

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The main character in a work of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist often overcomes a weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great courage may be called a “hero.” A protagonist of dubious tenacity and questionable virtue is an “antihero.” Readers often debate the virtues and motivations of the protagonists in the attempt to understand whether they are heroic. The protagonist's journey is made more dramatic by challenges presented by characters with different beliefs. A “foil” provokes the protagonist so as to highlight more clearly certain features of the main character. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Buck is the protagonist of the novel. Several antagonists oppose him—dogs, humans, even the harsh climate and landscape. For this lesson, focus on the canine characters; Lesson Seven will focus on the humans.

Discussion Activities

Discuss Handout Two, “Pack Mentality.” Assign each group one dog other than Buck from Chapters 1-3: Curly, Dave, Spitz, Sol-leks, Billee, or Joe. Ask students to find passages that reveal information about the dog's personality. Where does the dog fit into the pack? What does Buck think of this dog? What does the dog think of Buck and of the humans? Have each group present the key attributes of their dog's character, giving specific examples from the text to support their answers.

Writing Exercise

Chapter 3 centers on the fight between Buck and Spitz—one of the novel's most important scenes. How does the narrator prepare the reader for this scene? Who initiates this fight? Why does Buck win? Did the fight have to end in Spitz's death? Why or why not?

Homework

Read *The Call of the Wild*, Chapter 4: “Who Has Won to Mastership.” Is it possible to interpret the dogs as symbolic? What passages might suggest they are more than just characters?