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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.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is structured as if it were a fugue, a composition in which themes are stated by each voice in succession, building to a unified whole. From Mick’s ambition to become a professional musician, to Singer’s purchase of a radio, to the soulful wail of Willie’s harmonica, musical symbols inform the reader’s understanding of the characters and help set the overall tone of the novel. They represent characters’ feelings, motives, and ambitions.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following references to examine symbols. Students can discuss their responses in groups or craft written responses.

Mick’s violin: (Part I, Chapter 3)

Mick tries unsuccessfully to build a violin out of a broken ukulele. “It seemed to her as she thought back over the last month that she had never really believed in her mind that the violin would work. But in her heart she had kept making herself believe. And even now it was hard not to believe a little” (pp. 46-47). Discuss how the violin symbolizes Mick’s musical aspirations. How might the thwarted attempt at building the violin foreshadow Mick’s future?

Music and the radio:

Mick’s fascination with music mirrors her determination to venture beyond small-town life toward a larger world. When Singer buys a radio for his room, Mick asks if she can “come in and listen sometimes” while he is at work. How is the radio a symbol for Mick? How is it a symbol for Singer? Why would Singer buy a radio he cannot hear? What does this say about his desire to connect with the people who visit his room?

Willie’s harmonica:

Dr. Copeland’s son, Willie, always carries a harmonica. McCullers uses Willie’s “sad and empty” music to symbolize Dr. Copeland’s mood as he listens to the footsteps of his children walking away (p. 90). After Willie is hurt, does his music come to have additional meaning? What purpose does it serve?



Homework

Have students read Part Two, Chapters 8-10 (pp. 223-263).