**Analysis of Literary Characters**

Overview

When examining character, the reader should be concerned with three elements essentially:

1. the reader must be able to establish the personalities of each character, and be able to identify their intellectual, emotional, and moral qualities;
2. the reader must be concerned with the techniques the author uses to create and develop the characters;
3. the reader must be concerned with whether or not the characters are credible and convincing.

Classifications of Character:

1. **protagonist**: generally classified as the “hero” of the story, the protagonist is the figure that the story revolves around.
2. **antagonist**: although the antagonist usually takes human form, by definition the antagonist is the force which acts against the protagonist.
3. **flat character**: these characters usually embody only one character trait or idea. They are also known as a stereotypical or type character.
4. **round character**: round characters have several character traits and are complex, multidimensional characters of considerable intellectual and emotional depth. Most importantly, these characters have the ability to grow and change.
5. **static character**: these characters do not have the ability to change.
6. **dynamic character**: these characters exhibit the ability to grow and change.
7. **foil**: a foil is a character used in contrast to another character; usually the foil is used to illustrate character elements of the protagonist.
8. **archetype**: a character with predictable character traits or actions.
9. **caricature**: humor or ridicule created by distortion of a character’s physical features or actions.

**Characterization**

What Is Characterization?

Characterization is the process by which the writer reveals the personality of a character. This is revealed through both direct and indirect methods of characterization (see below).

Breaking Down Characterization into Four Levels:

It is possible to talk about four levels of characterization, or four different categories of information that we may learn about a character:

1. **the physical level**: at the most basic level, information may be given concerning the character’s appearance, age, height, gender, build, race, etc. It is generally in the initial stage of a text where the writer reveals these elements of a character.
2. **the social level**: this level is made up of elements which place the character within a particular environment, such as religion, social status, family relationships, profession, etc. This is often illustrated through the character’s responses to and interactions with other characters.
3. **the psychological level:** thisrefers to a character’s values, attitudes, beliefs, likes and dislikes, and thought processes.
4. **the moral level:** This level of characterization is often less obvious than the others, and includes the characters sense of right and wrong and elements that lead to choices and decisions the character ultimately makes.

Methods of Characterization:

1. **Telling (also called *direct* characterization):** This method relies on the direct exposition and commentary from the author of the work to tell the audience what the personality of the character is. This may include:
   1. **characterization through the use of names**: an author may assign a particular name to a character in order to aid in the characterization. These names may draw upon literary or historical allusion. Examples include the rather unfortunate Fortunato, a character in Poe’s *The Cask of Amontillado*, and Stephen Daedalus, the protagonist in Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.
   2. **characterization through appearance**: details of appearance provide essential clues about a character. Elements such as dress, physical appearance, and facial expressions help develop the character for the reader and are quite deliberately done.
   3. **characterization by the author**: this is the most customary form of telling. In this, the author interrupts the narrative and directly reveals, through a series of editorial comments, the personality of the characters, including the thoughts and feelings that pass through the characters’ minds.
2. **showing (also called *indirect* characterization)**: This is an indirect way of illustrating the personality of a character through the use of dramatic elements. In this, the author ‘steps aside’ to allow the characters to reveal themselves directly through their dialogue and their actions.
   1. **characterization through dialogue**: by having the characters reveal themselves through dialogue, the author allows the readers to arrive at their own conclusions. In order to accomplish this, the reader must analyze the dialogue in the following ways:
      1. what is being said
      2. the identity of the speaker
      3. the occasion
      4. the identity of the person or persons the speaker is addressing
      5. the quality of the exchange
      6. the speaker’s tone of voice, stress, dialect, and vocabulary
   2. **characterization through action**: this is the single most important and definitive method of revealing character. In order to successfully analyze characters through their actions, the reader must scrutinize the elements of the plot, and then infer certain character traits based upon these crucial actions.

Questions for In-Depth Character Analysis:

1. Who is the protagonist of the work and who (or what) is the antagonist? Describe the major traits and qualities of each.
2. What is the function of the work’s minor characters?
3. Identify the characters in terms of whether they are flat or round, dynamic or static.
4. What methods does the author employ to establish and reveal the characters? Are the methods primarily of showing or telling?
5. Are the characters properly motivated and consistent?
6. Are the characters of the work finally credible and interesting?