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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 Exercise



Ask students to name five themes within the novel. Here are some examples:

Race

At what points do different characters make remarks about race? At what points do other characters' actions speak louder than their words? Does the novel make a final statement about how race should affect our treatment of others? Does Dolphus Raymond provide us a clue to this question?

Justice

Return to Sandra Day O'Connor's statement that the "idea of justice pervades everything" in the novel. What evidence supports or refutes O'Connor's view? If Lee is using the novel to provide us with a definition of justice for the twentieth century, what is her definition? Remember, she published the novel in 1960, during the Civil Rights era.

Literacy/Illiteracy

Explore Jem's statement about literacy. Review the novel, noting occasions where reading plays an important role. How is the novel developing an argument about the value of reading? What is more important: the activity of reading or the content within the text?

Gender

A tomboy, Scout becomes more feminine as the novel closes. How does Scout battle with her gender role? Does she give a new definition of femininity? How does this relate to the rest of the story? In what ways do Jem and Dill face the same coming-of-age dilemma? Finally, does this reflect the 1930s, 1960s, or both?



Homework

Read Chapters 28–31 (pp. 254–281). Begin essays, using the essay topics at the end of this guide. Outlines are due next class.