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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Plot

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

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 effects of that climactic action are presented.

Rulfo’s story grips the reader from the very first sentence—“Tell them not to kill me, Justino!”—and the urgency of the narration continues on every page. The actual story is fairly simple: One man kills another over a land dispute; the killer goes into hiding and is caught nearly four decades later. The complexity of the story is the result of how the details and turning points of the story slowly unfold.

Discussion Activities

By propelling the reader into the middle of the action in the first sentence, Rulfo immediately piques our interest. Discuss as a class your students’ reactions to the opening sentences of the story. Who is trying to kill this man? Why? What did he do? Does the way Rulfo began the story garner sympathy for the protagonist? Why or why not?

We soon find out through flashback that Juvencio is not innocent. Ask students if they felt conflicted about their support of Juvencio. Did the tension in the story increase when they learned that he had murdered Don Lupe?

Have students map out a timeline of the story’s main events. Which are told in the present and which are revealed through flashbacks? How does the way the reader finds out new information affect how he or she feels about the characters?

Writing Exercise

“Tell Them Not to Kill Me!” slowly reveals itself through flashbacks. Have students write in their reader’s journal about the twists in the story’s plot. Did their allegiance shift between the characters? If so, at what point did this change take place? Did they anticipate any of the plot twists? Which revelation had the most impact? Why?

Homework

Read “My Life with the Wave” by Octavio Paz. Identify several examples for each of the following questions: Which specific moments in the story are bizarre or dreamlike? Which moments seem more conventional?