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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 most important symbol in *The Maltese Falcon* is the falcon itself, a statuette once given by the Knights of Rhodes to King Charles V of Spain. Gutman, Cairo, and Brigid O’Shaughnessy selfishly pursue their own interests as they try to obtain the bird. Driven by greed, they become mired in the quest for fortune without considering the cost. Spade becomes embroiled in the pursuit after his partner, Miles Archer, is murdered.

Discussion Activities

Read Handout Three. Ask your students to think of the novel as an allegory. How do the novel’s characters, objects, and events symbolize concepts of moral or social significance? Do their names provide any clues? Divide the class into four groups. Assign each group a character: Sam Spade, Casper Gutman, Joel Cairo, or Brigid O’Shaughnessy. If *The Maltese Falcon* is read as an allegory, what abstract ideas might each of these characters personify?

Writing Exercise

Ask your students to think about the qualities of a real falcon. Does the character they were assigned today share any of these characteristics? If so, what are they? Does the falcon represent different things to different characters?

Have students support their answers with passages from the text.

Homework

Have students read Chapters 15-17 (pp. 140-171). Ask the students to pay close attention to the phone call Effie receives from Brigid and the scene with Rhea Gutman. Do they feel Brigid can be trusted? Why or why not?