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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.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



A symbol is a visible object or action that suggests additional meanings. Use this class period to analyze three major symbols in *My Ántonia*: the snake, the crossroads, and the plough.

The Snake (Book One, Chapter 7)

After Jim kills the snake in Book One, he becomes boastful and then considers himself “a big fellow.” Why does Jim compare this snake to “the ancient, eldest Evil.” To what evil does he refer? Is Jim right to be so proud? The allusion to the Garden of Eden extends this symbol even deeper.

The Crossroads (Book One, Chapter 16)

Mr. Shimerda could not have a Catholic funeral or burial since he killed himself without—presumably—repenting. European folklore taught that the crossroads were the haunts of demons, ghosts, or witches—the only appropriate place for murderers to be buried. Why does Cather choose “Jesus, Lover of my Soul” as the hymn sung at his burial? Why does Jim recollect “in all that country it was the spot most dear to me”?

The Plough (Book Two, Chapter 14)

One of Cather’s most famous symbols, the plough “stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.” How does this image correspond to the novel’s epigraph? What does this ordinary farm object have to do with Jim’s and Ántonia’s diminishing childhood?



Homework

Read *My Ántonia*, Book Three, Chapters 1-4 (pp. 191-218). In light of the novel’s title, why is Ántonia absent from Book Three?