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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author artfully builds a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and inform character development. The timing of events, from beginning, to middle, to end, can make a novel predictable or riveting. A plot, propelled by a crisis, will reach a climax, and close with a resolution (sometimes called *dénouement*). Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy time while telling the story. A successful author will keep a reader entranced by clever pacing built within the tale, sometimes confounding a simple plot by telling stories within stories.

The Maltese Falcon begins as a mystery novel, with the hard-boiled detective, Sam Spade, trying to solve his partner's murder. It evolves into a quest for the falcon, of course, but also for abstract concepts such as truth and justice. The chase leads to a final truth: the statue is a fake, a worthless piece of lead. The criminals blame one another and, in the aftermath, Wilmer shoots Gutman. Though Spade admits he might be in love with Brigid, he turns her over to the police, unwilling to protect her from punishment for Miles Archer's murder.



Discussion Activities

In small groups, have the students map a timeline that depicts the development of the story and the building of drama. This timeline should include the most significant turning points, but also examine lesser events that build tension. As students develop their timelines, they should define the beginning, middle, and end of the novel. Groups will present their timelines to the class.



Writing Exercise

Ask your students to write a different ending to the novel.



Homework

Have your students come to class with three major themes of the novel.