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Lesson 6

FOCUS: Symbols

Complex images do more than simply map the inner landscape, they become symbols. As a form of figurative language, symbols can maintain our fascination by hinting beyond the literal, drawing us back to explore what the author may mean.

Use this class period to mark the development of three major symbols in the novel: the pear tree, the street lamp, and the mule.



Discussion Activities

Divide your class into groups. Ask them to outline the literal elements of the pear tree or street lamp before they discuss possible symbolic meanings. Have them present their ideas to the class.

The Pear Tree

Listen again to the first three minutes of Track 2 of The Big Read CD as Ruby Dee reads the “pear tree” passage from Chapter 2. Do you agree with Carla Kaplan’s and Azar Nafisi’s interpretation of this symbol? Janie has now journeyed through two unsatisfying marriages; notice when she does (or does not) remember the pear tree. For what is she searching? Do you think she will find it?

The Street Lamp

What does the street lamp in Chapter 5 communicate about the ideals of the Eatonville townspeople? Does it exemplify a control over nature that empowers the community? Why does Mrs. Bogle sing “Jesus, the light of the world,” when the lamp is lit? What does Joe mean when he says: “And when Ah touch de match tuh dat lamp-wick let de light penetrate inside of yuh, and let it shine, let it shine, let it shine”?



Writing Exercise

The Mule

In Chapter 6, Bonner’s yellow mule stimulates the Eatonville men to “mule-talk.” How does this deepen the meaning of the mule, both literally and symbolically? How does Hurston capture the musical, imaginative talk of the townspeople in this scene? This talk also reflects “playing the dozens.” If you have time, students can research the history and evolution of “playing the dozens.”



Homework

Read Chapters 10-12 (pp. 94-115). What are the most significant changes in Janie after she meets Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods?