

Types of Characters in Fiction

"What does characterization do for a story? In a nutshell, it allows us to empathize with the protagonist and secondary characters, and thus feel that what is happening to these people in the story is vicariously happening to us; and it also gives us a sense of verisimilitude, or the semblance of living reality. An important part of characterization is dialogue, for it is both spoken and inward dialogue that afford us the opportunity to see into the characters' hearts and examine their motivations. In the best of stories, it is actually characterization that moves the story along, because a compelling character in a difficult situation creates his or her own plot."

In fictional literature, authors use many different types of characters to tell their stories. Different types of characters fulfill different roles in the narrative process, and with a little bit of analysis, you can usually detect some or all of the types below.

- Major or central characters are vital to the development and resolution of the conflict. In other words, the plot and resolution of conflict revolves around these characters.
- Minor characters serve to complement the major characters and help move the plot events forward.
- Dynamic - A dynamic character is a person who **changes over time**, usually as a result of resolving a central conflict or facing a major crisis. Most dynamic characters tend to be central rather than peripheral characters, because resolving the conflict is the major role of central characters.
- Static - A static character is someone who **does not change over time**; his or her personality does not transform or evolve.
- Round - A rounded character is anyone who has a **complex personality**; he or she is often portrayed as a conflicted and contradictory person.
- Flat - A flat character is the opposite of a round character. This literary personality is notable for **one kind of personality trait or characteristic**.
- Stock - Stock characters are those types of characters who have become **conventional or stereotypical** through *repeated use* in particular types of stories. Stock characters are instantly recognizable to readers or audience members (e.g. the femme fatale, the cynical but moral private eye, the mad scientist, the geeky boy with glasses, and the faithful sidekick). Stock characters are normally one-dimensional flat characters, but sometimes stock personalities are deeply conflicted, rounded characters (e.g. the "Hamlet" type).
- Protagonist - The protagonist is the central person in a story, and is often referred to as the story's main character. He or she (or they) is faced with a conflict that must be resolved. The protagonist may not always be admirable (e.g. an anti-hero); nevertheless s/he must command involvement on the part of the reader, or better yet, empathy.
- Antagonist - The antagonist is the character(s) (or situation) that represents the opposition against which the protagonist must contend. In other words, the antagonist is an obstacle that the protagonist must overcome.

- **Anti-Hero** - A major character, usually the protagonist, who lacks conventional nobility of mind, and who struggles for values not deemed universally admirable. Duddy, in Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, is a classic anti-hero. He's vulgar, manipulative and self-centered. Nevertheless, Duddy is the center of the story, and we are drawn to the challenges he must overcome and the goals he seeks to achieve.
- **Foil** - A foil is any character (usually the antagonist or an important supporting character) whose personal qualities contrast with another character (usually the protagonist). By providing this contrast, we get to know more about the other character.
- **Symbolic** - A symbolic character is any major or minor character whose very existence represents some major idea or aspect of society. For example, in *Lord of the Flies*, Piggy is a symbol of both the rationality and physical weakness of modern civilization; Jack, on the other hand, symbolizes the violent tendencies (the Id) that William Golding believes is within human nature.
- **Direct presentation (or characterization)** - This refers to what the speaker or narrator **directly says or thinks about a character**. In other words, in a direct characterization, the reader is *told* what the character is like. When Dickens describes Scrooge like this: "I present him to you: Ebenezer Scrooge....the most tightfisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner!" - this is very direct characterization!
- **Indirect presentation (or characterization)** - This refers to what the *character* says or does. The reader then **infers** what the character is all about. This mimics how we understand people in the real world, since we can't "get inside their heads". In other words, in an indirect characterization, it's *the reader* who is obliged to figure out what the character is like. And sometimes the reader will get it wrong.

Reading Material 2:

English **250** **Fiction** **Unit:**
Characterization 1 — Character Types

250 • Fiction • Characterization 2 • Lit Analysis

Antagonist: a.k.a. "the bad guy" but better thought of as the opponent of the protagonist or central character. The action of a story arises from conflict between the antagonist and protagonist, as in Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* with its struggle between the Wicked Witch of the West and Dorothy. The antagonist need not be a person at all but may be an animal, an inanimate object or even nature itself. For example, the antagonist of Tom Godwin's story "The Cold Equations" is outer space.

Cardboard character: A stereotype, mannequin, drone or otherwise uninteresting simulacrum passing for a real character. Cardboard is what you use when — for whatever reason — you fail to put yourself into your characters. It is the only pejorative I've included in this list. The utopia

of Edward Bellamy's didactic "idea" novel *Looking Backward* is entirely populated with right-thinking men and women of cardboard.

Confidante: someone in whom the central character confides, thus revealing her personality. Once again, that someone need not be a person. In Robert Heinlein's *The Door Into Summer* the central character, Dan Davis, continually confides his plans and feelings to his cat, Pete.

Developing character: a character who changes over the course of the story. The central character is often but not always a developing character. However, it's crucial that the action of the story causes some character to change. When I was at Clarion, Damon Knight used to write "Who cares?" at the end of stories in which no one develops — a characteristically terse criticism which I found devastating. A *tour de force* of developing characterization is Louis Sacchetti, the protagonist of Thomas Disch's *Camp Concentration*, who is infected with a disease that makes him a genius.

Flat character: Someone who is characterized by one or two traits. "Flat" and "round" were terms first proposed by E.M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* and they are often misapplied by modern critics. Flat is especially corrupted when used as a synonym for cardboard; in Forster's usage, flat is not a derogatory term. Rather, it describes a character who can be summed up in a sentence. Gollum from *The Lord of the Rings* is a wonderful character who is absolutely flat in that his character is determined by his obsession with the recovery of the ring, "his precious." Every story needs some flat characters and many successful stories, for instance Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, have nothing but flat characters.

Foil: someone whose character contrasts to that of the protagonist, thus throwing it into sharp relief. In Connie Willis's "The Last of the Winnebagos," Katie Powell serves as a foil to the protagonist David McCombe. Katie chases after David to expiate her guilt over killing one of the last surviving dogs on Earth, while David runs away from Katie and from admitting to himself that he, too, is responsible for the dog's death.

Narrator: the fictional storyteller. When the narrator is involved in the action of the story she's called a first person narrator. The sentence "I watched the triceratops eat my purse," is narrated in first person. When the narrator stands outside the story, she is usually taken to be the implied author. "Persephone watched as the triceratops ate her purse," is narrated in third person, presumably by the writer. Narrators can either be reliable or unreliable. For example, in *Gulliver's Travels*, Gulliver narrates his own story: "I began last week to permit my wife to sit at dinner with me, at the farthest end of a long table, and to answer (but with the utmost brevity) the few questions I ask her." However, he is so credulous at the start and misanthropic at the end that we know enough not to take everything he tells us seriously. Since he is unreliable we must read between his lines to discover Jonathan Swift's intent. On the other hand, we have every reason to trust the third person narration in "Nightfall"; the implied storyteller, Isaac Asimov, means exactly what he says. The vast majority of author-as-narrator stories are told reliably. Indeed, a story in which the implied writer appears to be unreliable is usually scorned as a "readercheater." However, there have been interesting experiments in unreliable third person narration. The implied Bruce Sterling in "Dori Bangs" makes clear that he is unreliable in pursuit

of higher truth. This is all very complicated, I know. We'll more talk about narrators when we get to viewpoint characters.

Protagonist: The central character, or the one whose name comes to mind when you ask the question, "Whose story is this?" A story ought to have just one protagonist but a novel can have several, as in Kate Wilhelm's multigenerational novel of the Sumner family, *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*.

Round character: one who is complex and perhaps even contradictory. E. M. Forster (see Flat Characters) put it succinctly, "The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way." If a flat character can be summed up in a sentence or two, a round character would probably take an essay. For example, Genly Ai in *The Left Hand of Darkness* is one of the of Ursula Le Guin's many round characters.

Spear-carriers: minor characters who provide verisimilitude. They must necessarily be flat since they are rarely named or described in any detail. They tend to run in crowds; in movies these are the folks who made up the "cast of thousands." The dim-witted population of Earth in C. M. Kornbluth "The Marching Morons" are spear-carriers.

Static character: a character who does not develop. Most characters in a story should be static, so as not to distract from the significant changes you will be depicting in the central character. Static, however, most certainly does not mean boring. In Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," all of the characters except for the scapegoat, Tessie Hutchinson, are static.

Stock character: a.k.a. stereotype, but actually a special kind of flat character who is instantly recognizable to most readers, as in the Brave Starship Captain or the Troubled Teen or the Ruthless Businessperson. In the hands of a clumsy writer, the stock character never rises above the cardboard stereotype, which is unfortunate. Even as cliches encapsulate a kernel of truth, so do stock characters reflect aspects of real people. Courage is required of military personnel; people in business act ruthlessly at times in order to survive in the Darwinian world of business. In his collection of short stories, *Fancies and Goodnights*, John Collier demonstrates how to bring stock characters to life — he's particularly good with devils.

Sympathetic character: One whose motivations readers can understand and whose feelings they can comfortably share. This is the kind of character of whom naive readers will say "I could identify with her." The protagonist is often, but not always, sympathetic. Note that a sympathetic character need not be a good person. In George Orwell's *1984*, despite the fact that he betrays Julia and his own values by embracing Big Brother, Winston Smith remains a sympathetic character.

Unsympathetic character: One whose motivations are suspect and whose feelings make us uncomfortable. The boundary between sympathetic and unsympathetic characterization is necessarily ill-defined. The protagonist of Lucius Shepard's "Black Coral," an Ugly American named Prince, is definitely not sympathetic, nor is he intended to be. However once he brings destruction down on himself, we feel sorry for him. The central irony of this story is that the punishment Prince receives is to become a sympathetic character.

Viewpoint character: the focus of narration, the person or persons through whom we experience the story. One kind of viewpoint character is the first person narrator. Here's Mitchell Courtenay, the first person viewpoint character of Pohl and Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants*: "As I dressed that morning I ran over in my mind the long list of statistics, evasions and exaggerations that they would expect in my report." When author herself acts as narrator, she usually chooses to tell the story in the third person, limiting herself to the perspective of one character. While she is in his point of view, she has access to his thoughts and memories but not to those of any one else, as in "*The View From Venus*" by Karen Joy Fowler:

"Linda knows, of course, that the gorgeous male waiting for her, holding the elevator door with his left hand, cannot be moving into apartment 201."

A well-written third person viewpoint can be so seductive that it appears that the viewpoint character is, in fact, the narrator; the implied author seems to disappear. However the invisible author must continue to be reliable even if the viewpoint character is an unreliable focus on the action of the story. John Kessel's *Good News From Outer Space* has several limited third person viewpoint characters — some fairly reliable, some less so. Kessel maintains consistency of point of view by switching only at the chapter breaks. It's also possible to have no viewpoint character at all, as when an omniscient author sees through everyone's eyes. In "Day Million," Frederick Pohl not only tells us what all his characters think but also what his imaginary readers are thinking as they read his story!