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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are interpretive keys to the text. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols that present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to reference (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal or figurative meaning attached to the object – above and beyond face value. Symbols are often found in the novel’s title, at the beginning and end of the novel, within a profound action, or captured by the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols of the novel. By decoding symbols, any reader can reveal a new interpretation of the novel.

Hemingway employs symbols deliberately and selectively. We can find an explanation in Henry’s comment that “abstract words...were obscene beside the concrete names of villages...” (p. 185). Idealized heroic figures, symbols of victory or defeat, rarely appear in this story. As implied in Henry’s quote, in the face of this war, the symbols “were obscene.”

Still the changing seasons may just reflect Henry’s inner development, his developing relationship with Miss Barkley, and the progress of the war. The novel begins in harvest time, when the two lovers meet. They later enjoy a blissful summer in Milan. But the book’s second half is filled with uncertainty and death, accompanied by a deluge of rain and snow during the winter of 1917-18. Catherine says, “I’m afraid of the rain because sometimes I see me dead in it” (p. 126).

Discussion Activities

Rinaldi says, “I am the snake. I am the snake of reason.” Henry responds, “You’re getting it mixed. The apple was reason” (p. 170). Rinaldi has “no sacred subjects” and notes that he has no married friends, presumably because he can seduce any woman through reason. Finally he admits, “We are born with all we have and we never learn. We never get anything new. We all start complete” (p. 171). These biblical symbols draw us back into questions of religion. Could Rinaldi provide a symbol of the atheist or a world without religion? Discuss with the class.

Writing Exercise

Using the Discussion Activity, have students write a brief essay on either (1) how Rinaldi might symbolize a particular point of view, or (2) how Hemingway portrays religion in the novel. Please cite references in the text to support your argument.

Homework

Have students read Chapters XXVIII-XXXII (pp. 194-233). How might Henry’s character (and challenges) reflect the era? Is Henry himself a symbol of the “Lost Generation?” In what way might he fail to represent the Lost Generation?