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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The main character in a work of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist often overcomes a weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work’s end. A protagonist who acts with great courage may be called a “hero.” A protagonist of dubious tenacity and questionable virtue is an “antihero.” Readers often debate the virtues and motivations of the protagonists in an attempt to understand whether they are heroic. The protagonist’s journey is made more dramatic by challenges presented by characters with different beliefs. A “foil” provokes the protagonist so as to highlight more clearly certain features of the main character. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Divide the class into five groups, giving one of the following main characters to each. The group will describe the personality and motivations of its assigned character. Who is the protagonist, hero, foil, and antagonist according to your students’ reading so far?

Ántonia—Remember that the reader only sees Ántonia through the lens of the adult Jim Burden. What are her strengths and weaknesses, according to Jim? How does his view of her differ from others in the town of Black Hawk?

Jim Burden—Pay special attention to the scene where he “saves” Ántonia from the rattlesnake. What does the novel reflect about his maturity and masculinity?

Mr. Shimerda—What drove him to end his life? What are the consequences for the family, especially for Ántonia? Why does his death affect Jim so much?

Lena Lingard—This Norwegian immigrant is Ántonia’s foil, which will become even more apparent in Book Four. How are Ántonia and Lena alike? How are they different?

The Land—Can the land be seen as the novel’s protagonist? Could it also be the antagonist? Identify some passages that describe the land with human characteristics.



Homework

Read *My Ántonia*, Book Two, Chapters 6-12 (pp. 131-169). Describe the changing social situation between Jim and Ántonia as she becomes a “hired girl” in town. Why were “hired girls” “considered a menace to the social order”? How do the different ways Lena and Ántonia dance highlight their contrasting personalities?