understanding of this metaphor?

Write or type your response in this area.

3. What other strategies does Dunbar use to add complexity to the poem?

Write or type your response in this area.

After sharing your responses to the question above, complete the following chart by 1) writing a claim statement (remember to be specific in your response), 2) by choosing two textual details that will provide the best evidence for your claim, and 3) by defending those choices by writing a one-sentence explanation for why you chose them.

| PROMPT: HOW DOES THE USE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE REVEAL THE SPEAKER'S PERSPECTIVE ON LIFE? | |
|--|---|
| CLAIM: | |
| <i>Write or type your response in this area.</i> | |
| FIRST TEXTUAL DETAIL THAT BEST SUPPORTS THIS CLAIM: | SECOND TEXTUAL DETAIL THAT BEST SUPPORTS THIS CLAIM: |
| <i>Write or type your response in this area.</i> | <i>Write or type your response in this area.</i> |
| WHY DOES THIS DETAIL BEST SUPPORT YOUR CLAIM? | WHY DOES THIS DETAIL BEST SUPPORT YOUR CLAIM? |
| <i>Write or type your response in this area.</i> | <i>Write or type your response in this area.</i> |

Poem “Thine Own” by Josephine D. Heard



Instructions: Read and annotate the poem while looking specifically for figurative language.

Thine Own

By Josephine Delphine Henderson Heard

To live and not be Thine Own,
 Like Springtime is when birds are flown;
 Or liberty in prison bars,
 Or evening skies without the stars;
 Like diamonds that are lusterless,
 Or rest when there’s no weariness;
 Like lovely flower that have no scent,
 Or music when the sound is spent.

Source: *She Wields a Pen: American Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century* (University of Iowa Press, 1997).

Now, complete the chart below.

| Figurative Language—“To live and not be Thine Own”—is like: | Literal meaning | Figurative meaning/perspective |
|--|--|--|
| <i>Write or type your response in this area.</i> | <i>Write or type your response in this area.</i> | <i>Write or type your response in this area.</i> |
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Write a paragraph explaining how the use of metaphor helps the speaker convey her perspective.

Write or type your response in this area.