In May Swenson’s poem “Southbound on the Freeway,” the author uses a shift to make the reader question our relationship with technology. In the first 23 lines of the poem, she describes a scene where an alien hovers above a busy freeway and wonders about the beings of this strange planet. At line 23, the poem shifts from description to a question: “Those soft shapes, / shadowy inside / the hard bodies—are they / their guts or their brain?” (23-26). This shift implies that the alien is asking the question, the author is also drawing the readers attention to this question and wants us to think about it as well. By shifting to this question, Swenson is prompting the reader to think about modern technology, and specifically cars the kind of relationship we have with them. By asking whether we (the soft shapes) are the brains or the guts of the cars (the hard bodies), Swenson is directing us to the theme that technology is such a dominant part of our lives that it is now hard to tell who is in control: us or the machines.
Example of Figurative Language Analysis

Mr. Gardner

English 9-6

15 January 2013

To show his frustration about how students struggle with poetry, Billy Collins uses an implied metaphor in his poem “Introduction to Poetry.” Throughout the poem, Collins describes the way that he would like his students to interact with poetry. He wants them to explore it like a maze (lines 5-6), examine it from different perspective (lines 1-2) and be persistent to find the “light switch” that will make it all make sense (lines 7-8). However, at the end of the poem describes what his students actually do. He says that all the students want to do is “tie the poem to a chair with rope / and torture a confession out of it” (13-14). This is an implied metaphor comparing a poem to a hostage or a criminal who is withholding information and must be beaten or tortured until is “confesses.” In the case of the poem what it would confess is “what it really means” (16). By comparing the poem to a hostage or criminal, Collins is hinting at the way students think about and treat a poem. People don’t think highly of criminals. Criminals are seen as threatening and dangerous—things that deserve no respect and ought to just tell the truth plainly and quickly. Through this comparison between a poem and criminal, Collins is suggesting that students tend to have a negative attitude about poetry and do not want to put in the time and respect to figure out the answer. Like a criminal confessing to a crime, the students want the poem to just give an easy, obvious answer.
Example of Shift/Theme Analysis

Mr. Gardner

English 9-6

15 January 2013

Rhina Espillat’s poem “Bilingual/Bilingue” uses a very subtle shift to reveal a point about what it is like to move from one culture to another. Over the course of the poem, Espillat describes how she and her father have differing believes about being bilingual. It is implied that the family has moved to America from a Spanish-speaking country, and while the daughter is learning English and thriving, this pains the father dearly. The father is not learning English, and he wants to keep his world separate: “English outside this door, Spanish inside,” he tells his daughter (7). The poem also describes how the father fears that by learning English, the daughter will be losing touch with her family’s heritage. Throughout the poem, the speaker uses parenthesis to offer Spanish translations for some of the words she uses in her verses, such as when she poses the question “Who can divide / the world, the word (mundo y palabra) from / any child?” (8-10). The shift in this poem is a shift in form that happens in the last two lines of the poem. Throughout the first 16 lines, the Spanish and the English were always separated. In the end, they are united: “he stood outside mis versos, half in fear / of words he loved but wantd not to hear” (17-18). This is the only line where the Spanish (“mis versos”) is fluidly written right in with the English. By doing this, the author is revealing her point: even though her father is worried that she will keep her two cultures separated, in actuality the two cultures are seamlessly blended together. With this shift, the author is hinting at the theme that when children experience a different culture from their parents, the family’s heritage and identity is not abandoned, it is instead integrated into the new identity the child develops.
The poem “Combing” by Gladys Cardiff closes with a simple implied metaphor that helps to show the reader how different generations can be connected. The poem is divided into three stanzas that each describe how one woman combs or braids the hair of another woman in her family. In the first stanza, it is the author herself combing her own daughter’s curly red hair. The second stanza describes the author thinking back to her mother folding her hair in to “braids drawn up / tight as piano wires and singing” (12-13). Finally, in the third stanza, the author recalls how her mother would comb her great-grandmother’s hair while the older woman rocked in an old oak chair. At the end of the poem, a single short stanza unites these three thoughts together and closes with the implied metaphor “Preparing hair. Something / women do for each other, / plaiting the generations” (27-29). In this implied metaphor, Cardiff uses the verb “plaiting” to describe what is happening to generations of women. However, “plaiting” is something that is done to hair when it is braided. By comparing generations and hair, she is revealing how even individuals (her daughter, her mother, her great grandmother and herself) can be bound tightly to one another just as individual strands of hair can be tied together. The metaphor helps to reveal how the act of braiding individual hairs into one strong strand is what braids the individuals into a shared family line.
“Those Winter Sundays” by Robert Hayden tells of a young man’s realization of an important life lesson. Hayden begins by describing the hard work his father would put in, laboring through the week and also getting up early on Sundays to take care of the family. Looking back, the author also recalls how “No one ever thanked him” (5) and how the author himself could recall “speaking indifferently to him, / who had driven out the cold / and polished my good shoes as well” (10-12). Right after these memories where the author is thinking back to the actions his father took, the poem shifts to a reflective question that finally reveals the depth of the author’s regret and shame about the way he treated his father. In lines 13 and 14, the author asks “What did I know, what did I know / of love’s austere and lonely offices?” By shifting to this question, the author is shifting from describing his own actions to now realizing that his actions were ungrateful. In this question, he is realizing that these actions his father was taking were actually his father showing love by taking care of the family and house. At the time, the author didn’t realize that this was actually love, not strictness or austerity. This shift points out the theme that many people experience in life: there is more than one way that love can be shown and it may not always look like love from an outsider’s perspective.
In Emily Dickinson’s short poem “Success is Counted Sweetest—,” a shift takes place early in the poem that helps draw the reader’s attention to the main theme. Dickinson begins her poem with two short rhyming sentences that point out that success is only really appreciated by people who do not experience success often. While this lays out the theme clearly, she shifts to a single long sentence that covers two whole stanzas in order to convey her point with passion:

“Not one of all the purple Host / Who took the Flag today / Can tell the definition / So clear of Victory / As he defeated—dying— / On whose forbidden ear / The distant strains of triumph / Burst agonized and clear!” (5-12). By shifting from two short sentences to one long, complex and emphatic sentence, the power of Dickinson’s point is driven home. The first two short sentences seem sweet and kind of sing-songy with their rhyme and rhythm, and therefore make the point seem trivial or simple. However, by going on a poetic rant of sorts—and even using war imagery—the author reinforces the theme that defeat is the only way to truly appreciate victory.
Example of Figurative Language Analysis

Mr. Gardner

English 9-6

15 January 2013

Dreams that have been delayed or lost make up the subject of Langston Hughes’s poem “Harlem,” and the author uses similes and a single implied metaphor to describe the affect that a delayed dream can have on a person. The majority of the poem is comprised by a series of similes posed as questions to try to understand what happens when the achievement of a dream is delayed. By using a simile to compare a dream to a raisin in line 3, Hughes wonders whether a dream might simply change into something different and not as appealing. In the next line, he compares a dream to a “festering sore” in a simile that questions whether a delayed dream might cause physical pain and illness in someone’s life (4). Another simile in line 6 compares a dream to rotten meat, implying that the dream becomes unusable and might inspire a feeling of disgust. Later, Hughes uses a simile to wonder whether a dream “just sags / like a heavy load” (9-10). Here, he implies that the emotional weight of a lost dream might weigh a person down and make it hard to move forward in life. All of these similes imply the potential affects a lost dream might have on a person, but at the end Hughes shifts to an implied metaphor comparing a deferred dream to a bomb: “Or does it explode?” (11). By comparing a dream to a bomb, Hughes implies that the lost dream not only is ruined and destroyed, but that it does so violently. Perhaps Hughes is implying that when people’s dreams are out of reach, this makes the person explode with anger or violence themselves.