

Character and Characterization

(Simplified from A Glossary of Literary Terms)

Introduction

The word "character" is used in two quite different ways in literary studies, and it's worth keeping them separate in your mind:

I. As a specific type of writing (a genre): A short, often witty prose sketch describing a "type" of person. This tradition began with the ancient Greek writer Theophrastus.

II. As the people who appear in a story: This is the meaning you'll use most often, the characters are simply the people (or sometimes animals, or other beings) who appear in a narrative or play.

How we come to know a character

We understand a character through two main things:

I. Dialogue: what they say, and how they say it

II. Action: what they actually do

The underlying reasons for a character's speech and actions: their desires, fears, values, and personality are called their motivation.

Stable characters vs. changing characters

Some characters stay essentially the same from the beginning of a story to the end. We call these *stable characters*. Example: *Mr. Micawber* in Dickens's *David Copperfield*: he's endearingly, consistently unable to manage his finances, from start to finish. Other characters undergo real change, sometimes gradually, over the course of the story (like *Emma* in Jane Austen's novel *Emma*, who slowly matures and learns from her mistakes), and sometimes suddenly, through a single dramatic crisis (like *King Lear*, whose experience of betrayal and suffering transforms him quickly and painfully).

Either way, whether a character stays the same or changes, readers expect consistency. This means a character shouldn't suddenly act in a way that has no believable connection to who we've already come to understand them to be. Even a sudden change needs to feel earned and plausible, growing out of what came before.

Flat characters vs. round characters

This useful distinction was introduced by the novelist E. M. Forster in his book *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). A *flat character* is built around just one central trait or

idea, and can be summed up accurately in a single sentence. This isn't necessarily a criticism, flat characters can be very effective in the right role. A *round character* is complex, has many sides, and, like a real person, is capable of surprising us.

Here's an important point: not every character needs to be round. Whether a character should be flat or round depends on their role in the story. Think about detective fiction. *Sherlock Holmes* is actually a fairly flat character (brilliant, eccentric, emotionally detached), and that's completely fine, because the story itself is what needs complexity, not necessarily every character in it. A story can succeed brilliantly even when some, even most, of its characters remain flat, as long as the characters who most need depth actually have it.

Showing vs. telling: two methods of building character

This distinction describes how an author reveals character to the reader.

I. *Showing* (sometimes called "*the dramatic method*"): The author simply presents what characters say and do, without directly explaining their inner motives. The reader has to infer what's going on inside the character, based on the evidence given.

II. *Telling*: The author directly steps in and explains, and often evaluates, a character's inner nature, motives, and personality. Here's a clear example from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Early in the novel, Austen first shows us *Mr.* and *Mrs. Bennet* talking to each other. We watch their conversation and start forming impressions. Then, Austen tells us directly: she describes *Mr. Bennet* as having "an odd mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice," and *Mrs. Bennet* as a woman "of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper." Notice how the "telling" here confirms and sharpens what we'd already begun to guess from the "showing."

Since the time of writers like Gustave Flaubert and Henry James, many critics have argued that "showing" is more artistically sophisticated, the idea being that a good author should stay invisible and simply present scenes, rather than directly explaining things to the reader. But it's worth remembering that this is really just one particular preference, associated with a certain modern style, not an absolute rule. Many of literature's greatest novels (including *Pride and Prejudice* itself) use plenty of "telling," very effectively.