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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 highlight more clearly certain features of the main character. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Sam Spade, the hardboiled detective in *The Maltese Falcon*, becomes embroiled in the quest for the elusive black bird after his partner, Miles Archer, is murdered. Throughout most of the novel, Spade’s motivations remain private, but most critics agree that he is driven by a personal moral code—an internal sense of right and wrong—rather than a conventional desire to uphold civil law. In various ways the secondary characters serve as foils and antagonists to Spade’s character, complicating his search for Archer’s killer and the falcon.



Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups. Photocopy the Reader’s Guide essay “Major Characters in the Novel.” Assign each group a character: Effie Perine, Brigid O’Shaughnessy, Miles Archer, Joel Cairo, Casper Gutman, or Wilmer. Some of these characters lie about who they are and what they know. Ask students to review the chapters they have read, selecting passages that reveal information about the true nature of their character. Have them present the key attributes of that character, giving specific evidence from the text to support their answers.



Writing Exercise

Choose a secondary character who serves as an antagonist to Sam Spade. How is this person important to the story? What motivates him or her? Does the antagonist make Spade appear stronger or more flawed? How might this be important as the novel progresses?



Homework

Have students read Chapters 10-11 (pp. 90-111). Ask your students to consider what Spade’s reaction to Casper Gutman reveals about Spade’s character.