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Sylvester's Magic Pebble Is More Than Meets the Eye: Third-Graders Interpret the Meaning of Literature that is Extended Metaphor

Jane F. Rudden

The importance of providing children with experience in using and understanding metaphor is inextricably tied to the process of constructing meaning from text. Metaphor may be embedded in the text by the author or used by the reader to actively create meaning. It is a means by which children make sense from stories using original formulations rather than repeated rules from the adult world (Miles, 1985; Lehr, 1988).

The specific aim of this study was to explore the abilities of middle elementary aged children to interpret literature that serves as an extended metaphor for real life. Research has shown that capacity to generate metaphor peaks at ages three/four and continues through age six (Geller, 1984; Hittleman, 1983). It has been suggested that metaphoric production declines during the middle elementary grades and reappears during adolescence (Gardner, 1974; Winner and Gardner, 1981). Reasons assigned to this decline include the view that the years of middle childhood make up a period of *conventionalism* or *literalism*. For example, children around

the ages of eight, nine, and ten often reject metaphors addressed to them — insisting, for instance, that colors cannot be loud, and people cannot be icy (Gardner, Kircher, Winner, and Perkins, 1975). There is also an increasing reliance on rules in their moral and social domains (Kohlberg, 1969; Piaget, 1965). It is unknown whether this decline is a natural developmental process or due to formal schooling which teaches children to follow rules and give correct answers. Despite the observable resistance to figurative expressions and a decline in the generation of metaphor, the ability to recognize and interpret metaphor remains. What we are seeing is a function of preference and performance, not ability (Winner, 1988).

This investigation did not involve any direct instruction in the recognition or production of metaphor. It relied solely on the personal interpretations offered by the participants. Results suggest whether or not children's literature can be used as a catalyst for reawakening metaphor competence in elementary school children.

The concept of metaphor

Metaphor was operationalized in this study according to Richards' (1929) definition, which states that a metaphor is made up of two terms: the vehicle, that which is familiar, and the topic, that which is unfamiliar. The commonality shared by the topic and the vehicle is called the ground. Any conceptual incompatibility between the topic and the vehicle is called the tension. Pearson, Raphael, TePaske, and Hyser (1981) explain:

In the metaphor, 'science is an iceberg,' the topic is science and the vehicle is iceberg. The ground of that metaphor is the commonality shared by science and iceberg. The tension results from the incompatibility

(lack of shared features) of the two terms, science and iceberg, when considered literally. (p. 250)

Metaphor arises even in the most commonplace conversations and writings. It abounds in literature written for children. Hundreds upon hundreds of children's books are published every year. Their story lines are frequently metaphoric and open to interpretation on several levels. In an annotated bibliography of 200 children's books, Rudden (1994) identified specific instances of explicit, implicit, and extended metaphor. Arter (1976) found figurative language in basal readers intended for first graders.

The concept of extended metaphor

Good fiction is extended metaphor. Through words, it acts on us as if it were lived life. It tells us to suspend our reasonableness and believe... It makes us think about things we've experienced or thought about or about what it means to be a human groping around in this world. It becomes a symbol of something that exists in everyone's life (Peterson and Eeds, 1990, p. 46).

In *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, Steig (1969) uses animals as characters and story events as symbols of human everyday life. Sylvester, a donkey, wishes he were a rock in order to avoid a charging lion. His wish is granted and he is left to contemplate an eternity spent in this condition. Isolated from his loved ones, the material gain signified by the powers of the magic pebble fades into insignificance. When the family is reunited at the end of the story, Sylvester's father puts the magic pebble in an iron safe. "Some day they might want to use it," writes Steig, "but really, for now, what more could they wish for? They all had all that they wanted". In an interview (Higgins, 1978) Steig said, "I think using animals emphasizes the fact that the story is symbolical — about human

behavior. And kids get the idea right away that this is not just a story, but that it's saying something about life on earth" (p. 6).

The concept of reader response

For purposes of this study, it is appropriate to review the evidence that both the author and the reader play an integral role in encoding and decoding meaning from text. These roles can often be specified through an analysis of the reader's oral and written expressions of interpretation. Empirical evidence is strong in underscoring the role of the reader's response to literature as integral to meaning making. Beginning with Rosenblatt (1976) and tracking forward through the decades (Applebee, 1978; Lehr, 1988; Cox and Many, 1992), the process of constructing meaning as we read has been demonstrated. Benton (1979) said, "Books are embalmed voices. The reader's job is to disinter them and to breathe life into them" (p. 74). This suggestion that reading is an active, creative, unique, and cooperative activity is borne out in the responses of the participants of this study.

Design components

This investigation was a classroom study in which 12 third-graders heard a story repeatedly and wrote their responses. They were each interviewed about their responses to the story in an effort to determine their ability to interpret literature containing embedded metaphor or whose story line serves as an extended metaphor for real life situations.

The primary data sources were the written responses of the participants following the first reading and the transcriptions of the interviews that followed the second reading. To triangulate the data, participants were shown a copy of the transcript and given the opportunity to verify or change any part of it. The Appendix contains the interview protocol.

Data analysis

Interview data were analyzed according to a phenomenological approach as described by Hycner (1985). All interviews were transcribed, segmented into units of general meaning, and then into idea units within those general categories. All units of general meaning were identified, even those outside the boundaries of the research question. Written responses were segmented in the same manner. An independent judge was trained to verify the units of relevant meaning. Reliability was calculated to be .93. The written responses following the first reading were compared with the interview responses following the second reading in order to detect any change in thinking that may have occurred due to the effects of a second reading. Any instance in which the participant compared two otherwise dissimilar objects, events, or ideas in conceptually compatible terms was counted as metaphor.

The reliability of *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* as representative of extended metaphor was established through the independent reading of the book by one professor of reading and one professor of library science. Each completed a form indicating their interpretation of the story in metaphoric terms. Agreement was calculated at 1.0.

Procedures

Day 1: William Steig's *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* was read aloud to all participants. This first reading was intended for enjoyment and was not followed by any discussion. All participants responded in writing to the prompt "Tell me what you think this story is about." Day 2: The same book was read aloud to the entire group. One week's time intervened between readings. The second reading was intended to refresh their memories and reinforce the story line. No discussion followed. Participants were reminded that they

would be interviewed to talk about the story. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, during which they were asked "What was the story about?" The interview protocol was framed by the research focus and probed for the essence of the story rather than a recall of the story events.

Results

Written responses following the first reading indicated a higher frequency of recalling the story events (7) than interpretations which incorporated personal views (2) or metaphoric counterparts for story objects or events (2). One participant refused to respond in writing — "I will tell my ideas on the story at the interview."

Eight units of general meaning emerged from the interview data: 1) prior knowledge of the story; 2) initial interpretation of the meaning of the story; 3) second reading effects on interpretation; 4) metaphoric/non-metaphoric interpretations of the pebble; 5) real life interpretations of the lion; 6) opinion of the story being real or pretend; 7) significance of the iron safe; and 8) interpretations of the story as symbolic of real life.

Prior knowledge of the story

A full 50 percent of the participants had heard the story prior to this study. Of those, only one had read it on their own. "Yes, I've heard this story before. I read it on my own. Many times." The remaining five had heard the story read to them when they were in kindergarten. This three-year span contributed to the diminishing of any impact previous familiarity with the story line might have had on interpretations of the story.

Initial interpretations of the story

After the first reading, participants were asked to respond in writing to the question "What do you think this story is about?" Seven of the participants limited their response to the main character, Sylvester — "It's about a donkey and a pebble" — and two mentioned only the "magic pebble." Three of the students went beyond literal recall. One offered a prediction "I thought, when you got to that part when the pebble was on the rock, he wouldn't come from the rock, I didn't think he would change. I thought he would stay a rock forever." Two insightful students offered responses reflecting their knowledge of stories often having morals or messages for the way we live. The first wrote "I think the story is about an old saying that goes be careful what you wish for. The pebble is fantasy, so dream on if are thinking you are going to find one, ever!" The second was much on the same wavelength when she wrote "moral don't be greedy if you can get anything you want. I think the story is about an old saying that like this be careful of what you wish for. and the pebble would be something I would wish for."

Second reading effects on interpretation

After an interval of one week, the same story was read to the group. The intention of the interval was to allow time for the children to think about the story or just let it roll around in their minds for awhile. The second reading was intended to refresh their memories of the story line and provide a second opportunity to go beyond the events of the story to its essence. Participants were reminded at this point that they would each have the opportunity to talk to me about their interpretations of the story. Six out of twelve had no change in their interpretations. Notable changes in the thinking of the remaining six included admonishing Sylvester for being so hasty with his wishes, "... he doesn't think as well as he should of and then he pays the price for it"; the implication

that this story was nothing but fantasy — “Well, I’d say it was magic cause whenever he wished to be a rock cause he was so scared then he became a rock. That really doesn’t normally happen with regular rocks”; and an awareness of the less-than-thorough search Sylvester’s parents mounted:

Sylvester, he was a little more anxious to get home and the dogs this time, they just came, went looking in the same places. Why wouldn’t they look other places? And the mother and father, they might of gone out looking, but why didn’t they go out with the dogs and the polices?

Metaphoric interpretations of the pebble

Each participant was asked “When Sylvester realized that this was not a regular pebble, but one with magical powers, what do you think that pebble meant to him?” In their written responses, three participants assigned a metaphoric counterpart to the pebble. One was clearly taken from the book title (“the pebble was magic”) and two were of their own making (“the pebble is fantasy”; “the pebble is a meterite from outer space”). The interview data revealed a metaphoric interpretation for the pebble in seven instances. These were treasure, dream, fortune, unlimited unpriced shopping spree, a dream come true, charm to win friends, and an idol. Three responses were borrowed from the book title and assigned magic to the pebble. Two referred to the pebble in adjectival terms, as helpful and secret.

Real life interpretations of the lion

On his way home to tell his parents about his good fortune in finding the magic pebble, Sylvester is accosted by a lion. In his haste to escape danger, he wishes he were a rock and he instantly becomes a rock. The participants were asked if they could compare the lion attack to anything in their own

lives that might have caught them off guard and prevented them from thinking clearly. Three participants were clear and quick with their examples of "lions" from their own lives.

Yeah. I was at daycare and there was a bee's nest on the ground over by the tree. I didn't know any better. I went over to set and watch the bees and 'Nyee!' and I'm like 'Aaaauggghh!' That bee... I kind of lost control of myself.

The second example is of a real-life lion:

Someone standing there with... like robbers when they stand there and hold you with a gun to your head, that would make me lose it.

And the third fancied herself as the lion in her brother's life.

Well, yeah. When I start chasing my brother, like the lion scared Sylvester, I scare my little brother, he doesn't think really fast and he like just jumps down the stairs. He like jumps on the stairs and starts sliding down, bump! bump! bump! I was running down, our hallway's good for running, so I was getting ready to do a cartwheel and I did this (throws arms up over her head) and my brother he started panicking and he jumps down the stairs. Whenever I do that he panics and jumps down the stairs.

A summary of metaphoric counterparts for the pebble can be found in Table 1.

Opinion of the story as real or pretend

In order to establish the participants' orientation to this story relevant to its symbolic nature, they were asked directly whether they thought it was real or pretend. All participants

Table 1
Interpretations of the pebble

Student Code	Metaphoric	Non-metaphoric
A6		Helpful
A11	It'd be my dream come true, like getting \$1000.	
E		Don't play with the pebble. Don't touch the pebble. Magic rock.
K1		It's just a magic pebble.
K2	Let's say you just moved to some place and you wanted some friends and you didn't want your friends to know that you had to have to get your friends. With the pebble you got friends.	
K3		A marble. It said it's as round as a marble. (Recall of simile from story.)
K4	His dream. A meterite from outer space.	
M	It was like an idol. I mean like, this is so neat and it was amazing to him. The rock had magic powers.	
N	An unlimited unpriced shopping spree.	
R8	Magic	
R12	A treasure, like something that you never had and you had it and you found it and you didn't know it was magic.	
T	Fortune	

said the story was pretend. Reasons offered for this opinion included: "because how he turns into the magic pebble and everything like that"; "A donkey can't talk. Donkeys can't walk on their hind legs"; "Animals cannot talk, cannot wear clothes, live in houses like these"; "No pebble that I've ever seen is perfectly round"; "Because it change into rocks . . . and donkeys can't talk"; and "All the magic and everything is not real cause if you wish to become a rock, you don't automatically become one in just a snap, or whatever."

Significance of the iron safe

When, at long last, Sylvester is saved and returned to his parents, his father takes the pebble and puts it in an iron safe. The participants were asked if they thought there was any significance to that action. Five participants felt the pebble was put into the safe to prevent theft. Five others felt Mr. Duncan was saving it for later when it might "come in handy." When I asked for specific reasons the Duncans might need the pebble later, two children believed in the humanitarian nature of the Duncans: "Food," and "Well, maybe one day, like they could have someone really sick, like a relative, and they could wish he or she were better." There was also those who felt Mr. Duncan was protecting his son from his spontaneous and sometimes careless wishing patterns. "So his son doesn't get the thing, the pebble, and change him back into stuff. Safe place, to protect Sylvester," "Another way of saying it, he was protecting it from, like everything would just get out of control, like when he turned himself into a rock. See. I think he's keeping it from letting anything like that happen again." Another offered this suggestion:

He could be hiding it so Sylvester, if it's like one of those safes that you have to put a combination in, Sylvester won't get it and like take it out and somethin' dangerous might happen. He might wish a wrong wish again.

Finally, one student felt the cloak of protection extended to the whole family.

Cause, since that happened, he said we won't really use this until we really, really need it cause we don't want nothin' to happen like that again. He was protecting the whole family by, if it was out in the open, like someone could use it, like there could be another animal or somethin' that makes him really scared and they have it in their hoofs and they could wish for something and they could like turn them into something else. They could actually turn them into bugs and squash 'em.

Interpretations of the story as symbolic of real life

For purposes of determining whether or not the participants could conceptually connect the diverse domains of fiction and reality, they were asked if any of the events or objects in the story made them think of something in their own lives; this despite the fact that animals were used as the main characters and magic pebbles are rarely seen in the real world.

Responses included literal correspondences (i.e., the storm, the police, stones, wolves, lions, rain, houses, trees, Strawberry Hill, fences, donkey walking but only on four feet, and the picnic); and also applied correspondences ("When his parents were asking everybody if they seen him. Sometimes, you know, the police don't see your child"; "Cause they went to the police. They told their neighbors"; "Well, like their kid can like, they won't come back for two days, stuff like that. That can happen"; "Well, instead of animals it could be people and well some person could have stolen or abducted Sylvester and killed him. So that's real life. Your parents would be worried"; "Yes. A kid could of gotten lost. Like if someone's kid would run away I'm sure they would miss 'em

and sit there and be like, 'Uuhhh, I miss my kid.' People could go like on a picnic".

There were three one-to-one correspondences with actual events in their lives. The first:

Well, my cousin, he's been gone for five days from, because his Mom's been worryin' about where he's been. One thing about it, they have that thing there, where they're going to the police. Usually, the police can find somethin' out about it. And usually the police find stuff out about, like where, in here when he was gone, they went to the police and the police couldn't find nuthin' out. Well, usually the police can find something' out like, if your kid's missing, they can go out and surely find them."

The second:

I've done that before. Yes. I always get lost in the supermarket. Well, I'm not afraid at the supermarket, but at the department store!

The third:

Well, one time I was going to ask one of my friends if I could come over to play with them. We were someplace and they were there, too. I went out into the parking lot. They had already gone so I wanted to see if I could find the car wherever or if it was parked someplace else, but I went across the street that my Mom didn't let me go across without her and I started crying. I didn't know, I couldn't get on to the other side and the policeman came. My Mom couldn't find me. But something better happened than happened in this story. The policeman gave me a toy to comfort me and

I still have that toy. It's a little pink bear with little blue eyes.

These data revealed a greater number of metaphoric expressions than found in the written responses — for the pebble (7) and the addition of metaphoric interpretations for Sylvester's meeting up with the lion (2). All participants' interpretations of putting the pebble into an iron safe reflected their own world knowledge. The symbolic nature of the events of the story "saying something about life on earth" (Higgins, 1978, p. 6), was reflected in the responses of nine participants.

Discussion

We must look to the personal nature of reading and the pervasive nature of metaphor in children's literature to find the importance of this study. As children interact with the text to construct meaning, they draw on their knowledge of the world and written word to interpret and extend the text to their own lives. This study asked how children interpret literature that has been written for them that either embeds metaphor in the text or serves as an extended metaphor for real life. Through an inspection of the written and verbal responses, it was evident that they drew on their knowledge of the world to make meaning from the story. Some participants went beyond literal interpretations to affective and aesthetic interpretations for the story events. This can be viewed as an attempt to suspend the disbelief demanded by fantasy and conceptually bridge with the real to find meaning. Responses reflected the degree to which their understanding of the complexities of the story could be grasped — their psychological readiness. That's all that is ever possible in view of the fact that a reader's interaction with the text is limited by the level of maturity in specific domains, either inferred or explicit.

Difficulty in assigning a metaphoric counterpart to the pebble, the lion, the iron safe, or story events may have been due in part to the non-linear nature of the cognitive developmental stages at play. That is, the presence of metaphor in the speech and writing of children has been shown to decline in the middle elementary grades. One reason assigned to this decline has been their continuing efforts to master the conventions of their language. Often these middle year children will demand literal usage from adults and peers. Third-graders fall within this stage of language development. Secondly, extended metaphor is an inferred conceptual compatibility across two dissimilar domains. Development in the recognition and interpretation of metaphor begins in symbolic play and is largely reliant on the physical characteristics of objects — pretending something is really something else (Winner, 1979; Winner and Gardner, 1981). Independent of symbolic play, affective or psychological metaphor is not in evidence at this age. It is dependent upon an understanding of affective counterparts and develops on a domain-by-domain basis. Despite this decline, the ability to understand metaphor remains with children throughout these years (Winner, 1988) and can be directly influenced by instruction (Readance, Baldwin and Head, 1986; Ruddon, 1993). The interview protocol used in this study might be considered a guide, or indirect instructor, for probing into a deeper level of story meaning rather than a recall of events.

Conventional wisdom would have teachers avoid instruction in figurative language until the intermediate grades (four-six) even though it is present in their readings as early as grade one. The results of this study suggest that using literature to focus children's attention on the similarities that can be drawn across diverse domains provides an avenue for higher level thinking. It creates an opportunity to respond to

text on a deeper level, reawakens their imaginations, and draws on their delight in wordplay.

The limitations of this study include its one-time, one-example exploratory nature. Additional research on effects over time might be accomplished using several representative selections from children's literature and a continued exploration over a longer time period. The long range effects could reveal that children look beyond the surface details of a story, interact with the text on a personal level, and bring their knowledge of the world and word to the interaction. This may, in turn, work to minimize the observable decline in metaphor competence in middle elementary children.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

Sylvester's Magic Pebble is More than Meets the Eye: Third-Graders Interpret the Meaning of Literature that is Extended Metaphor. I'd like to ask you a few questions about the story I read to the class, *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*. I'd like to tape record what you have to say, so I don't miss any of it. I don't want to take the chance of missing something. If you want me to turn it off at any time while we're talking, just say so. (Start tape.)

Thank you for letting me tape record this chat. Remember that you don't have to answer any of my questions, there are no right or wrong answers, and no one else is going to listen to this tape except me. If I tell anybody about what you said, I'll use a different name so they won't know who it was. Okay? Do you have any questions right now about what I'm doing? (Wait time.)

1. The book I read to your class was *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*. (A copy of the book will be available for inspection during the interview.) Had you heard this story before?
2. If yes, when did you hear it? Did you read it on your own or did someone read it to you?
3. This first time I read the story to your class, what did you think it was about?
4. What was different the second time you heard me read it?
5. What do you think the story means?
6. When Sylvester realizes that this is no ordinary pebble but one with magical powers, what does that pebble mean to Sylvester?
7. Were there any parts of the story that made you think about your own life? Tell me about that.
8. Is this a real story or a pretend story? Why do you think so?
9. Even though the main characters are animals, do you think the story tells us a message about our own lives?
10. At the end of the story, Mr. Duncan puts the pebble into an iron safe. Why do you suppose he did that?

Those are all the questions I wanted to ask you. Are there any questions you want to ask me? Are there any parts of the story you'd like to talk about that we didn't mention yet?

Thank you very much for chatting with me.