

CHARACTER: Revealing Human Nature

Creating characters--telling us what human beings are like--is the whole point of writing stories. A story is really only interesting to us as readers because of what it tells us about people and how it makes us feel about them. Thus, character, the revelation of human nature, is what a good story is all about.

A magazine editor once said that all you need to tell a story is a character, an adjective, and a series of choices that the character must make. Let's call our main character George, give him the adjective "stingy," have him invite Donna out for her birthday, and see what happens.

If we are told that he has fifty dollars, yet walks Donna the sixteen blocks to the theater, pretending not to notice the approaching bus, we know our George. We are even delighted when George chooses the balcony seats, which are cheaper than the seats in the orchestra. Later, at the restaurant, we know he'll be looking anxiously at the right-hand side of the menu (where the prices are listed).

What we are curious about is how Donna will respond to this stingy character. Now suppose that at the restaurant George recommends, instead of the three-dollar hamburger, the ten-dollar steak? A surprise, a **change** in character! Love, that powerful tonic, has done what no amount of reasoning could do... and we recognize with satisfaction a truth, a revelation of how we and our fellow human beings behave.

Of course people are much more complex than a single adjective can describe, and that is the joy, and the difficulty, of storytelling. How does a writer build a character out of words, someone who will seem to become flesh and blood and rise off the page?

Creating Characters

Direct Characterization

One way of creating a character is through **direct** characterization. This means that the writer tells us directly what a character is like or what a person's motives are. A writer might tell us directly that a character is sneaky, honest, evil, innocent, and so on. A writer might tell us directly that a heroine suffers from shyness and hates to go to parties or that another character is self-centered and cares only about adding necklaces to her collection. In a famous listing of adjectives, Dickens even tells us directly what kind of person Scrooge is:

Oh, but he was a tightfisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!

Modern writers do not often tell us too much directly about their characters. In fiction, as in life itself, it is much more satisfying for us to discover what characters are truly like for ourselves.

Indirect Characterization

When a writer shows us a character by describing his or her speech, appearance, thoughts, or actions, we say that the characterization is **indirect**. This means that we ourselves, as readers, have to take all the information we are given about the character

and interpret for ourselves the kind of person we are meeting. Indirect characterization is something like meeting people in real life. In real life, people do not wear t-shirts with slogans explaining what kind of people they are. In real life, we observe people, we listen to what they say, and we watch how they act. Then we draw our own conclusions about them.

Five methods of Indirect Characterization

1. Since the writer is painting a portrait in words, the most obvious method of characterization is the character's own **speech**. Think of how you can recognize your friends from what they say--not just from their tone of voice, but also from the kinds of words they use (big inflated ones, little punchy ones; formal or slangy ones). Think of how people reveal their values by using words that always allude to what things cost, rather than to how pleasurable or beautiful they are. Reading the characters' dialogue in a story is like listening in on a conversation.

2. **Appearance** is another method of creating character. We can tell so much simply from the words a writer uses to describe a person's face, or body language. The kinds of clothes a character wears can give us hints too. As readers, we will respond one way to a character wearing a pin-striped suit, and another way to a character wearing old blue jeans and work boots. Clothing, body language, and physical features, like speech, can indicate age, life experiences, geographic origin, culture, social and economic background, and many other aspects of personality.

3. In fiction, a writer can even take us into the characters' minds to reveal their private **thoughts**. In this sense, fiction has an advantage over real life. We might learn that one character detests her brother's drinking, or that another one sympathizes with his father for his troubles at the office. We might learn how one character secretly feels when he sees the bully picking on the smallest kid in the schoolyard or how another feels as she watches her grandmother's coffin being lowered into the ground.

4. We can learn about characters by watching **how other characters in the story react to them**. We might learn, for instance, that a salesman is a hearty, good fellow in the eyes of his customers and a generous tipper in the eyes of the local waitress; but he is impatient, cranky, and selfish in the eyes of his family.

5. Most of all, we understand characters in fiction from their **actions**, from what we see them doing. How would you react to a girl of sixteen who, when you first meet her in a story, is dyeing her hair green? How would you react to another who, at five-thirty in the morning, is out delivering her newspapers? Scrooge, when we first meet him on Christmas Eve, is working on his accounts--an action that instantly reveals his overriding concern with money.

In fact, most characters in a story (and in life) tend to reveal themselves most fully when they are under stress, when they are placed in some situation that demands that they do something about it. As we watch the characters in a story take action in response to a conflict, we begin to discover the kinds of people they really are.

(Adapted from *Elements of Literature*, Third Course, Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston.)

CHARACTERIZATION EXERCISES:

Analyze the characterizations of the following excerpts carefully, and make notes on your own paper:

- What can you learn about the character that is being described? Give evidence.
- Which of the five main characterization methods has the author used to create this character?

PART I:

A. His name was George E. Babbitt. He was forty-six years old now, in April, 1920, and he made nothing in particular, neither butter nor shoes nor poetry, but he was nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford to pay.

His large head was pink, his brown hair thin and dry. His face was babyish in slumber, despite his wrinkles and the red spectacle dents on the slope of his nose. He was not fat, but he was exceedingly well-fed; his cheeks were pads, and the unroughened hand which lay helpless upon the khaki-colored blanket was slightly puffy. He seemed prosperous, extremely married and unromantic... *Babbitt*, by Sinclair Lewis.

B. She wore a steel gray business suit and under the jacket a dark blue shirt and a man's tie of lighter shade. The edges of the folded handkerchief in the breast pocket looked sharp enough to slice bread. She wore a linked bracelet and no other jewelry. Her dark hair was parted and fell in loose but not unstudied waves. She had a smooth ivory skin and rather severe eyebrows and large dark eyes that looked as if they might warm up at the right time and in the right place. *The Lady in the Lake*, by Raymond Chandler.

C. ...beside him, his wife brushes her hair. Her face is soft in the morning, flushed, slightly rounded, younger than her thirty-nine years. Her stomach is flat almost as if she never had the babies. She raises her hands to the back of her neck, pinning her hair into a neat coil at the back of her head. Beautiful hair, the color of maple sugar. Or honey. Natural, too. The blue silk robe outlines her slender hips, her breasts. *Ordinary People*, Judith Guest.

D. A woman with shorn white hair is standing at the kitchen window. She is wearing tennis shoes and a shapeless gray sweater over a summery calico dress. She is small and sprightly, like a bantam hen; but, due to a long youthful illness, her shoulders are pitifully hunched. Her face is remarkable--not unlike Lincoln's, craggy like that, and tinted by sun and wind; but it is delicate too, finely boned, and her eyes are sherry-colored and timid. *A Christmas Memory*, Truman Capote.

E. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice... *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens.

ASSIGNMENT I:

Now write your own character sketch, using words to paint a **physical** portrait of a person. Before you begin, have a clear, detailed, specific picture in mind of what this character's personality is like, and how his/her personality is reflected in his/her appearance. (ca. 75 words)

PART II:

Read the excerpt and analyze the character:

A. "Most of dese zigaboos is so het up over yo' business till they liable to hurry theyselves to Judgment to find out about you if they don't soon know. You better make haste and tell 'em 'bout you and Tea Cake gittin' married, and if he taken all yo' money and went off wid some young gal, and where at he is now and where at is all yo' clothes dat you got to come back here in overhalls." Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, .

B. While I worked, Dona Maria bent over a larded frying pan and told me about her father.

"He was a shepherd and a good man--never ambitious for the centavos," she said. "He was happy and contented with no more ambition than not to lose a lamb and go down to Santiago Papasquiario two or three times a year to hear the mariachis play in the plaza and listen to the church bells." Amado Muro, *Maria Tepache*

ASSIGNMENT II:

Now write a character sketch of approximately 75 words that focuses on a character's **speech**. This character can be the same as the character in your first sketch, or it can be entirely different, but your sketch must be specific and detailed.

PART III:

Read the excerpt and analyze the character:

A. As I'd watched Momma put ruffles on the hem and cute little tucks around the waist, I knew that once I put it on I'd look like a movie star. (It was silk and that made up for the awful color.) I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world. Hanging softly over the black Singer sewing machine, it looked like magic, and when people saw me wearing it they were going to run up to me and say, "Marguerite [sometimes it was 'dear Marguerite'], forgive us, please, we didn't know who you were," and I would answer generously, "No, you couldn't have known. Of course I forgive you." Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

B. So I gritted my teeth and figured I'd have to skip college and go straight to Broadway, but it pissed me off. Because I wasn't simply a great actress, I was smart too. I'd known this since the seventh grade, when I decided my family was made up of a bunch of morons with lousy taste in television. I exiled myself into the basement recreation room every night to get away from them...Soon I'd read everything in the books by [Shakespeare], and then by Whitman and Tennyson and Shelley. I memorized Hamlet's soliloquy and said it to the mirror behind the bar. To do this in the seventh grade made me think I was a genius. And now, to be told by my mother, who'd never read a book in her life, that I couldn't go to college, was worse than infuriating, it was unjust. Beverly Donofrio, *Confessions of a Bad Girl Who Makes Good*

ASSIGNMENT THREE:

Now write a character sketch of approximately 75 words that shows a character's personality through his/her thoughts.

PART FOUR:

Read and analyze the excerpts:

A. I preferred magnifying glasses to matches. We spent the afternoons burning little piles of cut grass. I loved watching the grass change colour. I loved it when the flame began to race through the grass. You had more control with a magnifying glass. It was easier but it took more skill. If the sun stayed out long enough you could see through a sheet of paper and not have to touch it...Last to burn the paper completely in half had to let the other fella burn his hand. Roddy Doyle, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*.

B. "Son of a bitch bit me . So I got me some steak, and I got me the spring out of a clock. I put points on the ends of the pieces. They were sharp as razor blades. I stuck 'em into the steak, way inside. And I went past where they had the dog tied up. He wanted to bite me again. I said to him, 'Come on, doggie -- let's be friends. Let's not be enemies anymore.'" *Slaughterhouse Five*, Kurt Vonnegut.

ASSIGNMENT FOUR:

You guessed it -- write a character sketch that shows a character's personality through his/her actions.

PART FIVE:

For these two longer excerpts, use all your understanding of characterization to first analyze the mother and son as individuals and in their relationship in each excerpt separately, and then to compare and contrast the two excerpts.

A. "You finish your work, John?" she asked.... "That's a good boy," she said. She smiled a shy, strained smile. "You know you your mother's right-hand man?"

He said nothing, and he did not smile, but watched her, wondering to what task this preamble led.

She turned away, passing one damp hand across her forehead, and went to the cupboard. Her back was to him, and he watched her while she took down a bright, figured vase, filled with flowers only on the most special occasions, and emptied the contents into her palm. He heard the chink of money, which meant that she was going to send him to the store. She put the vase back and turned to face him, her palm loosely folded before her.

"I didn't never ask you," she said, "what you wanted for your birthday. But you take this, son, and go out and get yourself something you think you want."

And she opened his palm and put the money into it, warm and wet from her hand. In the moment that he felt the warm, smooth coins and her hand on his, John stared blindly at her face, so far above him. His heart broke and he wanted to put his head on her belly where the wet spot was, and cry. But he dropped his eyes and looked at his palm, at the small pile of coins. *Go Tell it On the Mountain*, James Baldwin.

B.

He goes out into the hall, just as his mother reaches the top of the stairs. She jumps, drawing in her breath sharply.

"Sorry," he says.

"I didn't think you were home yet."

"I just got in," he says. "How was your golf game?"

"Fine. Cold." Her hair is loose about her face. She lifts it in back, rubbing her neck. "Your father called. He'll be late. We're not eating until seven."

"Okay."

She heads toward her room. "I have an awful headache. I'm going to lie down awhile."

"Okay."

She is almost to her door and he calls after her, "I swam pretty well today. Salan wants me to stay later and work out. I might be starting in the fifty."

"Good." The door closes behind her, and he stands a moment in the hall, then goes back into his room. He shuts his door and leans against it, trembling. A dull, roaring sound in his ears as he doubles over, arms crossed, pressed against his waist. His stomach tightens, as if to ward off a blow. *Ordinary People*, Judith Guest.

1. A trip to the principal's office
2. A fifty minute class period filled with a daydream
3. A marriage proposal
4. A blind date or first date
5. A funeral
6. A trip to the doctor's office
7. Breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend
8. Having a fight or disagreement with friend or parent
9. Being caught in a blizzard
10. Getting in a car accident
11. Getting lost far away from home
12. Being "stood up" for a date
13. First kiss
14. Being accused of something
15. Being verbally and/or physically threatened by someone

I'm sure you can think of many more from your own experience!