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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 aftereffects of that climactic action are presented.

As a series of linked stories, *Love Medicine* does not have the classic narrative arc that readers might find in more traditional novels. While it is unlikely that readers will be able to identify a single climax of the novel, there are undoubtedly several significant events that function as turning points in the story. Considered together, these major events reveal a great deal about the characters and how they grow and change in response to life's hurdles and successes. For instance, on the day Lulu's house burns, Marie learns that Nector intended to abandon her for Lulu. She decides to maintain their relationship, despite his infidelity. This confirms for the reader what we already believe about Marie—that she is motivated by practical concerns rather than an idealized notion of love. Marie's choice also prepares the reader for the later chapters, in which she and Lulu become friends.

Discussion Activity

Using their reader's journals as a resource, have the students construct a timeline of the book's main events, identifying major turning points for each character.

Ask students to identify other important plot points in the novel, such as Marie's departure from the convent, Henry Lamartine's suicide, Nector's poisoning by Marie and Lipsha, and Gordie Kashpaw's suicide. Students will want to consider which of these events, or others they name, are most central to the novel as a whole and shape most profoundly our understanding of the characters and their world.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to rewrite one of the signal events above with a different outcome. Imagine that Lulu's house had not burned, or Marie had thrown Nector out of the house. What if Henry Lamartine's suicide attempt in the river had been unsuccessful? Encourage students to be as creative as possible using metaphor and simile and to carefully choose which narrative voice can best tell the story.

Homework

Students should finish the novel by reading "The Good Years" and "Crossing the Water" (pp. 272–333). Ask them to identify three themes of the novel. Students should also note the narrator of each chapter in their reader's journals.