4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the "protagonist." The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw such as weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a "hero." An "antihero" is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a "foil," has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the "antagonist," opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

Love Medicine does not have one central protagonist; there are a handful of major characters who serve most frequently as narrators and whose interwoven stories create the plot. These characters are often paired up, with each member of the pair serving as a foil to his or her partner.

Discussion Activities

Discuss Handout Three. Ask your students how understanding the Chippewa creation story increases their understanding of the characters and Chippewa culture portrayed in the novel.

Have students identify various pairings of characters in the novel: Marie and Lulu, Nector and Eli, Marie and Rushes Bear (her mother-in-law). These pairings are not structured as good against evil; typically, each character has virtues and flaws that throw elements of the opposite character into sharper relief. For example, Marie's dutifulness as a wife and mother (and her refusal to enter into an adulterous relationship with her brother-in-law Eli) makes Lulu's flexible morals all the more startling. How does Erdrich balance these characters? How does she keep the reader from judging one or the other too harshly?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to pick one of the pairs they've identified in the discussion, and list the traits they have in common, and also how they differ. Ask them to identify which member of the pair is more attuned to Chippewa culture. Does one member of the pair embrace tradition while the other shuns it? Are both equally invested in tribal life? Why might Erdrich have chosen to pair characters in this way?

Homework

Students should read "The Plunge of the Brave" and "Flesh and Blood" (pp. 118–162). Ask students to identify three or four instances of rich, colorful language, particularly metaphors and similes, from the reading assignment. Students should record these passages in their reader's journals.