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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Book

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



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the book in specific ways. Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements *The Shawl* makes about the following themes and the themes your students identify during their reading of the book:

Memory/History

Rosa writes to Magda, “When I had my store, I used to ‘meet the public,’ and I wanted to tell everybody—not only our story, but other stories as well. Nobody knew anything. This amazed me, that nobody remembered what happened only a little while ago” (p. 66). Why does Rosa feel compelled to tell her story to people who do not want to hear it? What does she hope to accomplish? Do people have a responsibility to study history? Why or why not?

Dignity

Rosa often feels ashamed. Discuss instances that cause Rosa embarrassment. Why do these events cause such profound pain? Refer again to the passage on pages 53–61. What does Rosa mean when she says she is “no ordinary button”? How might it have been important *not* to be ordinary while trying to survive in a death camp? Does the desire to be something special influence Rosa in positive ways or negative ones? Support your answers with references to the text.

Life

Rosa tells Persky that people have three lives: “the life before, the life during, and the life after” (p. 58). Discuss Rosa's three lives. Which is the most important to her? Does Rosa have the power to change “the life after?” Why or why not?



Homework

Ask students to begin their essays using the Essay Topics in this guide. Outlines are due the next class period.