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Great Gatsby Unit
Metaphor in *The Great Gatsby*

Exploring Metaphor in *The Great Gatsby*

Abstract:

In this lesson, students engage with one approach to metaphor and then apply that learning to metaphors in *Great Gatsby*. To start, students learn about I. A. Richards's definition of metaphor as the link between *tenor* (topic) and *vehicle* (way of thinking about it). They then generate some metaphors by randomly combining tenors and vehicles in order to understand how the parts interrelate. Finally, the class interacts with the messier, more beautiful face of metaphor by working through, in groups, some key metaphors from the novel. Students identify the components of each metaphor (tenor, vehicle) and also consider what subtle information the metaphor gives us about character or setting. The lesson may be adapted to other novels; it works well with upper-level students.

Common Core Standards:

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.5](#) Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

Procedure:

To begin, introduce students to I. A. Richards's key terms for metaphor. The *tenor* is the topic or subject of the metaphor; it is what the metaphorical phrase is about. The *vehicle* is the imaginative way of understanding that topic. For example, given the basic metaphor, "Life is a box of chocolates," the tenor is life and the vehicle is a box of chocolates. The metaphor uses the notion of variability in the box of chocolates (with its multitude of flavors and types) as a way to suggest that life is unpredictable and varied.

The structure of metaphor examined above ("tenor is vehicle") showcases Richards's terms very easily; some other examples are more difficult. Try some other examples to get students engaged with trickier versions. Ask them to pick out the tenor and vehicle within the following items: "Friendship blooms between the cracks" (friendship is a flower that manages to grow despite adversity); "sharp-fanged jealousy" (jealousy is a monster or predator); "evening of life" (life is a day; here, the ultimate meaning of the phrase is old age) or "thick mist of fatigue" (fatigue is a mist). Feel free, of course, to add your own here, too. Personally, I feel free to

discuss similes as a subspecies of metaphor. For example, the phrase “Her anger is like a thornbush” works very well within Richards’s scheme, despite the fact that it is not a metaphor. I encourage students to unpack similes while understanding the slight difference.

At this point you might hand out slips of paper taken from the Tenor/Vehicle sheet (see Materials, below). This sheet contains 12 tenors, numbered 1-12, and 12 vehicles, lettered A-L. Cut up the sheets so that each student gets a numbered tenor or lettered vehicle from you. (You may need to create more of each category, or you might discard some if unnecessary.) Then call out a random combination (“5B”): ambition and a dull knife. Ask each student with that letter and number to read his or her word for the class. Once the class hears the pair, ask the class to synthesize some meaning here: what does it mean for ambition to be seen as a dull knife? What does “Ambition is a dull knife” mean? Students should play around here: it might mean that ambition doesn’t get you what you want; it might suggest that ambition is violent; it might mean that ambition looks impressive but is actually ineffective; it might mean that ambition takes more effort than it appears to. Call out more random combinations, or ask the students to do so, and have the students describe what those metaphors might mean. (N.B. Some of these combinations, like 3A (men and women are moths flying at night) and 6D (laughter spills over its glass), are very similar to metaphors from *Gatsby*, below. “H” is related, too.)

In the last phase of the lesson, students work in groups to unpack some richer metaphors from *The Great Gatsby*. (This lesson can be broken up over two days; this is a good break point.) Groups of three or four work well. Each group should work to identify the tenor and vehicle of each underlying metaphor, and groups should also be prepared to explain nuances of the metaphor that the basic analysis does not capture. Consider the following metaphors:

- Most of the confidences were unsought — frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon; for the intimate revelations of young men, or at least the terms in which they express them, are usually plagiaristic and marred by obvious suppressions. (ch. 1)
- If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. (ch. 1)
- He had changed since his New Haven years. Now he was a sturdy straw-haired man of thirty with a rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner. Two shining arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward. Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body — he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing, and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat. (ch. 1)
- I looked back at my cousin, who began to ask me questions in her low, thrilling voice. It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. (ch. 1)
- There was music from my neighbor’s house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars. (ch. 3)

- The lights grow brighter as the earth lurches away from the sun, and now the orchestra is playing yellow cocktail music, and the opera of voices pitches a key higher. Laughter is easier minute by minute, spilled with prodigality, tipped out at a cheerful word. (ch. 3)
- Even Jordan's party, the quartet from East Egg, were rent asunder by dissension. One of the men was talking with curious intensity to a young actress, and his wife, after attempting to laugh at the situation in a dignified and indifferent way, broke down entirely and resorted to flank attacks — at intervals she appeared suddenly at his side like an angry diamond, and hissed: "You promised!" into his ear. (ch. 3)

Materials: Tenor/Vehicle sheet

1. truth

2. success

3. men and women

4. power

5. ambition

6. laughter

7. taxicabs

8. happiness

9. love

10. eyes

11. beauty

12. mystery

A. moth(s) flying at night

B. dull knife

C. hole in the ice

D. spills over its glass/
spill over their glasses

E. boot stuck in the mud

F. leash

G. egg yolks

H. angry diamond

I. dead battery

J. empty auditorium

K. mangy dog

L. satellite