Symbolism in “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons”

Concept: Symbolism
Primary Subject Area: English
Secondary Subject Areas: n/a
Common Core Standards Addressed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades 9-10</th>
<th>Grades 11-12</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key Ideas and Details</td>
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<td>o Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of text.</td>
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Overview:
This class will discuss symbolism in Edward P. Jones’ “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons.”

Objectives:
Students will be able to:
• Identify symbols and their purpose in the novel
• Analyze the added meaning inferred by symbolism

Warm-Up Activity:
• Ask students to define symbolism. Why do authors use symbolism? What does the literary device add to stories?
  o Symbolism: the use of an object or action to represent or suggest something else; the use of an object to convey a meaning
• Ask students to brainstorm symbols from “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons.” List possible symbols on the board.
• Have students explore the symbol of pigeons throughout the story. Ask students to find textual references in the story about the pigeons.

Short Lecture & Partner Activities:
Jones employs symbolism in his story “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons.” The pigeons, and their eventual demise, are symbolic of Robert Morgan’s attempts to protect his only daughter, Betsy Ann, from the realities of life.
• Refer to the list of possible symbols collected earlier on the board. Ask students to keep these ideas in mind as they complete the discussion questions outlining symbolism in the story.
• After students complete the worksheet, go over the answers as a class.

The death of pigeons represents Betsy Ann’s innocence or youth. The Rat represents the forlorn state of their neighborhood, or more broadly, social forces that defeat his efforts to protect his daughter from life’s painful realities.
• Betsy receives pigeons.
• Robert Morgan wants to protect her from hurt; checks on them every morning to prevent her from finding one dead.
• Incident in Peoples (stealing) is first sign that his daughter is subject to outside negative social forces and these forces have the potential to change her—as a result he watches her more closely, further restricts her freedom
• Rat attacks pigeons; Robert Morgan is forced to kill the wounded.
• Ultimately, coming-of-age story for Betsy Ann. He father does not succeed in protecting her from hurt.
## Discussion Wrap-Up:

After students complete the worksheet, gather the class for discussion. Possible discussion questions include:

- How does symbolism enhance the story “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons?” Does symbolism give added meaning to specific plot points? If so, what plot points?
- Was it difficult to infer the meaning of Jones’ symbols? Did your group have different interpretations of the symbols? Specifically focus on student’s interpretation of the pigeons; attention on this symbol can guide a discussion about greater symbolism of the story.

## Writing Activities/Evaluations:

### Analytical:

One theme reflected in the symbolism of the novel is loss. In 8-10 sentences, identify varying forms of loss throughout the story. Explain how different types of loss affect the actions of the characters. Does loss play a role in the symbolism of the story?

### Creative:

“The Girl Who Raised Pigeons” is a coming of age story about a young girl living in Washington D.C. Write a 10-12 sentence paragraph about an event in your life led to personal growth.
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- Who does Betsy Ann live with? What does the narrator reveal happened to Betsy Ann’s mother?

- Who gives Betsy Ann the pigeons in the story? What does the narrator reveal about this character? Why is he deemed odd?

- Why does Robert Morgan check on the pigeons every morning before Betsy Ann awakes? Does Betsy Ann know her father checks on the pigeons? Why does she think he does this?

- What happens to Myrtle Street throughout the story? What changes does the neighborhood undergo throughout the course of the plot?

- How does Robert Morgan’s and Betsy Ann’s relationship change after she is caught stealing from Peoples? How does this reiterate previous character traits about Robert Morgan?

- What do Betsy Ann’s pigeons represent in the story? How is the death of her pigeons symbolic of her relationship with her father?

- How do the deaths of Betsy Ann’s pigeons change her?
## Symbolism in “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons”

**Book:** Lost in the City  
**Author:** Edward P. Jones  
**Grade Level:** 9-12  
**Lesson Type:** Symbolism

### Key Vocabulary

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<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Iridescent</td>
<td>displaying a spectrum of colors that shimmer and change due to interference and scattering as the observer's position changes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compulsion</td>
<td>An inner drive that forces a person to perform actions even against his or her will</td>
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<tr>
<td>Despoiled</td>
<td>Stripped or deprived by force</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yearling</td>
<td>An animal between one and two years old</td>
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<tr>
<td>Submissive</td>
<td>Tending towards humility, servility, or passivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resignation</td>
<td>A submissive unresisting attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romped</td>
<td>Played or ran about wildly and joyfully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viscera</td>
<td>Intestines, guts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismantled</td>
<td>Took apart</td>
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• “Her father would say years later that she had dreamed that part of it, that she had never gone out throughout the kitchen window at two or three in the morning to visit the birds. By that time in his life he would have so many notions about himself set in concrete. And having always believed that he slept lightly, he would not want to think that a girl of nine or ten would walk by him at such an hour in the night without his waking and asking of the dark, Who is it? What’s the matter? (P. 1)

• “The candy episode killed something between them, and more and more he began checking up on her. He would show up at the house when she though he was out working. She would come out of the coop with a bag of feed or the broom in her hand and a bird sitting on her head and she would find him standing at the kitchen window watching her.” (p.20)

• “On what turned out to be the last day, a very cold morning in February, she stepped out onto the roof to drink the last of her cocoa. At first she sipped, then she took one final swallow, and in the time it took her to raise her cup to her lips and lower it, the pigeons had take a step and dropped from the ledge. He caught an upwind that took him nearly as high as the tops of the empty K Street houses. He flew farther into Northwest, into the colors and sounds of the city’s morning. She did nothing, aside from following him, with her eyes, with her heart, as far as she could.” (p. 25)
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<thead>
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<th>Potential Educational Uses of Resource</th>
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<tr>
<td>Web articles</td>
<td>Information about pigeon keeping</td>
<td>Background on Betsy’s pigeons</td>
<td><a href="http://www.npausa.com/keeping/index.htm">http://www.npausa.com/keeping/index.htm</a></td>
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