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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels and novellas trace the development of characters that encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist undergoes profound change. A close study of character development maps the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief in each character. Still, the tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next, affecting the drama and the plot.

While all the other characters in this novella are static and two-dimensional, Ivan Ilyich himself undergoes as profound a change, or series of changes, as can be imagined. Through most of the book, he is a thoroughly ordinary man. He has no real virtues in any active sense; his positive qualities are merely the absence of negative ones: he does not take bribes; he does not cheat on his wife or mistreat her and their children, etc. Self-centeredness is his most prominent characteristic, which often manifests itself in pettiness and irritability, usually directed at his wife. Until very near the end, the changes he undergoes have less to do with an alteration or enlargement of his character than with his increasing inability to live as he wishes to. When he finally acknowledges that his whole life has been wasted in the pursuit of false and trivial goals (pp. 108-09), his reaction is terror and despair. It is not until the very last chapter that he achieves true grace, and with it understanding and peace of mind.

Discussion Activities

Returning to the terms employed in Lesson Four, generate a class discussion of Ivan Ilyich's role as an "antihero" through most of the novella. Then have the class consider whether or not he has, by the end of the book, achieved the status of "hero."

Writing Exercise

Define the term "epiphany" to your students and give examples from literature. Have them write about Ivan Ilyich's epiphany at the very end of the novella.

Homework

Beginning with Chapter 2, have the students page through the book once again and list as many turning points in the plot as they can find.