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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Harper Lee uses images and characters to stand for something above and beyond what they represent at first reading. These symbols have special importance — they are interpretive keys to the text.

As a form of figurative language, symbols can maintain our fascination by hinting beyond the literal, drawing us into the story, and asking us to explore the author's intentions. Frequently, study of the specific characteristics of the symbol will shed light on the entire story. For example, Atticus is named for a leader from ancient Greece. Independent research on the original Atticus will open doors to a deeper understanding of Lee's Atticus.

The very names of Maycomb's residents symbolize something about their nature. Mr. Underwood confines himself to a dark office, and Robert E. Lee Ewell may be the antithesis of his Civil War namesake.

Discussion Activities

The only time Atticus describes “sin” to his children, he advises Scout and Jem to avoid shooting mockingbirds. Why does the mockingbird (p. 90) become a central symbol of the novel? How does this warning relate to the other events of the story? How does exploration of the mockingbird shed light on other elements of the story?

To further explore this topic, have students do extra research on mockingbirds. Do mockingbirds have other natural features that relate to the story?

Writing Exercise

In Chapter 15, the drama mounts as Atticus is surrounded by a group of men. How does Scout defuse the potentially violent confrontation? Would you have expected this? Was it convincing that Scout could defuse such tension? Why or why not?

Choose a character whose name serves a symbolic function. Explain how the name as a symbol relates to the real person. Does the person reflect his or her namesake or contradict his or her namesake? Why has Lee depicted them this way?

Homework

Read Chapters 16-18 (pp. 155-189). Read Handout Three. In the first 18 chapters, how have Jem, Scout, and Dill changed? Are these profound changes or just a result of growing up?