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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Discussion Activities

Discuss the valley of ashes in Chapter 2. Keeping in mind the historical and cultural contexts of the novel, what might the valley symbolize? Why might Fitzgerald want to underscore an important theme, such as the pursuit of wealth, so early in the story? What do we learn about Nick from his description?

Discuss some of the other potent symbols in the story. How are these interpretive keys to the novel's meaning? How might the "two young women ... buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon" (p. 8) symbolize the women of this generation?

Gatsby looks for Daisy in the green light at the end of her dock. Does anyone in the story truly know Daisy? Does the light become a symbol for something else?

Writing Exercise

Nick describes that Gatsby had created an illusion of "colossal vitality." Write three paragraphs from Nick's point of view considering what Daisy has come to represent. Why has Gatsby created such a "colossal" illusion? How does Nick feel about the elevation of Daisy to almost epic status?

Homework

Read Chapter 6 (pp. 97–111). At the end of Chapter 5, Nick says, "It was the hour of a profound human change, and excitement was generating on the air" (p. 95). What happens in Chapter 6 to fulfill Nick's prediction?