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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: Epistolary Writing

“Chac-Mool” by Carlos Fuentes

The word “epistolary” comes from the Latin word for letter, *epistola*. “Epistolary” writing is told by way of documents written by one or more characters. These can take the form of letters, as in Mary Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein*; of diary entries, or a combination of documents, as in Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula*. Fiction writers usually use the epistolary form to add authenticity to a story, a sense that the author or narrator has discovered these documents and is sharing them with the reader.

Discussion Activities

Carlos Fuentes chose to structure this story as a diary nested inside another character’s first-person narration. Discuss the structure of “Chac-Mool” using the homework assignment from the previous class. Why might Fuentes have decided to tell the story through the filter of a narrator reading his friend Filiberto’s diary entries? How might the ending have had to change if Fuentes had just given us Filiberto’s diaries?

The narrator’s account isn’t just a framing device. He interrupts Filiberto’s diary twice. In the first of these interruptions he writes, “The entry for August 25 seemed to have been written by a different person. At times it was the writing of a child, each letter laboriously separated; other times, nervous, trailing into illegibility.” How does a reader’s awareness not just of Filiberto’s medium—in this case, “a cheap notebook with graph-paper pages and marble-ized-paper binding”—but also his erratic penmanship, condition how we interpret his story?

Finally, consider that two of the greatest horror stories, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, and “Chac-Mool” are all written in epistolary form. What is it about the epistolary form that might lend itself to the creation of unease, or suspense, or dread?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short story in their reader’s journal using the epistolary form. Encourage them to be creative. They may use letters, diary entries, e-mails, or even blog posts.

Homework

Have students page back through “Chac-Mool” to find examples of symbolic objects. How is the symbolic meaning different from the literal significance of the object? How does each symbol inform our understanding of the story or characters?