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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.

At the beginning of the novel, Mick Kelly, an idealistic young girl, dreams of becoming a great musician, an inventor, and a world traveler. As the novel unfolds, we witness Mick's journey toward maturity. Mick childishly frightens her brother, Bubber, after he accidentally shoots Baby, but later consoles him. When her relationship with Harry becomes sexual, Mick assures him that it was not his fault. "I wasn't any kid," she says, "But now I wish I was, though" (p. 275). Later, she bravely offers to quit school and take a job at a local department store to help her poverty-stricken family. By the novel's end, she assumes responsibility for payments on Singer's radio and maturely considers ways she might be able to afford a piano one day.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Read Handout Three. All the main characters experience failures to communicate. They feel isolated and alone. Each has something he or she desires above all else. Each has something he or she loves most and, by the end of the novel, each suffers a loss. Ask your students to consider the ways love, desire, and the struggle against loneliness compel the characters to act as they do.

Read aloud the section of the novel when all the characters gather in Singer's room on the same night (pp. 210–212). Look closely at the actions, reactions, and body language of each person. How do these responses help define our understanding of each?

The "epistolary" form, telling a story through the use of letters, allows an author to convey a character's viewpoint without the interference of other characters. In Part Two, Chapter 7, John Singer writes to Antonopoulos, "The others all have something they hate. And they all have something they love more than eating or sleeping or wine or friendly company" (p. 215). Ask your students to choose a character in the novel other than John Singer, and then write a letter from this character to another person in the novel. What does their character love and hate? How does the character feel about those around him or her?



Homework

Have students read Part Two, Chapters 11–13 (pp. 264–305). Ask your students to review the novel and identify two important turning points. Which characters were most affected? Why?