

CHARACTER

Introduction

Every story revolves around *characters*. Whether in an epic, novel, drama, or short story, characters perform the actions, speak the dialogue, experience conflicts, and express the ideas that give literary works their meaning.

Readers often remember literary characters more vividly than plots. We may forget every event in *Hamlet*, but we remember *Hamlet* himself. We may not recall every incident in *Pride and Prejudice*, but *Elizabeth Bennet* remains unforgettable.

Etymology

The word character comes from the Greek *kharaktēr*, meaning mark, stamp, engraved sign, or distinctive feature. Gradually, the word came to mean the distinctive qualities that make one person different from another.

Definition

A character is a person represented in a literary work whose personality, thoughts, emotions, speech, and actions contribute to the development of the narrative.

Characters may be fictional, historical, realistic, symbolic, or mythical.

Character and Characterization

Character refers to the person presented in the literary work. For example: *Elizabeth Bennet* in *Pride and Prejudice*. Characterisation, on the other hand, refers to the artistic method through which the author creates that character.

Characterization includes description, dialogue, actions, thoughts, relationships, and reactions.

Therefore,

Character = Who the person is.

Characterization = How the author presents that person.

How Authors Reveal Character

Readers discover character through several kinds of evidence.

A. Speech: A person's language reveals education, intelligence, personality, emotions, and values.

B. Actions: Actions often reveal character more effectively than words. A brave character demonstrates courage through action. A dishonest character reveals dishonesty through behaviour.

C. Thoughts: Novelists frequently reveal memories, fears, hopes, imagination, and internal conflicts to reveal the psychological complexity of characters.

D. Appearance: Clothing, facial expressions, posture, and physical description may contribute to characterization. However, appearance alone never completely defines character.

E. Other Characters' Opinions: Characters often describe one another. Readers compare these opinions with actual behaviour. Sometimes these judgments are reliable and sometimes they are misleading.

F. Narrator's Commentary: In some novels, the narrator directly explains a character's personality. In others, the narrator leaves readers to draw their own conclusions.

Types of Characters

A. Major and Minor Characters

I. Major Characters: These occupy the centre of the narrative. The story depends upon them.

Examples include *Hamlet* from *Hamlet* and *Elizabeth Bennet* from *Pride and Prejudice*.

II. Minor Characters: They support the main action. Although less important, they help develop plot, atmosphere, themes, and major characters.

B. Round and Flat Characters

One of the most influential distinctions regarding character was made by E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel*, where he distinguished between round characters and flat characters.

I. Flat Character: Possesses only one or two dominant qualities. They are characteristically simple, predictable, easily recognized, and have little psychological complexity.

Examples include comic servants, stock villains, and many minor figures.

II. Round Character: Complex, fully developed, psychologically convincing. Round characters surprise readers, develop gradually, and possess contradictory qualities.

Examples include *Hamlet*, *Elizabeth Bennet*, and *Anna Karenina*.

C. Static and Dynamic Characters

I. Static Character: Remains essentially unchanged. The personality stays stable throughout the work.

II. Dynamic Character: Changes significantly. The character learns, matures, declines, or undergoes moral transformation.

Stock Characters

A stock character is a conventional figure that appears repeatedly in literature. Examples include the miser, the jealous husband, the wicked stepmother, the faithful servant, the clever clown, and the boastful soldier. Readers recognize these figures immediately because they follow familiar patterns.

Character and Plot

Characters and plot are closely connected. Characters make decisions. Those decisions create events. The events, in turn, change the characters. Thus, plot influences character, and character influences plot.

Psychological Realism

Modern literature increasingly emphasizes psychological depth. Characters possess conflicting motives, unconscious desires, uncertainty, and moral complexity. Readers observe not only actions but also mental processes.

Character in Different Genres

I. Epic: Heroes represent national ideals. Examples include *Achilles* in the *Iliad*, *Odysseus* in the *Odyssey*, and *Aeneas* in the *Aeneid*.

II. Drama: Characters reveal themselves primarily through dialogue and action. The audience observes behaviour directly.

III. Novel: The novelist has greater freedom to present thoughts, memories, psychological development, and interior consciousness.

IV. Lyric Poetry: The central figure is usually the lyric speaker or persona, rather than a fully developed fictional character.

Modern Characterization

Twentieth-century writers increasingly rejected simple heroes and villains. Modern characters often appear uncertain, fragmented, psychologically divided, and morally ambiguous.

Common Student Mistakes

Mistake 1: Confusing character with characterization.

Remember:

Character = Person.

Characterization = Method.

Mistake 2: Thinking that every major character changes.

Many central characters remain largely static.

Mistake 3: Believing appearance determines character.

Literature frequently challenges outward appearances.

Mistake 4: Treating characters as historical people.

Characters are artistic creations designed to serve literary purposes.