from Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God by Jonathan Edwards

LITERARY FOCUS: FIGURES OF SPEECH

Writers use figures of speech to help us see the world in new, imaginative ways. A figure of speech compares one thing to another, very different, thing. In “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Jonathan Edwards uses figures of speech to make his readers experience the horrors he is describing. In one memorable example, he describes “wickedness” as being “heavy as lead.” By using this figure of speech, a simile, Edwards compares the idea of wickedness to an everyday material his audience is familiar with. The figure of speech helps them feel the dead weight of wickedness.

What’s the Difference? Three of the most commonly occurring figures of speech are simile, metaphor, and personification.

- A simile compares two unlike things, using a word such as like, as, than, or resembles: Her heart is as cold as a dungeon.
- A metaphor compares two different things without using such words as like or as: Life is a carnival.
- Personification gives human characteristics to objects, animals, or abstractions: The flowers nodded their heads in agreement.

READING SKILLS: IDENTIFYING AN AUTHOR’S PURPOSE

Most writers have a purpose for putting words to paper. Some writers want to create a whole imaginative world of their own. Some want to share information. Some want to convey a message to their readers. Others hope to tap into readers’ feelings or reason and persuade them to accept a way of thinking or to take some particular action. Jonathan Edwards’s vivid, intense sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” was written with a clear purpose—to make the experience of hell so real and frightening that people in his audience would change their lives.

Use the Skill As you read the selection, circle the details that reveal the author’s purpose.
So that, thus it is that natural men¹ are held in the hand of God, over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, His anger is as great toward them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of His wrath in hell, and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abat² that anger, neither is God in the least bound by any promise to hold them up one moment: The devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would fain³ lay hold on them, and swallow them up; the fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out: And they have no interest in any Mediator⁴ there are no means within reach that can be any security to them.

In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of; all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and unconfected, unobliged forbearance⁵ of an incensed⁶ God.

The use of this awful subject may be for awakening unconverted persons in this congregation. This that you have heard is the case of every one of you that are out of Christ. That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell’s wide gaping mouth open; and you

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1. natural men: people who have not been “reborn.”
2. abate v.: reduce in amount or intensity.
3. fain adv.: archaic word meaning “happily” or “gladly.”
4. Mediator: Jesus Christ. In general, one who intervenes between two parties in conflict.
5. forbearance n.: tolerance or restraint.
6. incensed v. used as adj.: angered; enraged.
have nothing to stand upon, nor anything to take hold of; there is nothing between you and hell but the air; it is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.

You probably are not sensible of this; you find you are kept out of hell, but do not see the hand of God in it; but look at other things, as the good state of your bodily constitution, your care of your own life, and the means you use for your own preservation. But indeed these things are nothing; if God should withdraw His hand, they would avail no more to keep you from falling, than the thin air to hold up a person that is suspended in it.

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downward with great weight and pressure toward hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider’s web would have to stop a fallen rock.

The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given; and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course, when once it is let loose. It is true, that judgment against your evil works has not been executed hitherto; the floods of God’s vengeance have been withheld; but your guilt in the meantime is constantly increasing, and you are every day treasuring up more wrath; the waters are constantly rising, and waxing more and more mighty; and there is nothing but the mere pleasure of God that holds the waters back, that are unwilling to be stopped, and press hard to
go forward. If God should only withdraw His hand from the floodgate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath of God, would rush forth with inconceivable fury, and would come upon you with omnipotent power; and if your strength were ten thousand times greater than it is, yea, ten thousand times greater than the strength of the stoutest, sturdiest devil in hell, it would be nothing to withstand or endure it.

The bow of God’s wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. Thus all you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all you that were never born again, and made new creatures, and raised from being dead in sin, to a state of new, and before altogether unexperienced light and life, are in the hands of an angry God. However you may have reformed your life in many things, and may have had religious affections, and may keep up a form of religion in your families and closets, and in the house of God, it is nothing but His mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction. However unconvinced you may now be of the truth of what you hear, by and by you will be fully convinced of it. Those that are gone from being in the like circumstances with you, see that it was so with them; for destruction came suddenly upon most of them; when they expected nothing of it, and while they were saying, peace and safety: Now they see, that those things on which they depended for peace and safety, were nothing but thin air and empty shadows.

7. affections n. pl.: feelings.
8. closets n. pl.: rooms for prayer and meditation.
The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: His wrath toward you burns like fire; He looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire; He is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in His sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in His eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended Him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but His hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night; that you was suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not gone to hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking His pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending His solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell.

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: It is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment....
from Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

Reading Skills: Identifying an Author’s Purpose

Most authors have a purpose, or reason, for writing. Jonathan Edwards’s purpose for writing “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” is very clear, and his vivid details and frightening metaphors help him get his message across. Fill in the chart below with some details from the sermon that reveal Edwards’s purpose for writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>To scare his congregation into obeying the word of God</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passage 1</th>
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<tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passage 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Vocabulary in Context

DIRECTIONS: Write vocabulary words from the Word Box on the correct blanks to complete the paragraph. Not all words will be used.

Jonathan Edwards’s emotional sermons described an all-powerful, (1) omnipotent God. Edwards wanted to (2) induce, or force, his listeners to obey God. His descriptions of God were not meant to calm or (3) appease the fears of his audience. Instead, he wanted them to believe that God’s anger was (4) inconceivable by their sins. Many modern readers find Edwards’s scare tactics loathsome and (5) abominable.

Prefixes and Suffixes

A prefix is a letter, syllable, or word part that is added to the beginning of a word. A suffix is a letter, syllable, or word part that is added to the end of a word. Both prefixes and suffixes change the meaning of a word.

DIRECTIONS: Using the information in the box, match each numbered word with its definition. Write the letters on the blanks.

Common Prefixes and Suffixes

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<th>Prefix</th>
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<td>con-</td>
<td>means “with” or “together”</td>
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<td>omni-</td>
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1. omnipresent  
2. arguable  
3. attendance  
4. converge  
5. breakable  

a. “come together”  
b. “able to be argued”  
c. “state of being present at (an event)”  
d. “able to be broken”  
e. “everywhere; present at all times”
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• A metaphor compares two different things without using such words as like or as. Life is a carnival.

• Personification gives human characteristics to objects, animals, or abstractions. The flowers nodded their heads in agreement.

REVIEW SKILLS

Look for examples of the following as you read this selection.

IMAGERY

Language that appeals to the senses.

Three of the most commonly occurring figures of speech are simile, metaphor, and personification.

1. A simile compares two unlike things, using a word such as like, as, than, or resembles. Her heart is as cold as a dungeon.

2. A metaphor compares two different things without using such words as like or as. Life is a carnival.

3. Personification gives human characteristics to objects, animals, or abstractions. The flowers nodded their heads in agreement.

READING SKILLS: IDENTIFYING AN AUTHOR’S PURPOSE

Most writers have a purpose for putting words to paper. Some writers want to create a whole imaginative world of their own. Some want to share information. Some want to convey a message to their readers. Others hope to tap into readers’ feelings or reason and persuade them to accept a way of thinking or to take some particular action. Jonathan Edwards’s vivid, intense sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” was written with a clear purpose—to make the experience of hell so real and frightening that people in his audience would change their lives.

Use the Skill As you read the selection, circle the details that reveal the author’s purpose.

So that, thus, it is that natural men1 are held in the hand of God, over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it, and God is dreadfully provoked. His anger is as great toward them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of His wrath in hell, and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate1 that anger, neither is God in the least bound by any promise to hold them up one moment: The devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flame gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them, and swallow them up, the flames going up in their own hearts is struggling to break out: And they have no interest in any Mediator,2 there are no means within reach that can be any security to them.

In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of; all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliged forbearance3 of an incensed4 God.

The use of this awful subject may be for awakening unconvinced persons in this congregation. This that you have heard is the case of every one of you that are out of Christ. That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell’s wide gaping mouth open, and you

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2. Mediator: Jesus Christ. In general, one who intervenes between two parties in conflict.
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5. appease: to satisfy.
have nothing to stand upon, nor anything to take hold of; there is nothing between you and hell but the air; it is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up. You probably are not sensible of this; you find you are kept out of hell, but do not see the hand of God in it, but look at other things, as the good state of your bodily constitution, your care of your own life, and the means you use for your own preservation. But indeed, these things are nothing; if God should withdraw His hand, they would avail no more to keep you from falling, than the thin air to hold up a person that is suspended in it.

Your wickedness makes you as heavy as lead, and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your health, your care, and your righteousness would not protect you, any more than a spider's web could stop a falling rock.

The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given; and the longer the stream... is nothing but the mere pleasure of God that holds the waters back, that are unwilling to be stopped, and press hard to go forward. If God should only withdraw His hand from the floodgate, it would immediately fly open, and the fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath of God, would rush forth with inconceivable fury, and would come upon you with omnipotent power.

According to Edwards, what would happen if God were to “withdraw His hand” (lines 29–38)?

Simgers would fall into hell.

 Lines 47–51 contain a powerful simile. To what is Edwards comparing God's wrath? Underline the answer. (Review Skill)

VOCABULARY

inconceivable (in-kon-sev-a-a-b-le) adj.: unimaginable, beyond understanding.

omnipotent (om-nip-o-tent) adj.: all-powerful.

INTERPRET

Lines 47–51 contain a powerful simile. To what is Edwards comparing God's wrath?

ANALYZE

What does Edwards believe will happen to people who practice religion but haven't given themselves to God (lines 76–81)?

He believes they won't be saved.
from Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

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Suggested entries appear below.

Author’s Purpose
To scare his congregation into obeying the word of God

Passage 1
“The devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them. . . .” (lines 8–9)

Passage 2
“The use of this awful subject may be for awakening unconverted persons in this congregation.” (lines 17–18)

Passage 3
“There is nothing between you and hell but the air. . . .” (lines 25–26)

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Vocabulary Development

from Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

DIRECTIONS: Write vocabulary words from the Word Box on the correct blanks to complete the paragraph. Not all words will be used.

Vocabulary Word Box

- provoked
- appease
- constitution
- contivance
- inconceivable
- omnipotent
- abhors
- abominable
- ascribed
- induce

Jonathan Edwards's emotional sermons described an all-powerful, omnipotent God. Edwards wanted to (1) ______ omnipotent, God. Edwards wanted to (2) __________ or force, his listeners to obey God. His descriptions of God were not meant to calm or (3) __________ the fears of his audience. Instead, he wanted them to believe that God's anger was (4) __________ by their sins. Many modern readers find Edwards's scare tactics loathsome and (5) __________.

PROFILES AND SUFFIXES

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Prefixes

1. omnipresent
2. arguable
3. attendance
4. converges
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Suffixes

a. "come together"
b. "able to be argued"
c. "state of being present at (an event)"
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e. "everywhere; present at all times"

Before You Read

from The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano

by Olaudah Equiano

LITERARY FOCUS: AUTOBIOGRAPHY

An autobiography is the story of a person's life, written by that person. An autobiography usually reveals the writer's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. Writers of autobiographies also tell how particular experiences shaped their lives, providing details that only a person with firsthand experience would know. This selection by Olaudah Equiano has unique historical value because it was one of the first autobiographies written by a former slave.

Interesting Lives

Think for a moment about autobiographies you've read. Write the author or subject of the autobiography in the left-hand column of the chart below. Then, in the right-hand column, provide one or two details you learned about each person.

Reading Skills: Making Inferences About an Author's Beliefs

In some pieces of literature, the writer may directly state a personal belief; for example, "I never believed communism was the answer." Sometimes, however, writers only hint at their beliefs, leaving us to infer or make an educated guess, about what they are. In this autobiography, Olaudah Equiano does both. He directly states some of his beliefs and hints at others.

Use the Skill

As you read the selection, use the details in the text to make inferences about Equiano's beliefs. To make an inference, combine what you already know with clues given in a text. Then, use this information to make a good guess about what the author really thinks or feels about a subject.
**Figures of Speech**

A *figure of speech* is a word or phrase that describes one thing in terms of another and that is not meant to be taken literally.

DIRECTIONS: The chart below describes the most common figures of speech. Fill in the chart with examples from the selection. (Not all selections will include all types of figures of speech.)

<table>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td><strong>Metaphor</strong>: a comparison</td>
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<td>between two unlike things in which one thing is said to be another thing—for example: <em>She was a gazelle leaping across the stage.</em></td>
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<td><strong>Personification</strong>: a</td>
<td></td>
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<td>figure of speech in which an object or animal is given human feelings or thoughts—for example: <em>The stage refused all comfort to the dancers.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Symbol</strong>: a person, place, thing, or event that has meaning in itself and that also stands for something more than itself—for example: <em>A dove is a symbol of peace.</em></td>
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