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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.” Readers often debate the virtues and motivations of the protagonists in the 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,” is any character or force in a literary work that opposes the efforts of the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success. The antagonist doesn’t necessarily have to be a person. It could be nature, a social force, or an internal drive in the protagonist.



Discussion Activities

Grant Wiggins is the protagonist of the novel, but his life becomes inextricably tied to Jefferson’s. Ask your students to examine how Jefferson acts during the visit with Grant in Chapter 11 and how he later acts when Miss Emma visits, as depicted in Chapter 16. Grant tells his aunt, “He treated me the same way he treated her. He wants me to feel guilty, just as he wants her to feel guilty. Well, I’m not feeling guilty, Tante Lou. I didn’t put him there. I do everything I know how to do to keep people like him from going there” (p. 123). Why is Grant offended by Jefferson’s behavior? Does Jefferson want Miss Emma or Grant to feel guilty, or is he simply unable to cope with his fate?



Writing Exercise

Ask your students to write three paragraphs on a character other than Jefferson or a situation that serves as an antagonist to Grant. What is the conflict? How does Grant respond? Is his response appropriate? Have students support their ideas using examples from the text.



Homework

Read Chapters 14-17 (pp. 103-134). Ask your students to pay close attention to the way Grant describes the scenery during his walk with Vivian.