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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who 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.

As the novel unfolds, we see Tom come to the defense of a principle larger than just himself. He learns to protect others against crooks, cons, vigilantes, and violent cops. He uses the toughness he developed in prison to shepherd the Joads to the "safety" of California, stepping in to take on the roles of family members who die, or leave, or lose authority. In this way, Tom grows into the role of family provider.

Discussion Activities

Which members of the Joad family undergo a change in the course of the novel? Divide the class into groups and assign a member of the family to each. Have each group find examples where the character has changed by the time he or she reaches California. What causes this change? Does any character fail to evolve? If so, why? Are the Joads responsible for what happens to them? Have a spokesperson report the group's findings to the class.

Writing Exercise

Have students focus on and write about Tom, Ma, Casy, and Rosasharn, the novel's main characters by the end of the novel. Students should consider these four characters in pairs, since Tom follows Casy's example, while Rosasharn emulates Ma. How are Tom and Casy, or Ma and Rosasharn similar? How are they different?

Homework

Have students read Chapters 22-24 (pp. 285-345). Ask them to begin thinking about how Steinbeck has organized the events that make up the plot, and whether the story so far points to a likely resolution. Students should come to class with what they think are the two most important turning points so far in the novel.