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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The novel begins with Tom Joad's release from prison. He is a convicted killer who acted in self-defense and has served his debt to society. Soon he joins his family for the trip to California. Many readers consider Tom Joad the protagonist of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a man who struggles against violent instincts while standing up for the rights of the dispossessed. Several foils propel Tom into manhood. Reverend Casy speaks a language of pantheism and growing political awareness. Ma is a restraining figure, always reminding Tom of his checkered past and responsibility to the family. Even poor Muley, a solitary outcast on the land, unwittingly warns Tom of the consequences of social exile. These foils vie to lead Tom toward his final choices.

Discussion Activities

Who is the antagonist in *The Grapes of Wrath*? Is it the men who drive the tractors? Is it the bank officials who own the land? Or is the antagonist not a person at all, but the “monster” hounding the farmers from Oklahoma all the way to California? Are the protagonist and the antagonist in this novel in a fair fight? Can the Joads win, or are the odds stacked against them?

Writing Exercise

Steinbeck often alludes to myth to reveal something essential about his characters. Other times, he'll include a story within the novel. For example, Steinbeck tells the story of the Joads' first-born son, Noah. Ask students to find another example of this technique, and to consider the value of telling stories to develop a character.

Homework

Have students read Chapters 14–17 (pp. 150–200). Ask them to find examples in the text where Steinbeck makes them see the landscape in a new way by comparing it to something else. For instance, challenge them to find moments where inanimate objects are compared to animate ones.