

Lesson plan 3: Symbols

Lesson Objective:

Students will know the definition of “symbol.” Students will recognize that listing characteristics of a symbol is a process helpful to understanding the meaning of that symbol (or metaphor). Students will connect their experiences to the novel in order to have a discussion about the meaning of this symbol in the novel.

Anticipatory Set (10 minutes):

I will pair students together and ask them to discuss and write down their responses to the following questions: (1) What do mice, rabbits and puppies have in common? (2) What references are made to mice or rabbits or dogs in the title and chapter 1 of the novel? Please write down the page numbers where you see either of these mentioned in the novel. (3) What is a symbol?

Processing (35-40 minutes):

Following this, I will break the students out of pairs and gather the class together into a whole group discussion. Before we begin to work on the meat of the lesson, I will take a few minutes to make sure all the students have read chapter 1 by asking a few plot-oriented, comprehension-level questions (e.g. Who are the two main characters? What is their relationship? Where are they? Where are they going? What topic dominates their conversation?)

We will begin with answers to question 3, and a precise definition of “symbol” will go on the board for future reference. Then we will, turn to question 1 and a list of some common characteristics of mice, rabbits and puppies will go on the board. I will tell the students that these three taken together are an important and running symbol in Steinbeck’s novel. I will tell the students that interpreting this symbol in a variety of ways will be critical to our understanding of the central themes and conflicts of this story.

The following are questions that may help guide this discussion: (1) What does Lennie do with the mice? (2) What does this tell us about Lennie? (3) Are these animals particularly fragile or vulnerable? How does this relate to what Robert Burns (and Steinbeck) are saying about men? (4) How are mice used in scientific laboratories? Is this similar to the way George relates to Lennie? (5) How do rabbits figure into George and Lennie’s dream for the future? Who will tend the rabbits? Why do we think this is important to Lennie? (6) Who in the class has owned a puppy or rabbit? Describe that experience (7) What two animals is Lennie likened to in Chapter 1? (Ans: a dog and bear) Are these similar or opposing metaphors?

Synthesis (10 minutes):

As the discussion wraps up, I will remind the students that this is a recurring symbol, and that the conclusions generated from this discussion will be critical to our continuing analysis of the novel. In other words, Steinbeck will continue to make references to this symbol, and our understanding of this symbol will change as we read more and more. Further, our understanding of the major themes of the novel will be greatly enhanced by bearing in mind how this symbol functions throughout the story.

Finally, I will give the students index cards to write down responses that will serve as “exit slips” from the class.

- (1) Of all the common characteristics of mice, rabbits and puppies, list the three you believe are the most important ones for Steinbeck. Why do you believe these three are the most important?
- (2) Complete the following: By using this symbol, Steinbeck is conveying this important message: People are _____ because _____.