

# 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. 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.

*The Things They Carried* does not follow the narrative arc of a typical novel. Instead, each chapter functions as a separate story that has its own protagonist, setting, and dramatic force. Because the stories are interrelated, O’Brien can weave each of the twenty-two separate chapters together to achieve a unified whole. Though each story has its own main character, it can be argued that the ultimate protagonist of the book is the narrator, Tim O’Brien, who struggles to tell the “truth” about war through extraordinary “acts of remembrance.”

### Discussion Activities

Discuss the stories “Enemies,” “Friends,” “How to Tell a True War Story,” and “The Dentist.” Ask students to identify the protagonist and antagonist in each story.

Break your class into groups. Have each group list the titles of the eight stories the class has read so far and the names of the prominent characters from each story. Are some characters emerging as the book’s “major” characters while others have a lesser role? If so, which characters seem to be the most important and why?

### Writing Exercise

In “How to Tell a True War Story,” O’Brien writes:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. . . . The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*.

Ask students to find an instance where O’Brien’s writing reflects the surreal nature of war and write a short essay on how he achieves this effect. What kinds of truths can surrealism reveal?

### Homework

Read “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong.” Ask your students to identify ways O’Brien uses figurative language such as imagery, simile, and metaphor to enhance the story.