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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

The Great Gatsby has a remarkable structure. Chapter 5 provides the emotional center of the drama: when Gatsby reunites with Daisy, when Nick experiences a grand foreboding, and when Daisy's voice becomes a "deathless song." Some chapters exhibit parallels. Chapters 2 and 8 are physically violent turning points, with grotesque landscapes, dust, and ashes. The novel begins with Nick's arrival to Long Island and his memories of his father's words. Nick wants "the world to be ... at a sort of moral attention forever" (p. 2). The novel ends with an encounter with Gatsby's father and Nick's realization: "I see now that this has been a story of the West after all ... [P]erhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life" (p. 176).



Discussion Activities

Have students identify the most important turning points in the novel. Ask them to identify the passages from the novel, explaining why these events are the most significant. Use this information for the next activity.

Map a timeline that depicts the dramatic build-up in the novel. This map should include the most significant turning points but also examine the lesser events that build tension. As students develop their maps, they should define the beginning, middle, and end of the plot.



Writing Exercise

Outline a sequel to Fitzgerald's novel. How would this plot unfold? How might students map the beginning, middle, and end? Have them write the opening paragraphs to the sequel.

Rewrite the novel's ending as if Gatsby and Daisy reunite. Would the novel be as powerful? Why or why not? What might make this new plot successful?



Homework

Read Chapters 8 and 9 (pp. 147–180). Why does Nick think that Gatsby "paid a high price for living too long with a single dream" (p. 161)?