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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters that 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 undergoes profound change. A close study of character development maps the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief in each character. Still, the tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next, affecting the drama and the plot.

“Flat” or “two-dimensional” characters in a work of fiction do not experience a profound emotional change and personal growth during the course of the story. They serve to provide comic relief or help advance the plot. “Round” or “three-dimensional” characters have complex emotions and motivations. They encounter conflict and are changed by it.

The archetypal private detective, Sam Spade is motivated not by conventional standards but by an internal code of conduct. Like the criminals he encounters while pursuing the falcon, Spade divulges only what suits his purposes. He tells each of them what he believes they want to hear without revealing how much of the truth he has pieced together from their various stories. His motivations remain a mystery until the end.

The classic *femme fatale*, Brigid is beautiful but dangerous. She lies compulsively, revealing bits of truth sandwiched between falsehoods. Brigid feigns loyalty to various characters, but ultimately she betrays them all.

Discussion Activities

Discuss with your students the roles of “flat” and “round” characters. Ask them to identify some of their favorite fictional characters. What attributes bring them to life? Some critics feel the characters in *The Maltese Falcon* lack depth. Do your students agree? Which characters in the novel seem the most “real”? Why? Using your discussion of allegory from Lesson Six, ask the students to consider how using two-dimensional characters can sometimes enable writers to represent broad concepts.

Writing Exercise

Ask the students to write two paragraphs about the characters they most trust. What particular actions or qualities contribute to that feeling? Have them support their answer with examples from the text.

Homework

Have students read Chapters 18-20 (pp. 172-217). Ask your students to come to class ready to present the two most important turning points in the novel.