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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 book’s title, within a profound action, or captured by the name or personality of a character. The life of a book is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols of the story.

Discussion Activities

In the book’s opening story, Rosa swaddles her infant daughter Magda in a shawl to protect her and keep her warm. Throughout the rest of the book, the shawl represents different things to different characters. Ask your students to consider what the shawl meant to Magda, an infant barely clinging to life in an extermination camp. What did the shawl represent to fourteen-year-old Stella? To Rosa, a young mother? Why do your students think Rosa kept the shawl for more than thirty years? Over the years, did the shawl begin to represent something different to Rosa? If so, what? As an adult, how does Stella feel about the shawl? Are her feelings justifiable? Why or why not?

After her trip to the laundromat, Rosa notices a pair of her underwear is missing. Why is Rosa so upset by the loss? Ozick writes, “Because of the missing underwear, she had no dignity before him. She considered Persky’s life: how trivial it must always have been: buttons, himself no more significant than a button. It was plain he took her to be another button like himself, battered and now out of fashion[. . .]” (p. 55). Ask your students to consider the reasons why losing such an intimate item might be especially upsetting to Rosa. Why was it particularly humiliating for Rosa to think Persky took them?

Writing Exercise

On the day Rosa and Persky meet, she is ashamed when Persky, a retired button manufacturer, notices her dress is missing a button. Later, when he visits her apartment and offers to take her to the library, Rosa is touched. “A thread of gratitude pulled in her throat. He almost understood what she was: no ordinary button” (p. 57). Ask your students to read that scene again and then write a two-page essay on what buttons symbolize to Rosa. How are the actual image and its symbolic value appropriate considering Rosa’s background and history? Have your students support their ideas with passages from the text.

Homework

Ask your students to make a list of Rosa strengths and weaknesses. They should support each trait with a passage from the text.