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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.” A protagonist of dubious tenacity and questionable virtue is an “antihero.” 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 more clearly highlight certain features of the main character. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter defies the conventions of literary fiction. The novel does not follow a straightforward, linear plot, nor does it focus most closely on the actions of a single individual. The novel examines the lives of five main characters and their struggle against isolation and despair. McCullers’ empathetic portrayal of the various personalities highlights their differences as well as the common adventure of the human experience.

McCullers intentionally crafted a composite cast of characters whose stories converge rather than focusing the reader’s attention on a single protagonist. Literary scholars debate which character, John Singer or Mick Kelly, is the true “protagonist” of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. McCullers compared Singer’s character to the hub of a wheel; most of the action of the novel revolves around him. Yet Mick Kelly’s journey toward adulthood gives the story its trajectory.

Discussion Activities

Photocopy Handout Two. Discuss the ways *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is a “Southern Gothic” novel. How important is setting in the novel? Which characters are “grotesques” and what, if any, unpleasant aspects of society do they represent? Do they meet McCullers’ goal of creating grotesque characters whose physical incapacity symbolizes a spiritual void?

Writing Exercise

Choose a secondary character who serves as antagonist to either John Singer or Mick Kelly. How is this person important to the story? Does the antagonist make the main character appear stronger, or more flawed? How might this be important as the novel progresses?

Homework

Have students read Part Two, Chapter 3-5 (pp. 135-181). Ask them to pay close attention to the passage in Chapter 5 when Mick goes to her “inside room,” and to consider what we learn about her character during that scene.