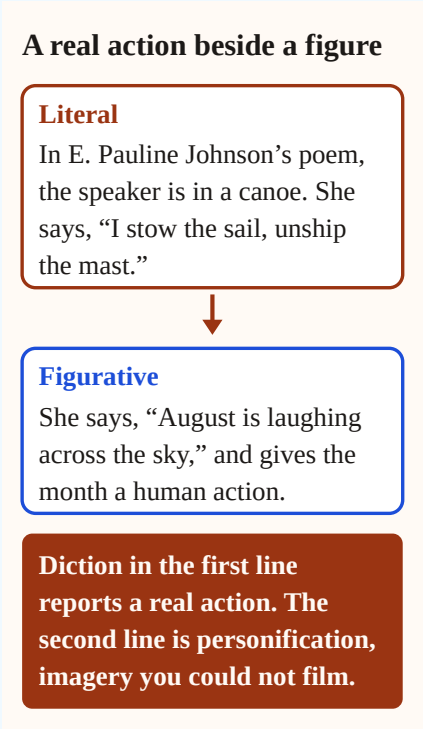
English Language Arts 10-1

Unit 2: Comprehend and respond to texts

Figurative language and performance

Figurative language in a poem

- Literal. In E. Pauline Johnson's poem, the speaker is in a canoe. She says, "I stow the sail, unship the mast."
- Figurative. The same speaker says, "August is laughing across the sky," and gives the month a human action.
- Diction in the first line reports a real action. The second line is personification, a picture no camera could film.



Figures and readings

- Literal statements report what could occur, and figurative statements ask you to carry meaning across.
- A symbol is a thing, such as the paddle, that stays itself and gathers a further meaning.
- An audience can admire a poem's content and still struggle with a performance, or the reverse.

Key terms

figurative language

Wording that asks a reader to understand one thing through another, as when a month is said to laugh.

symbol

A concrete thing in a text that also carries a further meaning the text supports.

allusion

A brief reference to a person, place, or text the audience is expected to recognize.

Kinds of meaning

- Literal: “Be strong, O paddle! be brave, canoe!” still addresses tools, and the bravery asked of them starts to figure.
- Symbol: the paddle remains a blade in the water and also gathers courage and song.
- Allusion: calling a bright afternoon “my summer’s day” borrows Shakespeare’s comparison if the class has just read “Sonnet 18.”



Text and performance

- In E. Pauline Johnson's poem the speaker is in a canoe and says, "I stow the sail, unship the mast." The same speaker says, "August is laughing across the sky."
- The first line is literal: a person could do it. The second is personification: the month is given a human action.
- A shouted reading of Be strong, O paddle! makes the poem's soft opening, gentle as a lullaby, hard to remember, so the performance changes the response.

Practice with a river sentence

- Between classes, Maya writes: The hallway current tugged our sleeves, and the bell was a thin whistle downstream. She then reads the line in a rush, almost shouting the bell.
- Label the literal tug and the figurative current and whistle, then say how the rushed reading changes a listener’s response.

Review

- After practice, Maya writes this line: The scoreboard moon hung over centre court, and Maya tied her laces. One classmate whispers the line, then another classmate shouts it.
- Say which part is literal, which part is a figure, and how the whisper and the shout ask for different responses.

Image credits

Unknown photographer, Grand River, Onandaga, where E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake) wrote “Paddle Song” (I0023615), public domain