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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 may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald explores characters in relation to their landscape, their wealth, and their prior relationships. The more we know about these characters, the more their lives shift from idyllic islands of wealth to colorless portraits floating through a “valley of ashes” with “grotesque gardens.” In this lesson, examine Fitzgerald's ability to present characters in both their ideal and real countenances.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to consider whether any of the main characters have changed in the novel's first six chapters. Examine Tom, Daisy, Nick, Jordan, and Gatsby. Are there any moments when these characters have a realization about their circumstances or change a firmly held opinion?

In the beginning of the novel, Daisy says contemptuously “Sophisticated—God, I'm sophisticated!” (p. 17). Now that we know more about Daisy, what did she mean? Does her life represent the free spirit of the Roaring Twenties? If not, why not?

How does the way Fitzgerald describes the Long Island landscape parallel the internal struggles of the main characters?

Writing Exercise

Have students read Handout Two and write a brief essay on whether or not this is a coming-of-age story. Which characters are growing in maturity and insight if this is a coming-of-age story? Students should support their conclusions with quotes from the novel.

Homework

Read Chapter 7 (pp. 113–145). Come to class with the two most important turning points in the plot of the novel.