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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Discussion Activities

Who is the protagonist in the novel? Who is the antagonist? How does the opposition of these two characters help develop the drama and the unfolding of the tale?

Divide the class into groups to examine the role of foils in the novel. Assign each group two secondary characters: Calpurnia, Boo Radley, Tom Robinson, Miss Maudie, Aunt Alexandra, Uncle Jack, Francis, or Miss Caroline. Ask students to review the first ninety-nine pages of the novel. Have each group list key attributes of their character. Prepare a presentation that documents moments when these characters bring out reactions from Scout. How do their unique personalities help Scout learn about herself?

Writing Exercise

Students should write two pages on the character that they believe to be the antagonist. If Scout is our protagonist, why is this character opposed to her? How is this character forcing her to look at herself in profound ways? What passages from the text support these conclusions?

Homework

Read Chapters 11–12 (pp. 99–126). Find the three most vivid descriptions in the two chapters. Are they effective? Why or why not? What do Jem and Scout learn from Mrs. Dubose and going to church with Calpurnia in this section?