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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who 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 may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

This novel explores human nature, equality, and justice through the trial of Tom Robinson. A child's inexperience captures an innocent sense of justice, while an adult's world-weariness leads to abandoning the fight for justice. As a result, this novel hinges on occasions in which adults act like children and children act like adults. In order to argue for racial equality, Lee must demonstrate situations in which narrow-minded prejudice can realistically yield to an expanded moral sensibility.

Discussion Activities

Which characters in the story are beginning to change their views? In what ways do they change their views? Choose one of the child characters and one of the adult characters to focus your discussion.

Will Atticus still win the trial if he only succeeds in convincing a number of Maycomb citizens of Robinson's innocence? Does he fail if he cannot convince the whole jury? Will it be unrealistic if he is able to convince the jury? Do the main characters reflect the tensions of the Civil Rights Movement? How?

Writing Exercise

On what occasions do you wish a character might have acted more maturely? On what occasions were you surprised that a character acted very maturely? Why or why not? Explain how you would define "mature."

Early in the novel Scout says, "Jem was a born hero" (p. 39). Have students write a paragraph explaining who they believe is the most heroic character of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Is it Jem? Is it Atticus? Scout? Tom Robinson? Or is it perhaps Boo Radley? Make sure students define "hero."

Homework

Read Chapters 19–23 (pp. 190–227). Ask students to reflect on how Lee has constructed the plot to reach this dramatic conclusion and come to class with the two most important turning points in the novel.