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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter was published in 1940, just as America emerged from the Great Depression, the worst economic collapse in the country's history. During the 1930s, radio became an essential part of the country's daily life. Through regional and national programming, the public gained access to free news, music, and other entertainment.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Photocopy and distribute Handout One. Explore the music of Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra. Clips of many performances are available on the Internet.

Like many American households in the late 1930s, Mick Kelly's family in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* does not own a radio. Mick eavesdrops at her neighbors' windows during the warm Southern evenings, hoping to hear her favorite shows:

She learned a lot about music during these free nights in the summer-time. When she walked out in the rich parts of town every house had a radio. All the windows were open and she could hear the music very marvelous. After a while she knew which houses tuned in for the programs she wanted to hear.
(p. 102)

Ask your class to imagine a world without radio, television, or the Internet. Have them write three paragraphs describing the way radio has changed our world. Encourage them to consider the social, political, and cultural effects, as well as the way radio might have affected someone in the 1930s, like Mick, who had never enjoyed easy access to music, news, and entertainment.



Homework

Have students read Part One, Chapters 4–5 (pp. 53–90). In these chapters, we are introduced to two additional main characters, Jake Blount and Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland. In many ways, Copeland and Blount are parallel characters. Ask your students to think about ways in which their worldviews and philosophies of life are similar, and how they differ.