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Lesson 14

Symbol Beneath the Surface in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own”

Objectives

- To recognize the value of symbols in short stories
- To analyze O'Connor's use of symbolism

Notes to the Teacher

In literature as in life, a symbol is something that has meaning beyond itself. Objects, actions, and characters may be symbolic. Conventional symbols include the American flag to represent freedom and the rose to represent love; these are easily recognizable. However, a problem can arise when symbols are not conventional. In “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” Flannery O'Connor uses an everyday object, the automobile as a symbol.

Procedure

1. Have students complete **Handout 19**. Then conduct a discussion based on their responses. Lead students to see that cars often symbolize freedom, responsibility, social status, personal philosophy of life, attitudes toward power, and other abstract qualities.
2. Point out that the car in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” is very important to Mr. Shiftlet. Ask students to indicate how his attitude is like and unlike their own. Lead them to see that a car would greatly increase his mobility. He is in no position to be choosy.
3. Have students complete **Handout 20**.
Suggested Responses:
 1. A '28 or '29 Ford; rusty; painted dark green with a yellow stripe; slow moving
 2. When Mr. Shiftlet first comes to the house, he sees the back of it in a shed.

3. *He casually asks if the women use the car, and while inquiring he keeps eyeing it. He tells the old woman he will get the auto to run. She realizes how important the automobile is to him and she makes a deal. Shiftlet married Lucynell and then left her, but he keeps the car.*
4. *Freedom, power, independence, mobility*
5. *This familiar expression is often associated with driving.*
6. *A car stands for a person's desires.*

