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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 an 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.

We encounter the secondary characters through Henry’s point of view. Hemingway does not profile Henry’s comrades in great detail. As Henry’s lover, Miss Barkley provides the foil for Henry’s character, leading him in unexpected directions: “God knows I had not wanted to fall in love with any one. But God knows I had and I lay on the bed in the room in the hospital in Milan and all sorts of things went through my head but I felt wonderful...” (p. 93).

Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups. Assign each group a secondary character, for example: Rinaldi, the priest, Miss Gage, or Miss Ferguson. Ask students to review the chapters they have read, selecting the chapter that best captures this character. Have them present the key attributes of that character, citing quotes from the text. Conclude by discussing moments when these characters draw reactions from Henry. Do these characters deepen our understanding of Henry?

Writing Exercise

Who is the antagonist in the novel? Does the antagonist require Henry to look at himself in profound new ways? Write a brief essay answering these questions, supporting your argument with quotes from the text.

Homework

Have students read Chapters XIX-XXIV (pp. 117-159), concluding Book Two. Hemingway alludes to a poem by Andrew Marvell, when Henry recites: “But at my back I always hear, time’s winged chariot hurrying near...” (p. 155). Why does Henry recite this poem at this moment in the novel? Why is “time’s winged chariot hurrying near?”