

9

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



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways. Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements *Old School* makes about the following themes:

The Importance of Literature

From the discussion of William Faulkner's "Barn Burning" in the opening chapter through the previously cited exploration of Hemingway's short fiction and Mr. Ramsey's observations on the need for stories, the novel makes a sustained, passionate defense of the significance of fiction to our lives. What claims are made for fiction beyond mere distraction or amusement?

Honesty and Deception

Poised right on the brink, I still held back, perhaps sensing that the moment it started, once I allowed myself the comfort of his interest, I wouldn't be able to stop; that the relief of confessing this paralysis might betray me into other confessions. In some murky way I recognized my own impatience to tear off the mask, and it spooked me (p. 118).

Why does the narrator hide the truth about himself? Why does he want to confess? Which of these impulses does the novel affirm?

Tolerance and Acceptance

For years Arch had traced this vision of the evil done through intolerance of the flawed and ambiguous, but he had not taken the lesson to heart. He had given up the good in his life because a fault ran through it. He was no better than Aylmer, murdering his beautiful wife to rid her of a birthmark (p. 193).

What is the lesson here, and why does it need to be taken to heart?



Homework

Ask students to begin their essays, using the essay topics in this guide. Outlines are due during the next class period.