



Education Department

Title: Reflections as a Young Man: A Poem by Barack Obama

Level: Eighth Grade
ENGLISH UNIT (3 Lessons)

OVERVIEW

Students will understand and employ the use of figurative language. They will then analyze a poem written by Barack Obama during his college years. For the final activity, students will create their own poem about a family member.

Common Core Reading Standards (Grade 8)

Key Ideas and Details (2) Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

Craft and Structure (4) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

California State Standards (Grade 8)

Reading **Standard 1.1** Analyze idioms, analogies, metaphors, and similes to infer the literal and figurative meanings of phrases

Reading **Standard 3.6** Identify significant literary devices (e.g., metaphor, symbolism, dialect, irony) that define a writer's style and use those elements to interpret the work

Writing **Standard 2.2b** Connect the student's own response to the writer's techniques and to specific textual references

Writing **Standard 2.2c** Draw supported inferences about the effects of a literary work on its audience

OBJECTIVES (SWBAT)

1. Understand, identify, and demonstrate the use of figurative language in poetry.
2. Analyze "Pop," a poem Barack Obama wrote while he was an undergraduate student at Occidental College.
3. Create a poem that describes a relationship with a chosen family member.

MATERIALS:

- Lesson I: Hand Out A (pages 4 to 5)
- Lesson II: Hand Out B (pages 6 to 10)
- Lesson III: Hand Out C (page 11)

PROCEDURE: LESSON I – Figurative Language

1. Distribute the Forms of Figurative Language handout, **Hand Out A** (pages 4 to 5).
2. Complete **Activity A (“Figurative Language”)**.

PROCEDURE: LESSON II – “Pop” by Barack Obama

3. Distribute the poem “Pop” by Barack Obama, **Hand Out B** (pages 6 to 10).
4. Divide the students into small groups.
5. Repetitive Readings: Students will read the poem silently with the group. Then, one person from the group will read the poem out loud. Finally, students will re-read the poem silently.
6. Students should complete **Activity B (“Using Contextual Clues”)** as a group.
7. When all the groups have finished, discuss the answers to the questions as a class.

PROCEDURE: LESSON III – Creating Your Own Poem

1. Distribute the Creating Your Own Poem handout, **Hand Out C** (page 11).
2. Complete **Activity C (“Creating Your Own Poem”)**. Write a poem that describes a relationship with a family member. Use figurative language to describe characteristics, mood, actions, feelings, and thoughts.
3. Share the poem with the class.

Additional Resources for the Teacher:

- Photo of the original publication of “Pop” by Barack Obama in Occidental College’s literary magazine *Feast*; includes an anecdote about Obama in a contemporary poetry class and how “Pop” was published:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/government-elections-politics/choice-2012/artifact-one-barack-obamas-pop/>
- Photos of nineteen year old Obama; includes an anecdote about the photos:
<http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1866765,00.html>

Background Information and Photo Shoot



Photos of 19-year-old Barack Obama taken by Lisa Jack in 1980. Taken from TIME magazine's website.

Barack Obama wrote “Pop” when he was a 19-year-old student at Occidental College. “Pop” (along with his other poem “Underground”) was published in the 1982 issue of *Feast*, Occidental’s literary magazine. “Pop” most likely refers to his maternal grandfather, Stanley Armour Dunham. When Obama was ten years old, his mother sent him to Honolulu, Hawaii to live with her parents, while she remained in Indonesia. He lived with his grandparents until he was eighteen.

The photos above portray Obama as a freshman at Occidental College. Lisa Jack, an aspiring photographer at the time, asked to take Obama’s photos for her portfolio. Jack mentions, “You can see he is just posing, initially, but as the shoot goes on, he starts to come out. He was very charismatic even then.” Though they only saw each other a few more times as students, in 2005 while on tour, Jack yelled hello to Obama on Capitol Hill and, “He knew exactly who I was after all this time. I was amazed.”

Jack then decided to track down the negatives from the shoot after a skeptical friend dared her. At first, Jack never thought her pictures would move beyond her darkroom, but she ended up placing the negative in a safety deposit box, so that they could not be used for political purposes. Today, she says she hopes the photos reveal a “spirit of fun and thoughtfulness.”

Forms of Figurative Language

Figurative Language uses speech or writing that departs from its literal meaning to achieve a specific effect. Figurative language is often used in poetry as a device to enhance the poem. Study the chart below to learn about the different forms of figurative language.

Term	Definition	Example(s)
Hyperbole	An over-exaggeration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’ve told you a million times already.” • “I’ve got tons of homework.” • “Her brain is the size of a pea.”
Idiom	Peculiar phrases (often with folk roots) in specific cultures and/or occupations that do not carry their literal meanings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Break a leg” • “Pay the piper” • “Jump the gun”
Metaphor	Unlikely comparison of two or more things	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Books are keys to your imagination • You are my sunshine • Jamie was a pig at the dinner table
Onomatopoeia	Words that imitate natural sounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swish • Kaboom • Drizzle
Personification	Attributing human qualities to non-human beings or objects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The stars danced in the sky • The wind howled • The pistol glared at me
Simile	A phrase that uses <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> to describe someone or something by comparing it with someone or something else that is similar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Happy as a clam • Her love was like a gentle wave • Strong as an ox

Other Poetic Devices

Term	Definition	Example(s)
Alliteration	Use of words that begin with the same sound/letter (usually consonants)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average <u>A</u>genda • Babbling <u>B</u>rooke • Complacent <u>C</u>at
Assonance	Use of words that have the same or very similar vowel sounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Su<u>u</u>mer Fu<u>u</u>n • Cru<u>u</u>mbing Thu<u>u</u>nder • Try to li<u>igh</u>t the <u>fi</u>re
Consonance	Repetition of the final consonant sounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bl<u>an</u>k and Thi<u>nk</u> • Spel<u>l</u>ed and Sc<u>al</u>d • Str<u>ong</u> and Sw<u>ing</u>

Activity A—Figurative Language Using the “Elements of Figurative Language” and “Other Poetic Devices” charts as guides, complete the activity below.

Give an example of...

- 1) An **alliteration** that describes something in kitchen

- 2) A **hyperbole** that describes the scariest moment in your life

- 3) An **idiom** you think is silly

- 4) A **metaphor** that describes your best friend

- 5) An **onomatopoeia** that describes a sound you would hear at construction site

- 6) A **personification** of something you would find in your bedroom

- 7) A **simile** that describes your hair

Pop

By Barack Obama, Occidental College, 1981

Sitting in his seat, a seat broad and broken
 In, sprinkled with ashes,
 Pop switches channels, takes another
 Shot of Seagrams, neat, and asks
 What to do with me, a green young man
 Who fails to consider the
 Flim and flam of the world, since
 Things have been easy for me;
 I stare hard at his face, a stare
 That deflects off his brow;
 I'm sure he's unaware of his
 Dark, watery eyes, that
 Glance in different directions,
 And his slow, unwelcome twitches,
 Fail to pass.
 I listen, nod,
 Listen, open, till I cling to his pale,
 Beige T-shirt, yelling,
 Yelling in his ears, that hang
 With heavy lobes, but he's still telling
 His jokes, so I ask why

He's so unhappy, to which he replies...
 But I don't care anymore, cause
 He took too damn long, and from
 Under my seat, I pull out the
 Mirror I've been saving; I'm laughing,
 Laughing loud, the blood rushing from his face
 To mine, as he grows small,
 A spot in my brain, something
 That may be squeezed out, like a
 Watermelon seed between
 Two fingers.
 Pop takes another shot, neat,
 Points out the same amber
 Stain on his shorts that I've got on mine, and
 Makes me smell his smell, coming
 From me; he switches channels, recites an old poem
 He wrote before his mother died,
 Stands, shouts, and asks
 For a hug, as I shrink, my
 Arms barely reaching around
 His thick, oily neck, and his broad back; 'cause
 I see my face, framed within
 Pop's black framed glasses
 And know he's laughing too.

Activity B—Using Contextual Clues

Read the poem silently. Then, have one person from your group read the poem out loud. Afterwards, read the poem silently again. Finish the activity by answering the following questions.

- 1) Contextual clues aid in comprehension of text. Write what you think the following phrases mean by reading the words around them and adding your own prior knowledge.

"a green young man...."	
"Flim and flam of the world...."	
"I pull out the/Mirror I've been saving"	

- 2) There is an abundance of figurative language in this poem. Identify some of them and interpret what you think they mean in the context of the poem. Use the “Elements of Figurative Language” chart if needed.

Line from Poem	Type of Figurative Language	Interpretation

7) What is the relationship between them like?

8) What do you think this poem is about?

Activity C—Creating Your Own Poem

Write your own poem that describes a relationship with a chosen family member. Try your hand at using figurative language. Describe characteristics, actions, thoughts, feelings, and mood.