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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are interpretive keys to the text. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to stand for a more abstract concept. A figurative meaning is attached to the object above and beyond face value. Symbols may be of two types: universal symbols that embody recognizable meanings wherever used, or symbols specific to a particular story. 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, symbols can reveal the author's intentions or can reveal a new interpretation of the novel.

An author does not always include symbols intentionally. Sometimes, they develop organically as part of the writing process. In a 1998 interview with *Humanities* magazine, Gaines said, "Students come up now and ask me, 'Did you know you put those symbols in there?' You never think of symbols." Gaines does not intentionally insert symbols into his writing; they evolve as part of the creative process.

Discussion Activities

There is a great deal of religious symbolism in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Like Gaines, many Southern writers such as Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Katharine Anne Porter, and Zora Neale Hurston use religious symbolism to reflect the moral ideals of a story's characters or to highlight the conflict between characters whose religious views differ. Ask your students to consider the way religion permeates the society in which Grant lives and the way it influences the actions of Vivian, Grant, Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Reverend Ambrose.

Grant's classroom is in a church. How is this appropriate for his role in the black community? Does this contribute to Grant's conflict with the Reverend? Does Tante Lou expect more out of Grant as a teacher than helping children learn to read and write? If so, what?

Writing Exercise

Choose a character from the novel whose name might serve a symbolic function. Explain how the name as a symbol relates to the character. Does the person reflect or contradict the values of his or her namesake? Why might Gaines have chosen to depict the character in this way?

Homework

Copy and distribute Handout Three. Ask students to read the handout and Chapters 22-24 (pp. 168-194). Ask them to play close attention to the scene in Chapter 24 when Grant describes a hero.