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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author artfully builds a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and inform character development. A novel's plot follows a series of events as they lead to a dramatic climax, a tragic realization, or a happy ending. The author's timing of events from beginning to middle to end can make a novel predictable and boring, or stimulating and riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy time while telling the story. A successful author will keep a reader entranced by clever pacing built within the tale, sometimes confounding a simple plot by telling stories within stories.

The events leading to Jefferson's execution shape the way Grant views himself and others. While Jefferson's fate is strongly foreshadowed throughout the novel, Gaines chooses to show us Grant's transformation slowly, creating tension that might not otherwise exist. In Chapter 25, Grant fights with the mulatto sharecroppers. This is a major turning point in the novel because it demonstrates how deeply Grant is affected by his relationship with Jefferson.

Grant's journey toward self-discovery defines the novel's pacing as much as Jefferson's impending execution.



Discussion Activities

Divide your class into two groups. Ask one group of students to examine the plot structure as it relates to Jefferson, the other as it relates to Grant. Students should identify the novel's major events from the perspective of the character they were assigned using passages from the novel to explain why these events are the most significant. Have each group write these events in a column on the board. Draw lines to show where Grant's and Jefferson's lives intersect. Discuss the ways each of them change during those scenes.

Divide students into groups and have them map a timeline showing the development of the plot as a whole. Students should define the events that constitute the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. Groups should present their timelines, discussing any discrepancies along the way.



Writing Exercise

Ask students to anticipate the novel's ending. Have them write several paragraphs describing what will happen to Grant and Jefferson. Ask them to consider the ways the actions of these two men might affect the entire community.



Homework

Read Chapters 28-31 (pp. 219-256). During his last days in jail, Jefferson keeps a journal. Why is Sheriff Guidry concerned about how Jefferson will portray him?