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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story’s conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

To Kill a Mockingbird begins as a story about curiosity, sibling adventures, and the first school days. The novel evolves into a saga about criminal justice, legal representation, and deep-rooted Southern values. All the events lead to the final, tragic event: Tom Robinson’s guilty verdict. At this tragic moment, Jem forsakes “background” in exchange for how long his family has “been readin’ and writin’ ” (pp. 226–227). He believes that literacy allows the Finches to rise above prejudice, while illiteracy sinks the Cunninghams into a moral quagmire. In the face of such injustice, Jem realizes that Boo Radley may want to stay inside to avoid the prejudice and injustice.

Discussion Activities

Have students identify the most important turning points in the novel. Ask students to reference the passages from the novel, explaining why these events are the most significant. Use this information for the next activity.

As a class, map a timeline that depicts the development of the dramatic build-up from the beginning of the story. This map should include the most significant turning points but also examine the lesser events that build tension. As students develop their maps, they should define the beginning, middle, and end of the novel.

Writing Exercise

Outline a sequel to Lee’s novel. How would this plot unfold? How would students map the beginning, middle, and end? Have students write the opening paragraphs to the sequel.

Rewrite the novel’s ending as if Tom Robinson was acquitted. If he were acquitted, would the novel be as powerful? Would it be more powerful?

Homework

Read Chapters 24–27 (pp. 227–254). Why did Lee choose this title? How is literacy a theme of the novel?