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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters that 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 undergoes profound change. A close study of character development maps the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief in each character. Still, the tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next, affecting the drama and the plot.

Jim Burden recounts his coming-of-age from a backward glance, always weaving into his story his immigrant friend, *Ántonia*. Willa Cather's characters rarely make long speeches; instead, they reveal their personalities through their actions.

Discussion Questions

Re-evaluate three major characters analyzed in Lesson Four. Ask students to discuss these characters' external changes of setting, profession, and/or landscape. Do these outward changes result in internal change? Have their motivations altered?

Jim Burden

The prairie orphan boy leaves Black Hawk to attend the University of Nebraska, and later Harvard Law School. What does he learn from Gaston Cleric? How does this inform his view of *Ántonia* and his past?

Ántonia Shimerda

Ántonia leaves Nebraska to get married, only to find herself a deserted woman carrying an illegitimate child. Why does she return to Black Hawk? Does she act in the way you would expect?

Lena Lingard

Lena becomes a well-respected dressmaker in Lincoln and has a brief romantic relationship with Jim. Why does it not last? Why does she remain in Lincoln? Is she content with her life?

Writing Exercise

How does Jim's education remove him further from his past? How does it bring him closer? Discuss the relevance of the novel's epigraph: "Optima dies...prima fugit" (The best days are the first to flee).

Homework

Read *My Ántonia*, Book Four, Chapters 1-4 (pp. 221-238). Consider Cather's choice to structure the novel in five books. Why would she break up her book this way? Identify two important turning points in the novel's action.