

Characterization

A **character** is a fictionalized individual who figures in an imaginative work. The means by which an author endows these individuals with distinctive personalities is known as **characterization**. An analysis of character requires examination of specific details that focus on dominant character **traits** (qualities of mind or habitual modes of behavior that reveal what a character is like, specifically those that determine how an individual acts or reacts under various conditions or attempts to shape the environment).

Characters must speak, think, and act as real human beings are likely to do. This is the standard of **verisimilitude** (the appearance of truth or reality), **probability**, or **plausibility**. Literature presents a highly selective view of reality. Characters in a realistic work operate under a different framework of probability than those characters in less realistic works (romance, fantasy, farce). Unexpected or exaggerated behavior is certainly **plausible** for characters in less realistic works as long as they operate within the established parameters of the given work. When analyzing character, distinguish between what characters may do and what they frequently or usually do.

Methods of characterization (S T E A L E) (adapted from East Greenwich HS Decubellis/characterization)

- 1) a character's **SPEECH** (what a character says and how he or she speaks)
- 2) a character's **THOUGHTS** (what a character thinks, feels, believes)
- 3) the **EFFECTS** of a character on others (what other characters say and how they respond and react)
- 4) a character's **ACTIONS** (what a character does or how a character behaves)
- 5) a character's **LOOKS** (the physical appearance)
- 6) **EXPOSITION** (what the author states explicitly)

Types of characters: round and flat

Round characters tend to be vividly portrayed as significantly complex, lifelike, and memorable. They are said to be **dynamic**: they recognize, change with, or adjust to circumstances and provocations (to have value, circumstances and provocations must demonstrate important character traits). A round character usually plays a major role in a work of fiction.

Flat characters are less than fully realized; they fail to grow, develop, or gain insight. As such, they are said to be **static**. Flat characters are often **stock characters**.

Problems of interpretation

Personal response

The **personal response** results from the natural human tendency to think of everything in terms of ourselves, to view as valid only what we think and feel, to see in a work only what we have experienced. The fallacy of such thinking, of course, is that not everyone is like us, and our experiences are not all-inclusive.

Stock Response

The **stock response** interprets the characters in a work according to the most conventional (typical, traditional) attitudes and beliefs of our society. Such responses will be relatively commonplace, clichéd, dull, mundane.

Ambiguous evidence

What is visible may be ambiguous, secondhand information may be obscure, and a character's words and thoughts about him- or herself may contain personal bias, leading to inaccurate inference of character.

Consistency

We can reasonably expect a writer to have had a controlling idea for a given work and to have consistently developed this idea throughout the work. Evidence gleaned from all sources (STEAL E) throughout the work must be consistent if it is to support an accurate interpretation of characterization.

Characterization

Character Analysis

Look for dominant character trait(s).

Take physical descriptions into account; relate the physical to the mental.

Move from the character's appearance to the character's nature (from what the character looks like to what the character is).

Go beyond the character's actions themselves and indicate what those actions reveal about the character. Try to get from the outside to the inside.

Qualities of character: mental, moral, physical, social.

character: a person (sometimes animal or other non-human) in a story

flat character: a character of little psychological complexity

round character: a character of significant psychological complexity

static: a character who changes little if at all throughout a literary work

dynamic: a character who undergoes an important change during the course of a literary work

protagonist: the main (central) character in a literary work

antagonist: a force (natural, supernatural; concrete, abstract) in conflict with the protagonist; may be a person, an aspect of the physical or social environment, or a destructive element within protagonist

foil: a character whose qualities or actions emphasize or highlight those of another (usually the protagonist) by way of contrast

anti-hero: protagonist in modern work, inept, dishonest

archetype: the original model for types of ideas, characters, situations, settings, symbols, images, themes, plot patterns, and actions that suggest universal human experience

cliché: a character whose behavior is predictable and superficial

stereotype: a character whose traits, actions, or values conform to the assumptions generally associated with particular group (gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, religion, occupation, marital status)

stock character: a character type that has become conventional in particular genres through repeated appearance (hardboiled detective, girl next door, town sheriff, girl with a heart of gold)

characterization: one of two methods by which an author develops character

direct (explicit) characterization: an author's explicit statements that reveal a character's personality

indirect (implicit) characterization: the actions, speech, thoughts, reactions, responses, interactions, physical description and background information that suggest a character's personality

motive: a force that impels a character to behave as he or she does

In your analysis of character, avoid using psychological jargon (commonly called psychobabble) that belongs to the field of psychotherapy.

Analyze character rather than actions.

Avoid simply restating narrative events. Any narrative summary you include must serve your interpretive purpose, which is to analyze character.

Characterization

Questions to consider while gleaning evidence in order to discern character

What are the character's dominant traits? Can you identify at least three? What are his or her admirable qualities? dishonorable qualities? To what extent is a major trait a strength? a weakness? To what degree does the trait become more (or less) prominent as the work unfolds? How do actions, appearance, speeches, narrative comments, authorial exposition reveal character?

How are these traits developed? Does one method of characterization dominate? How do these traits relate to the meaning of the work as a whole?

Against whom or what does the character struggle? What do these conflicts signify about character?

Which objects are associated with the character? What do they signify about character?

Which colors are associated with the character? What do they signify about character?

Which symbols are associated with the character? What do they signify about character?

What quotations provide a key to understanding the character?

What is your judgment of the character? How do traits help you judge the character?

To what extent is the character defined by contrast with other characters? How does the protagonist interact with opposing characters? What is the effect of these interactions?

If round, how does the character grow, change, or adjust during the course of the work with respect to circumstances and provocations? If flat, what function does the character serve in the work?

What motivates the character to react to various conditions or situations? to shape his or her environment? What goals does he or she have? What drives his or her thoughts and actions? What choices indicate character? what actions? Is the behavior consistent with what the character is like?

What are the high and low points for the character? What are the causes? Effects?

Physical What does the character look like? What does physical appearance signify? What role do physical attributes play in the work? How does the character feel about his or her physical attributes? How does the character change physically during the work? What do these changes signify? How do they affect the character's experience?

Intellectual How would you describe the character's intelligence? What does the character know? How does the character's intellect compare to others in the work? Is the character intelligent enough to thrive in his or her world? What does the character learn as the work develops?

Emotional What is the character's emotional state most of the time? How do his or her feelings change throughout the work? How does the character feel about himself or herself? When faced with challenges, what emotions arise for the character?

Social How does the character get along with others? Who does he or she choose for friends and why does he or she choose them? Where does the character stand in the social order? How does this social standing affect events in the work?

Philosophical What does the character believe? What does the character base these beliefs on? How do these beliefs affect the choices the character makes? How do these beliefs change during the course of the work? Do others in the work share these beliefs? Is the character moral, immoral, amoral?