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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Character Development

“Tell Them Not to Kill Me!” by Juan Rulfo

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 that 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.

The protagonist of Juan Rulfo’s “Tell Them Not to Kill Me!” is Juvencio Nava, a man who has lived in hiding for thirty-five years after killing a neighbor, Don Lupe Terreros. Juvencio is pursued by Don Lupe’s son, now a colonel, who has finally caught up with his father’s killer. Juvencio’s own son, Justino, has acted as a liaison between the colonel and Juvencio, despite concerns for his safety and that of his wife and eight children.



Discussion Activities

List the main characters on the board in front of your class. Using the homework assignment, discuss each character’s role in the story. Assign a student to play each part. Ask the rest of the class to split into two teams. Assign one team to be Juvencio’s defense attorneys and the other team to act as the prosecution. Each team may call the characters to serve as witnesses for either the defense or prosecution. Argue Juvencio’s guilt or innocence, then debate his sentence. Does Juvencio warrant sympathy? What was his motive for killing Don Lupe? Is Colonel Terreros justified in his revenge? Does Juvencio deserve his punishment? Could anyone in this story be considered a hero?



Writing Exercise

In their reader’s journals ask students to write about what happens after the last scene in “Tell Them Not to Kill Me!” Does this blood feud end with Juvencio, or does it set off a cycle of revenge? Is Colonel Terreros satisfied with the death of the man who murdered his father? What role did Justino play in his father’s capture, and how does he cope with this experience?



Homework

Have students re-read the story, this time identifying major turning points in the plot and shifts in time.