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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Great Book?

Novels illustrate the connections between individuals and questions of humanity. Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives while painting those conflicts in the larger picture of human struggle. Readers forge bonds with the story as the writer's voice, style, and sense of poetry inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities for learning, imagining, and reflecting, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changing lives, challenging assumptions, and breaking new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Put these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books they know that include some of the same characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Maltese Falcon*? Is this a great novel?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Hammett provide through the third-person objective narration of this hard-boiled detective novel? What does this voice tell us about the concerns and dreams of Hammett's generation?

Split the class into groups. Have each group choose the single most important theme of the novel. Ask a spokesperson from each group to explain his or her decision. Write these themes on the board. Are all the groups in agreement?

Writing Exercise

If you were the voice of your generation, what would be your most important message? Why might you choose to convey this in a novel rather than a speech or an essay? What story would you tell to get your point across?

Have students work on their essays in class. Be available to assist with outlines, drafts, and arguments. Have each student partner with another to edit outlines and/or rough drafts. Provide students with characteristics of a well-written essay.

Homework

Students should continue working on their essays. See "Essay Topics" at the end of this guide. For additional questions, see the Reader's Guide's "Discussion Questions" (p. 14). Turn in outlines and/or rough drafts for the next class.