

# One Page Concept Review: Characterization

## What is it?

This is how an author portrays the moral, emotional, and intellectual natures of his or her characters. This can be directly (through literal description on the part of either a narrator or through characters talking about other characters or themselves), or it can be done indirectly (by having the characters do and say things that allows readers to form inferences about their personality).

## Why should I care?

Understanding the characters is central to understanding the point of a work. At its most basic level, if you do not understand who you are supposed to find sympathetic or unsympathetic, you are very unlikely to understand the author's message (and uncovering this will be your task most of the time in high school and lower division university English classes).

Even if your task is to evaluate (or even criticize) an author's work (e.g., an author who unthinkingly characterizes through stereotypes or one who has trouble creating round characters), you still have to understand the author's intent in order to gauge how successful or unsuccessful the author is at achieving his or her goals.

## How do I do it?

- As a concept, **direct characterization is seldom useful unless there is some level of irony**. Look for gaps between how a character is described and the inferences you form from what they do. Pay especial attention to how characters describe themselves (looking for evidence that they are either hypocrites or blind to their true nature).
- **Indirect characterization is the primary tool to establish the personality of a character**. This means that you should be drawing conclusions about characters mostly based on what they do.
- **Look for characters that are foils to one another**. A good contrast not only has a lot of potential for generating conflict, but it also throws into relief ideas that one wishes to emphasize. As a result, setting up two characters that are-- in some vital way-- opposite to one another is a common authorial strategy. Be attentive to the possibility. Foils also provide a ready made contrast essay structure, with a body paragraph devoted to each character.
- First person narrators are *generally* mostly reliable, but **even the most reliable narrator will often reveal more than he or she intends**. These revelations are usually significant.
- **Unreliable narrators are most commonly used in narratives with a great deal of irony**. Be attentive to the possibility that the author intends for you to disapprove of a literary character (at least in part).
- **The authorial voice is usually revealed through the character that is the most developed and possesses the most interiority**. This has obvious significance, since understanding how the author feels about something has obvious applications for figuring out the message that the author is trying to communicate to the reader.
- Assuming that we are talking about round characters, **even the most praiseworthy characters will have flaws and limitations**. Usually these limitations are important to conveying the message of the text, so such flaws are almost always worth noticing.

- **Think about literary characters in terms of personal growth.** Whether they learn something by the end of the text (i.e., if they are dynamic) or if they are essentially the same at the end of a text (i.e., if they are static) is important. Often static characters are meant to be judged harshly by the reader if they should have learned something, but failed to take the opportunities that were presented to them.
- **Approval or disapproval of a character is seldom intended to be 100%.** Real people are complicated. So are good literary characters.

## How do students screw this up?

### Not Paying Attention as You Read

- **Pretend you know the character.** What would you think of them (based on what they say and do)? Unless you're attempting to relate to characters in this kind of personal way, you're probably just reading for plot, which isn't really the point of most literary fiction. Reading fiction is an act of empathy (imagining yourself in someone else's shoes), and if you aren't bothering to make any kind of connection, you aren't reading in any meaningful sense.
- **Do not ignore turning points.** Most major rounded characters will have some sort of character arc, and this usually involves coming to a point where a decision reveals who they really are and where their loyalties truly lie.
- **Do not ignore complexities.** Just because someone is the protagonist does not make them a hero, and just because someone is an antagonist does not make them a villain. If a character is purely good or purely evil, you're either not paying attention or you're probably reading some pretty poorly written stuff. Hell, even comic books try to make an effort to make their villains at least *somewhat* three dimensional.

### Making Bad Inferences

- **Do not judge literary characters by your standards.** Your only interest should be in the point of view of the text unless you are explicitly asked to evaluate the text by external standards. This is especially true if characters are doing or saying things that violate your own belief system. It may be that a strong negative reaction is what the author intends, but make sure this arises from the point of view of the text (and not your own), since what you think about a particular character's choice of action or line of thought is usually irrelevant to the writing task. Nobody's asking you to like a book, to like the author, or to approve of things that offend your sensibilities, but save these sentiments for a book review, not a literary analysis.
- Bad choices do not make the characters bad. Conversely, good choices do not make characters good. I've already touched on this earlier, so suffice it to say that characters are defined by the *aggregate* of their actions. **Do not use unrepresentative data to generalize about a character's personality.** Do not lose sight of the big picture.
- **When evaluating characters, look primarily to where characters end up, not to where they began.** Typically major characters will either grow as people in response to the stimuli of the unfolding plot, or they will fail to grow as people (often when they really *should* have changed). Both of these possibilities are obviously significant to figuring out author's purpose and themes, but one's focus should be at the end of this process, not the beginning. This is one reason why it is usually so obvious to graders when students never finished a book and are trying to fake their way through with just evidence from the beginning. These students almost always miss the point of the work.