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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Works of fiction trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

Discussion Activities

Discuss the evolution of Norman Bowker's character throughout the book. How does "Speaking of Courage" show us the complex relationship between one man, his fellow soldiers, and his family and friends in his hometown? Does learning about Norman Bowker's post-war life change the way we feel about his actions during the attack that took Kiowa's life? "Speaking of Courage" is the only story other than the title story, "The Things They Carried," that is written in the third-person point of view. Why might O'Brien have chosen this narrative stance?

In "On the Rainy River" O'Brien writes, "Courage, I seemed to think, comes to us in finite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for that day when the account must be drawn down" (p. 40). Ask your class if they believe there are any heroes in the book. If so, how do they display courage? Does the narrator's opinion of courage change during the course of the book?

Writing Exercise

Have students write a two-page essay considering how "Notes" expands the way we read "Speaking of Courage." How does the last paragraph of "Notes" demonstrate O'Brien's struggle to find the "truth" about the Vietnam War?

Homework

Read "In the Field," "Good Form," and "Field Trip" (pp. 162-188). Read Handout Three: The Quang Ngai Province and the My Lai Massacre.