Lesson Title: Where I’m From: Symbols in Paint and Poetry
Grades: 6-8; 9-12
Time Required: 3–5 classroom periods
Subject Areas: English Language Arts, Visual Art

Lesson Overview: In this lesson students will investigate the use of symbols in Coney Island by Arnold Mesches. They will then use the same process to create a symbolic meaning worksheet for the poem Where I’m From by Georgia Ella Lyon and create their own “Where I’m From” poem using concrete language.

Common Core English Language Arts

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1.C
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3.D
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.3.A

National Core Art Standards

VA:Re.7.2.6a
VA:Re8.1.8a

Students will be able to:

- Understand the difference between literal and symbolic meanings
- Use concrete imagery in their poems
- Use symbolism and concrete imagery to create their own poem about where they are from

Artwork in Focus:
Click on the links below to access these images through the Wadsworth’s Public Portal. Once on the portal, click on the image to view the object information. Click on the image again to download a jpeg version of the work. NOTE: Works of art used in this lesson may not currently be on view at the museum.

Arnold Mesches, Coney Island, 1999

Materials:
- Image of Coney Island by Arnold Mesches
- Projector and screen/SMART Board or equivalent
- Copies of Where I’m From poem (included in lesson plan)
- Copies of the Symbolic Meaning Worksheet (included in lesson plan)
- Chart paper
- Paper
- Pencils/pens

Lesson Procedures:

Part One: Discussion of Symbols

1. Begin with a discussion of symbolism. As a class, brainstorm some common symbols [wedding rings, emojis, religious symbols, company logos, street signs, etc.]. Write down student responses on chart paper.

2. Next, inform students that everyday objects can also act as symbols. Propose a couple of objects ready for analysis, see examples below. Ask students what each object might symbolize. If they are struggling, start with a discussion of the objects’ literal meaning/uses and ask them what associations
this brings to mind [for example: a watch: tells time → time passing → getting older/growing up]. Try to get a couple of answers for each object.

- Broom
- Candle (lit? just blown out?)
- A doll
- A watch

3. Tell students they will be looking at ways artists and writers use symbols to represent a place that is special to them.

Part Two: Guided Looking

Teacher Preparation: Create a Symbolic Meaning Worksheet on a large piece of chart paper prior to this discussion

1. Project the image of Coney Island by Arnold Mesches and first ask students to take an “object inventory”: how many individual images/objects do the students recognize? Write down their observations under the “Objects” column on chart paper. Ask students to give a literal meaning for each object (i.e. what would the dictionary definition of this image be?) Note: you may want to share information about the painting’s content given in the Background Information if students have trouble recognizing certain images, still leaving room for different interpretations!

2. Then ask students for some possible symbolic meanings/associations for each object, sharing content from the Background Information section when applicable (i.e. the image of the corsets in the window may have additional meaning for Mesches because his father owned a clothing store). Push students to come up with multiple meanings for each object/image, even meanings that seem contradictory.

3. After you feel the class has fully explored the individual elements of the work, ask them to “zoom out” and synthesize the meaning[s] of the painting as a whole using the questions below as a guide:
   - How is the painting organized (its composition)?
   - What does the composition remind you of?
   - How does the composition affect how we read it?
   - How does placing these images side by side change how we interpret them?
   - If this painting was a portrait, what would it be a portrait of?
   - Tell students that this work is titled Coney Island, telling them a little bit about Coney Island (see Background Information).
   - Why do you think the artist chose this title?

Part Three: Reading the Poem

Teacher Preparation: Create a Symbolic Meaning Worksheet on a large piece of chart paper prior to this discussion

1. Distribute copies of Where I’m From and read the poem twice as a class, defining any words students don’t understand. (See Vocabulary in the Background Information section).

2. Break students into groups and distribute a copy of the Symbolic Meaning Worksheet to each group. In their groups, have students fill out the worksheet. You may want to break the poem into sections and assign a section to each group, or have every group tackle the entire poem.
3. Then have the groups share out loud, recording student responses on chart paper. Discuss the poem’s similarities and differences with Coney Island. How did both artists use symbolism to represent a place with personal significance?

4. Focusing on a couple of examples from the poem, discuss with students George Ella Lyon’s and Arnold Mesches’ use of concrete images. Things we can use all of our senses to understand.

   For example:
   I am from the dirt under the back porch.
   [Black, glistening,
   It tasted like beets.]

   This is concrete because we can see the dirt, feel the dirt, see the black color, see the shine of the glistening dirt, taste the beets. Ask students to pick another example from the poem or painting to check for understanding.

5. Conclude by telling students they will be creating their own “Where I’m From” poems using concrete images.

Part Four: Writing Activity

1. Have students begin by thinking about “where they’re from.” Is it a place? People? Memories? Relationships?

2. Then have them brainstorm a list of possible personal symbols to use in their poems. Are there any objects or images in their lives that have special meanings? You can give each student a blank copy of the Symbolic Meaning Worksheet to help organize their thoughts.

3. Have each student write a practice “I am From” line. Then have them pair and share with a partner to help make that image more concrete. Are there any word choice changes to make sure the imagery engages the senses? Discuss with your partner how these edits change the mood.

4. Students then write their own “Where I’m From” poem. You can have a minimum line/stanza or leave it open-ended.

5. Students then pair and share again for peer editing

6. Students then revise and publish their poems. Conclude with a class share-out.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Arnold Mesches, Coney Island

Arnold Mesches (1923–2016) was born in the Bronx, the son of a Lithuanian Jewish immigrant father and an American-born Jewish mother. His father owned a clothing store, which he lost during the Great Depression, forcing him to sell door-to-door. At the same time, rumors were circulating about Jews disappearing in Europe as war raged. The images in Coney Island contain references to images of both personal and historic significance, touching on the immigrant experience in America, the trauma of war, genocide, and the Great Depression, as well as Mesches’ own family history to create a work that is both tragic and sweetly nostalgic. Mesches said this about his memories of Coney Island: “I had spent my childhood summers there with my mother before the Depression blighted all kinds of dreams, let alone summers at the beach.” Below is a list of some of the images referenced in Coney Island:

- Luna Park’s Kaleidoscopic Tower: a 100-foot tower covered in lights that changed color every second that stood at the entrance of Luna Park, one of the amusement parks in Coney Island.
- Carousel
- Brooklyn storefront selling corsets
- A boy [possibly Mesches] in a pony cart
- Empty chairs
- A family eating dinner
- Map of Europe that traces the path of Allied advances

Coney Island is part of a larger series titled Anomie 1492–2006. Mesches defined anomie as “a condition of society marked by the absence of moral standards.” Mesches was a politically active artist, both on the canvas and off. His involvement in civil rights protests led to the FBI amassing files on the artist during the McCarthy Era. In the words of one critic, his large-scale paintings “present a unique variant of history painting as canvases for social protest.”

Coney Island

Coney Island is a peninsula and beach on the Atlantic Ocean in southern Brooklyn, New York. It has been the site of amusement parks that reached their peak during the first half of the 20th century. Coney Island declined in popularity after World War II and ultimately endured years of neglect in the war’s aftermath. In recent years, the area has seen the opening of MCU Park and has become home to the minor league baseball team, the Brooklyn Cyclones.

Between about 1880 and World War II, Coney Island was the largest amusement area in the United States, attracting several million visitors per year. At its height it contained three competing major amusement parks, Luna Park, Dreamland, and Steeplechase Park.

Coney Island has been referred to as a “melting pot of societies.” Originally developed for the mass entertainment of New York families, the area has shifted over the course of time from its tranquil beginnings to a roller coaster ride of popularity to mistreatment. After World War II, cars and air conditioners lessened the attractions of Coney’s beaches. Luna Park closed in 1946 after a series of fires, and the New York street gang problems of the 1950s spilled into Coney Island. The presence of gang violence did not impact the beach-

---

goers, but discouraged visitors to the rides and concessions, which were staples of the Coney Island economy. The local economy was dealt a severe blow by the 1964 closing of Steeplechase Park, the last of the major amusement parks.

American artists have used Coney Island’s demographic shifts to illustrate the beauty, confusion, and chaos of American life. Relating to topics such as racial prejudice, immigration, social upheaval, and cultural dynamics, the amusement parks, resorts, and beaches of Coney Island have come to represent how American life has played out over the decades.

**VOCABULARY: “WHERE I’M FROM”**

carbon-tetrachloride: The organic compound with the formula CCl4. In the 20th century, carbon tetrachloride was widely used as a dry cleaning solvent.

forsythia bush: a genus of flowering plants in the olive family. There are about 11 species, mostly native to eastern Asia, but one native to southeastern Europe.

Dutch elm: a deciduous tree introduced to England from Holland in the late seventeenth century

Imogene and Alafair: “women in the neighborhood where I grew up in Harlan County, Kentucky. Alafair had a beauty shop in her garage, and Imogene gave out the best treats at Halloween—homemade popcorn balls, caramel apples, etc. Because I love words, I relished the sound of unusual names, especially together. (Their houses were across the street from each other.)” - Georgia Ella Lyon

He restoreth my soul: A psalm of David [see below]

“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.” Psalm 23:1-3

Artemus and Billie’s Branch: possibly the two sides of the writer’s family

Auger: a drilling device with a rotating screw blade for drilling holes (usually in wood or in the ground)
Where I'm From

-George Ella Lyon

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening,
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush
the Dutch elm
whose long-gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.
I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,
    from Imogene and Alafair.
I'm from the know-it-alls
    and the pass-it-ons,
from Perk up! and Pipe down!
I'm from He restoreth my soul
    with a cottonball lamb
    and ten verses I can say myself.
I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger,
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.
Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
to drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments--
napped before I budded --
leaf-fall from the family tree.
Symbolic Meaning Worksheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Literal Meaning (Definition)</th>
<th>Symbolic Meaning(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Arnold Mesches
American, 1923–2016
Coney Island, 1999
Acrylic on canvas
Gift of Jill Ciment, 2012.29.1
Courtesy of Jill Ciment and David and Schweitzer Contemporary