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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a work of fiction is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the book.

Discussion Activities

There is a great deal of symbolism in *The Things They Carried*. Readers are told in the title story that Henry Dobbins carries his girlfriend's nylons wrapped around his neck. In "Stockings," O'Brien tells the story of how the stockings became a symbol of comfort and protection.

Ask your class to identify some of the many other symbols in the book (i.e., Kiowa's moccasins and feathered hatchet, Mary Anne's tongue necklace, Lieutenant Cross's pebble, the young Vietnamese soldier, Kathleen, Linda, the thumb Norman Bowker carried in Vietnam, and his desire for the Silver Star Medal.) How does the symbolic value of items help the reader better understand the personality of the character? If the character is a symbol, what does that person represent?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short story with a symbol that is central to the plot. Encourage them to use a symbol that does not already have strong meaning attached to it.

Homework

Read "Speaking of Courage" and "Notes." Ask students to review the stories they have read so far and write a short character analysis of Norman Bowker.