The Secret Life of Bees:
Understanding Metaphor and Simile

Extension Activity #2

One of the best places to practice finding and understanding literary devices is in poetry. Because the poem is usually shorter than say, a novel, or a short story, the author has less words to express his or her meaning. This is where the literary devices of metaphor and simile come in. They help to say MORE than what is literally being said. This is why literary devices are also called “Figurative Language.” Because these devices make use of the figures of speech- the visual, the implied meaning, the symbolic, to say more than just one thing at a time.

Let’s take a look at some poetry by famous, female poet Emily Dickinson.

The Brain is Wider Than the Sky

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
For—put them side by side—
The other one will contain
With ease—and You—beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—
For—hold them—Blue to Blue—
The one the other will absorb—
As Sponges—Buckets—do—

The Brain is just the weight of God—
For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—
And they will differ—if they do—
As Syllable from Sound—

Questions that want you to comprehend the poem are usually phrased like this:

1. In the first stanza, what can the brain “contain with ease,” besides the sky?

2. What is the brain compared to in the second stanza?

3. What do you suppose the speaker means by “The Brain is just the weight of God?”
Questions that want you to understand the literary techniques used are usually phrased like this:

1. Parallelism occurs when a writer expresses ideas of equal worth in the same grammatical form, or structure. In the poem above, Dickinson uses the same form in the first line of each stanza. Find another example of parallelism in the poem.

2. What effect does using this technique have on the poem?

3. Find the simile that compares the brain to a sponge. How is the brain like a sponge? Is this an effective simile? Explain why or why not.

4. Many of Dickinson’s poems are brief, one stanza poems. In the poem above, she uses stanzas like paragraphs to focus on three different ideas. This is called structure. What is the main idea of each stanza in this poem?

Take a look at the next poem from the same author.

**Fame is a bee.**

It has a song—

It has a sting—

Ah, too, it has a wing.

Comprehension:

1. What three things does fame have in common with a bee?
2. What is the tone of the second line of the poem? Is the song of fame one of happiness or sorrow?

3. How can fame “sting” a person?

4. According to Dickinson, fame also has a “wing.” What do you suppose she is saying about fame? Do you agree?

Literary Analysis:
1. Emily Dickinson reveals her attitude about fame in four short lines—this is called TONE. What is this attitude?

2. Is the poem above, Dickinson uses METAPHOR to show the similarities between two unlike things. Why do you suppose she chose a bee for her metaphor? Why is the comparison a good one?

Sue Monk Kidd also chose bees and their metaphorical meanings to use in her novel. Because this metaphor occurs repeatedly throughout the whole novel, it is called a MOTIF. A motif is a distinctive feature or dominant idea in an artistic or literary composition.

Consider the first EPIGRAPH in the novel:

“The queen, for her part, is the unifying force of the community; if she is removed from the hive, the workers very quickly sense her absence. After a few hours, or even less, they show unmistakable signs of queenlessness” (Kidd 1).

Comprehension:
1. What happens to bees in a hive if the queen is removed?
2. What is the purpose of the queen in the hive?

Literary Analysis:

1. If Kidd is using bees as a metaphor for people, than bee behavior is somehow representative of human behavior. What do you suppose Kidd is saying about humans when she uses this epigraph?

2. Predict what this chapter may EXPOSE, given what you know from the epigraph above.