

9

Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Profound questions raised by the story allow the character (and the reader) to explore the meaning of human life and extract themes. Themes investigate topics explored for centuries by philosophers, politicians, scientists, historians, and theologians. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, personal moral code in relation to political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational commitments. A novel can shed light on these age-old debates by creating new situations to challenge and explore human nature.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways. Using textual references to support ideas, explore the statements *The Maltese Falcon* makes about the following:

- **Greed:** Gutman, Cairo, O’Shaughnessy, and Wilmer have been pursuing the falcon for quite some time. Spade has only recently joined the search. Discuss the various characters’ motivations. Are Spade’s more noble than the others? Why or why not?
- **Trust:** After Spade discovers some of Brigid’s lies, she pleads with him, “I’ve been bad—worse than you could know—but I’m not all bad. Look at me, Mr. Spade. You know I’m not all bad, don’t you? You can see that, can’t you? Then can’t you trust me just a little?” (p. 35).
 1. Why does Brigid want so desperately for Sam to trust her?
 2. Does she trust him? Why or why not?
- **Human Adaptability:** Throughout the novel, circumstances change that are beyond the control of the characters. The way they adapt (or cannot adapt) reveals a great deal about their personalities. Discuss the various ways the characters react to the following situations.
 1. Chapter 7. When Lieutenant Dundy and Tom Polhaus pay a surprise visit to Spade’s apartment, Cairo, Brigid, and Spade each react quite differently. How does the action of each character advance the plot?
 2. Chapter 19. Using his knife, Gutman finds that the falcon is made of lead. How do the various characters react? Do any of their actions surprise you? Why or why not?



Homework

Have students begin their essays, using “Essay Topics” at the end of this guide. Outlines are due at the next class.