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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. One practice of examining a literary work, biographical criticism, looks through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to more fully understand the novel.

Born in St. Mary's County, Maryland, in 1894, Dashiell Hammett left school at age 14 because of his family's shaky finances. He held a series of odd jobs until 1915, when he joined the Baltimore office of the famous Pinkerton's National Detective Service. Plagued by ill health, he left the detective agency for good in 1921. His first work was published in 1922. A year later, his fiction appeared in the popular pulp magazine *Black Mask*.

Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD. Students should take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the CD.

Photocopy the Reader's Guide essays, "Dashiell Hammett 1894-1961" (pp. 5-7) and "Hammett and His Other Works" (pp. 10-11). Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what it learned.

Writing Exercise

Have students read Chapter 1 (pp. 3-10) focusing on Hammett's use of dialogue. Ask students to write a two-page second chapter to begin to develop one of the characters. Ask them to use dialogue and action.

Homework

Continue to read Chapters 1-3 (pp. 3-31). Prepare your students to read two or three chapters per night in order to finish reading the book in seven lessons. Hammett begins the novel in the middle of a typical workday at Spade and Archer's detective agency. What clues indicate that some things are out of the ordinary? How might these clues foreshadow the rest of the story?