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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways. Explore the statements *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* makes about the following:

- **Isolation:** “Each evening the mute walked alone for hours in the street.... In his face there came to be a brooding peace that is seen most often in the faces of the very sorrowful or the very wise. But still he wandered through the streets of the town, always silent and alone” (pp. 12–13).
 1. What is McCullers saying about loneliness? Is there something noble in keeping oneself apart? Why or why not?
 2. John Singer’s disability creates a communication barrier. How are the other characters separated from society? Are these things within their control?
- **Racism:** Dr. Copeland tells a group of students, “Some of you young people here this morning may feel the need to be teachers or nurses or leaders of your race. But most of you will be denied. You will have to sell yourselves for a useless purpose in order to keep alive.... The time will come when the riches in us will not be held in scorn and contempt” (pp. 193–195).
 1. What does Dr. Copeland blame for the racist society in which he lives? Does he accept any responsibility?
 2. What values does Dr. Copeland believe will combat discrimination? What does he see as the black community’s “greatest need?”
- **Communication:** When Portia tells her father about the amputation of Willie’s legs, Dr. Copeland says, “I am deaf. I cannot understand” (p. 254).
 1. Why does he react in this way? What is McCullers illustrating by Dr. Copeland’s inability to accept what he has heard?
 2. Examine other examples of situations in which the novel’s characters cannot communicate effectively. Are the barriers to effective communication self-imposed, or are they influenced solely by society? Why?



Homework

Have students finish reading the novel. Ask them to begin their essays, using the “Essay Topics” section at the end of this guide. Outlines are due at the next class.