

The Young Gifted Child

From the Playful to the Profound: What Metaphors Tell Us About Gifted Children

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The Legacy of Metaphor

Although some metaphors have lost their novelty through overuse, the unexpected quality of other metaphors appeal to creatively gifted children given their proclivity for language and imagination. The unexpected connections that comprise metaphor manifest the creative process and can give rise to innovative expressions and concepts. Creatively gifted children have an extraordinary facility with metaphor, using these expressions in ways that reveal advanced metalinguistic ability. In addition, the metaphors they create reflect a wealth of ability from profound emotional and spiritual dimensions to playful and humorous insights into the human condition.

A range of metaphors composed by children are presented and discussed in terms of what they indicate about the personal worlds, special talents, and emotional insights that are often typical of the gifted. Moreover, some of these metaphors appear to play a cathartic role for their authors whereas others seem to provide an engaging vehicle for creatively gifted children's delight in the world of language and ideas. The approach to creative writing described in this article also has the potential to assist with the identification of those with linguistic talent.

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The term metaphor means transfer and originally comes from the Greek metaphora: meta, meaning "trans," and *pherein*, "to carry" (Ortony, 1975). This transfer of meaning is found within all cultures and languages, and has a long history of use as evidenced in the teaching of Aristotle and Plato. Metaphor has been central to the study of rhetoric and philosophy from Aristotle to the present day. Moreover, since at least the 1970s, the study of metaphor has continued to grow as a serious subject of scrutiny within linguistics, sociolinguistics, sociology, psychology, and education (Ortony, 1993).

According to Ortony (1975) "metaphors are necessary and not just nice" (p. 45) and he explains that there are various ways in which metaphor can facilitate learning. Metaphor can impress a concept or idea though the powerful image or vividness of the expression. Metaphor can also capture the inexpressible in that what a metaphor conveys is virtually impossible to express in any other way without losing the potency of the message. In addition, metaphor aids compactness in that chunks of well known experience can be transferred to less well known contexts. It is this transference from one context or phenomenon to another that manifests the creative process, as explained in more detail below.

Unexpected Connections

Metaphors "work" by juxtaposing elements in unexpected and unusual ways such as, "Every betrayal contains a perfect moment, a coin stamped heads or tails with salvation on the other side. Betrayal is a friend I've known for a long time, a two-faced goddess looking forward and back with a clear, earnest suspicion of good fortune" (Kingsolver, 1998, p. 469). The forming of such metaphors reveal the creative process of combining unrelated ideas (betrayal and coins; goddesses and suspicion) in unique ways. This definition of the creative process also forms the basis of synectics (Gordon, 1974). Synectics comes from the Greek word *synecticos* that means the joining together of apparently unrelated elements.

Using metaphors enables the creative process to manifest itself and Gordon (1974), Mednick (1962), Torrance (1988) and Koestler (1970) emphasize the metaphorical in their analyses of creativity. For example, Torrance defines creativity in a number of ways and one of his definitions captures the notion of unexpected combinations when he writes, "creativity is listening for smells" (p. 50). This pithy definition encapsulates how disparate items can be combined through metaphor in novel ways. Creating metaphors like this requires flexibility of thinking and a cognitive fluency which are qualities gifted children readily exhibit. Piechowski (1991) also claims that the gifted frequently use image and metaphor exhibiting a facility for such inventive expressions. While all young children may

Introduction

The everyday, colloquial use of metaphor has sometimes led to common phrases that no longer cause intrigue, such as "he's a star" and "she's a sweetie" (although such colloquial use can cause confusion across cultures). Such well known metaphorical expressions become taken-for-granted aspects of language, devoid of novelty and surprise. Winner (1997) argues that language is the graveyard of old metaphors (like these), but also the birthplace of new ones. Some metaphors seem to resist erosion by time (see for example, great poetry, Shakespearean drama, proverbs, etc.) and the birth of many new metaphors can revitalize language and human perception. Moreover, "a metaphor is often the only way of communicating precisely and efficiently what one means" (Winner & Gardner, 1993, p. 429).

Creatively gifted children with a strength in language have a special facility with metaphors, using them in ways that are highly novel and original. Metaphor can also be a vehicle through which they reveal and develop their advanced cognitive, social, and emotional skills. In addition, metaphor can enable such gifted children to reveal insights, personal issues and reflections on their worlds in relatively unthreatening ways.

readily understand a very obvious metaphor such as “stringy hair,” a number of studies reported by Winner (1997) confirm that the understanding of more complex metaphors (where the comparison of elements are very different) requires advanced metalinguistic capabilities “that do not develop until late childhood” (p. 35). For gifted children, however, such milestones are reached earlier and the sophisticated understanding required to comprehend the symbolism of metaphor emerges at a younger age. While it could be argued that all language is imprecise and requires flexibility of thought to create understanding, metaphors can be particularly challenging in that they are not intended to be literally interpreted. As Winner explains:

A novel metaphor surprises the listener and challenges him [sic] to solve a puzzle by mapping attributes and relations between the stated or implied elements being linked...Literal descriptions do no such thing but simply describe the world in established ways. In the sense that metaphors force us to understand one thing in terms of another, metaphors must elicit cognitive processes not ordinarily called upon by literal language. (p. 17)

The intellectual exercise of constructing metaphors is a cognitive process that enables people to explore ideas, develop insights and communicate complex concepts in ways that can be accessible to others. As Winner (1997) states, “metaphor is at the root of the creativity and openness of language” (p. 16). Metaphors can also assist the creator to grasp a difficult and seemingly elusive idea. A classic example is Einstein's metaphor of riding a beam of light through the universe, a visualization he employed to construct his theory of relativity.

Gifted children enjoy the word-play and creative associations of metaphor and readily detect the meaning that is intended. Gifted children usually can, for example, quickly identify the cat metaphor used evocatively in T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*:

The yellow fog that rubs its back against the window-panes
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue in the corner of the evening
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house and fell asleep.
(Allison, et al., 1970, p. 508)

Introducing gifted children to such skillful use of metaphor enables them to learn from expert models of literary practice and devise metaphors of their own. An extension of this idea is explained below.

Encouraging Children's Metaphorical Writing

The author has taught classes of children (aged 7 to 11 years) on the invitation of local parents' associations and schools. Creative writing was taught over a period of one and a half hours to three regular classes during school hours, and two gifted children's groups that met on weekends (it is more common in New Zealand for gifted children to remain in regular classrooms, at least at the elementary school level). The work

published in this article is from children in both the regular classes and the latter groups and was selected by the author. Some of the children had been officially identified as gifted by their schools but others were not. Permission was sought from the children to publish their work and consent was granted.

The lesson was on creative writing with the whole class and in each case it began with a sharing of clever metaphorical expressions, such as:

Woke at midnight, swimming up through aubergine nightmare. (Proulx, 1994, p. 29)

Trousers a sullen crookedness of wool. (p. 37)

The ocean twitched like a vast cloth spread over snakes. (p. 193)

The houses sit on their handkerchiefs and early in the morning begin to sneeze. (Grace, 1987, p. 67)

The clock gulps softly, eating seconds whole while she waits. (Kingsolver, 1993, p. 4)

These extracts are evocative and playful and the effectiveness of these metaphors is due to their novelty and unexpected quality. Nightmares are not usually associated with aubergines, nor trousers with sullenness. The children and I discussed how these metaphors successfully avoid hackneyed expressions such as “the ocean was dotted with white caps” or “her wool trousers were wrinkled as if she had slept in them,” and we considered what the authors may have been attempting to communicate through their choice of metaphorical expression.

Child volunteers were then asked to read aloud to the class or group, vignettes of personification from Gendler (1988) who explores dimensions of humanity from pleasure to pain. Gendler writes about these human emotions and experiences as if they were real people. For example: “Worry has written the definitive work on nervous habits. She etches lines on people's foreheads when they are not paying attention. She makes lists of everything that can go wrong while she is waiting for the train...” (p. 3); “Excitement wears orange socks. He understands the language of flames and loves to build fires... The Wind taught Excitement how to be two places at once, and they are still very good friends...” (p. 34); Anxiety “...likes to visit me late at night when I am alone and exhausted...he kissed me on the forehead once and I had a headache for two years...” (p. 13); “Anger sharpens kitchen knives at the local supermarket on the last Wednesday of the month. His face is scarred from adolescent battles. He has never been very popular...” (p. 69).

After sharing a number of these, the children were asked to suggest human qualities or emotions and then were guided to focus on one in particular. This “quality” was discussed as if it was a person they might meet. For example, one class chose “creativity.” Therefore, we discussed what sort of house Creativity would live in, what job he or she might have, what kind of clothes Creativity would wear, what hobbies, passions or past-times Creativity might enjoy, and who his or her friends might be. The children readily suggested various ideas and we discussed how well their suggestions matched with concepts of creativity. The children were then encouraged to select a quality or emotion of their own choosing to write about.

Children's Metaphorical Choices

The topics chosen by children reflected a wide range of approaches from the playful to the profound. A certain whimsy

and magical delight is evident in the following text:

Imagination

Imagination wears a rainbow coloured coat,
She's friends with Joy and Beauty.
She works at a shop that sells dreams.
Her house is made out of musical notes
That speak very softly.
She likes to eat soap suds with cream.
She never wastes any of her time.
As a child she never played sport
Because she had such an imagination
And wanted to change the rules.
(Rosie, age 9)

Imagination appears to be ephemeral and at home in the realm of fantasy. The images of pleasure are evoked by Rosie's choice of selling "dreams," having a house made of "musical notes that speak very softly" and eating "soap suds with cream." Rosie conveys a gentle character who, nonetheless, has her own mind and is certainly not afraid to play her own game. Rosie appears to capture the essence of imagination or at least, a benevolent version of this human capacity.

In contrast, the following text reveals another all too human quality about being confused and paralysed:

Indecision

She wears a colourful summery skirt
A thick dark purple coat.
Her house has a very dark blue roof
And a light yellow base
Her shutters are half closed half open

She likes to play with Crazy and Adventurous
But every time she goes to see them
She walks out the front door,
Then thinks she should have
Gone through the back door.

She really would like to eat hot food
But she prefers cold food.
She loves to cook
But normally eats out.

She would do things in the weekend
Except it takes till Monday to decide what.
(Katrina, age 7)

Katrina expresses the tentative and frustrated nature of Indecision. There is also humor evident in her wry analysis of this character. Indecision ends up doing some things that are not her preference by default. She is often caught wondering if the option she chose was the right one and whether she would have been better served by taking an alternative. This angst and oscillation serves to increase her anxiety. Indecision is nicely captured by Katrina's description indicating her awareness of this annoying feeling.

A more profound and mythic expression forms the theme and tone of Kate's text:

Glory

Every day she will wait till sunset.
She is the daughter of the rise of the sun.
People believe she forms into the golden hemisphere
at dawn
And fades at night.

She's clever and rays fling from her arms.
She's addicted to the fire's warning of night.
She will adore the brightness.
(Kate, age 7)

There is a distinctly spiritual dimension to Glory, and Kate develops a poetic description that captures the ethereal nature of this character. Her brief description of Glory conveys mystery; reverence; and a vibrant, transformative energy. In his description of what seems to be common in spiritual experiences, Claxton (2002) lists qualities reminiscent of Kate's Glory. These qualities include aliveness (a heightened sense of vitality), belonging (a sense of being at ease in the world), an affinity with mystery (being content with not knowing), and peace of mind (pp. 3-4). Kate reveals a spiritual insight and knowing beyond her chronological age. This quality seems characteristic of Picchowski's (1997) notion of spiritual giftedness. Moreover, her choice of language indicates a sophisticated analysis of text and linguistic structure.

Similarly, another girl also captured Passion in a few, carefully chosen words:

Passion

Passion is single minded
She is an obsession
Demanding attention
Yet quiet in contemplation.

She can be a follower
As well as a leader.
Passion is her own style.
(Brie, age 11)

These children's ability to succinctly convey emotional awareness in their texts seems to support the notion that a metaphor holds the most truth in the smallest amount of space (Costa, 2002).

Some children seemed to borrow from archetypal stories and classical themes to explore issues of sin, temptation, and greed. Although the idea the boy below uses is not original, the way in which he has constructed his character shows wit and flair:

Secret

Secret is in a ruby-red car.
He is dressed in a sky blue shirt and pants
But deep inside him his soul is as black
As the opals in a cave
Reflecting away any good.
He prances around like Excited or Handsome
But he observes every detail
And tells his boss Death
Everything he sees.

Death flings him a bag of gold coins
And he scurries off from the underworld
Up to the overworld
Where he prances off again
Ready to do anything
For the gold coins he is carrying.
(Shaun, age 9)

Themes of greed, bribery, vanity and corruption are evident in this drama which apparently borrows its plot from classical mythology. Shaun adds vitality and vividness to the

actions of his characters with words such as “prances,” “flings,” and “scurries.” Secret is not a passive character but one who is furtive, manipulative, and open to extortion. This 9-year-old author reveals much about the behaviour of such deviant characters and he indicates with considerable flourish how beguiling such villains can be.

Creating a metaphor and communicating it to others helps children to get to the essence of an idea. The process of metaphor making can also be an emotional event, tapping into the inner world of the child and revealing issues of personal and social import to the child. For gifted children this opportunity to explore social and emotional issues through metaphor might be both a cathartic and self-enhancing process. This process can assist in resolving conflicts and pain in one's life and metaphor can be a vehicle through which gifted children create a new reality. For example, the following metaphorical text personifies the emotion “rage” :

Rage

Rage is Anger's brother.
 Anger is a hurricane
 And Rage is a tornado
 They are powerful and strong.
 Rage is an eruption of red hot lava
 Running down a volcano.
 Anger is pitch black
 Like the bottom of the ocean.
 Rage throws spears of lightning and
 Pushes fire through your veins.
 Rage is an earthquake shattering buildings.
 Rage is a powerful force
 That causes total destruction.
 (David, age 10)

This allegory about Rage seems to reveal David's intense understanding of this emotion. This metaphor writing could well be a vehicle through which he can reveal strong feelings in a relatively safe way. As Silverman (1993) argues, being gifted is regarded by many as a “privilege,” yet “it is painful to be different in a society which derides difference” (p. 3). David has Asperger's Syndrome so his difference is doubled: both talented and disabled, both gifted and having special needs. His allegory reveals something of this powerful emotion through a vehicle that encourages introspection and emotional expression. Writing metaphorically can be an easier yet more potent way to explore one's inner life than directly talking about feelings, and for the gifted child with Asperger's Syndrome, this chance to communicate through writing can be liberating.

Metaphor Choice and Social/Emotional Development

The externalizing of an issue (such as rage) is an effective approach adopted in narrative therapy. By externalizing an issue (or problem) through a narrative like this allegory, children can examine it afresh and not feel overwhelmed or a victim of certain emotions (see for example, Monk, 1997). This can be especially useful with emotions such as anger, resentment, terror, loneliness, and feeling different. The narrative enables them to develop intrapersonal intelligence (knowing oneself) but not lose face in the public domain. For example, the following is a shortened version of a text by Alan:

Greed

Greed wears expensive dark trench coats.
 I first met Greed when I was two.
 Suddenly Greed started to filter through my skin.

While I tried to resist him,
 Like a tsunami
 Another flourish of Greed came over me
 And I started piling lollipops
 In the trolley
 At the supermarket.

My brief encounter with Greed was not pleasant.
 Don't ask him to dinner as he'll only want more and more
 And when his stomach starts to ache
 He'll blame it all on you.
 (Alan, age 10)

Through narrating an emotion, children can reveal what they feel but not be in a position of feeling that they are patently revealing their own vulnerability. Such uses of metaphor brings to the surface children's awareness of their inner lives and reinforces the validity of gifted children's emotional insights (see also Piechowski, 1997).

Salovey and Mayer (1990) state that emotional intelligence includes knowing one's emotions, managing feelings, recognizing emotions in others, and handling relationships. It seems that metaphorical analyses of emotions of import in a child's life can assist in the development of these social and emotional skills. Similarly, Richardson (1988) argues that personal insight and growth are fundamentals of creative giftedness and in creative writing, children should choose a topic with which they have an emotional bond. Richardson believes this helps their sensitivity to, and awareness of, deep feelings. Through such writing he asserts that

...the individual is actively involved in learning to understand and enjoy the self and the interactions which arise in living, looking, feeling, touching, dreaming, wondering, loving, thinking, hating and the like. (1988, p. xii)

Torrance (1995) also suggests that creative activities can have therapeutic value as such writing is a legitimate and socially acceptable way of expressing strong or puzzling or playful feelings. He claims that such creative activities enable teachers to know their students better and enable children to better understand their feelings.

This is not to suggest that all gifted children require special social and emotional therapy and/or guidance, although this is necessary in some cases (e.g., Silverman, 1993). As Moltzen (1996) points out, the research on the social and emotional needs of the gifted tends to present contrasting views, with some arguing that the needs of these children are more pronounced and require special interventions, and others arguing that gifted children are particularly well adapted both socially and emotionally. Moltzen urges readers to examine the samples of these contrasting studies to ascertain any contributing effects. For example, some studies only included gifted children in clinical settings - children who had already been referred (or referred themselves) for counseling. However, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) makes the salient point that creative people exhibit complex and seemingly paradoxical personality traits. He argues that “the openness and sensitivity of creative individuals often exposes them to *suffering and pain yet also a*

great deal of enjoyment” (p. 73) [emphasis in the original]. These contrasting traits reveal emotional breadth and depth. While in extreme cases this may lead to debilitating mood swings they could equally result in a psychologically healthy balance wherein life's joys and despairs are embraced with passion and understanding. There is something of these contrasts evident in the children's texts in that they seem to range from the playful to the profound.

The late George Parkyn was a leading scholar and the founding patron of the New Zealand Association for Gifted Children. He argues that the gifted need the arts to give expressive form to their “deep unconscious perceptions, feelings, and urges” (1995, p. 48) and that “the verbal arts [poetry, novels, drama, etc.] are probably our most sensitive and powerful expressive forms” (p. 49). The emotions expressed by the children here can be cause for confusion, bewilderment, or anxiety, yet their ability to express these feelings and ideas seems to promote understanding for both writers and readers. Parkyn would go so far as to say, “One of the most important tasks of education, therefore, should be to help us understand our feelings and teach us how to communicate our understanding to our fellows. It is here that we may find those basic human values on which humankind's survival depends” (p. 47).

Conclusion

Metaphor writing of the kind discussed here allows and encourages both personal introspection and public expression. This expression enables us to learn more about how gifted children make sense of their worlds, including their feelings, their insights, their struggles and their wit. Gifted children have the capacity to understand and create unique and evocative metaphors which convey pithy insights to the human condition. Given that some of the young authors published here had not been identified as gifted by the school system, it seems that the creative potential of metaphor provides endless possibilities for both the education and the identification of the gifted.

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