

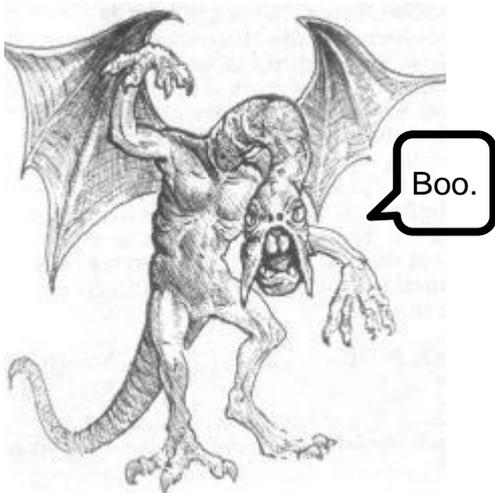
Characterization

Part One: What is it?

The Text

I am using the “Jabberwocky” poem (pages 7-8) and the excerpt from Chapter 6 (pages 9-11) of the sample text.

Read or review these pages if you want to get full benefit of the mini-lessons.



The Concept

Characterization is one of the necessary components of a conventional narrative (along with conflict, setting, and plot). It is difficult to even imagine a story without characters, and so long as those characters are described and do things: they are being *characterized* by the author.

Simply put, characterization is how authors endow their creations with a personality.

There are two ways of doing this. First, somebody in the text can describe a character in a certain manner. This is *direct characterization*-- so named because the text directly informs the reader that a character displays a particular trait. Second, the text describes what a character does. This is *indirect characterization*-- so named because the text only gives evidence that a character displays a particular trait, and the reader has to make an inference in order to figure out what the text is trying to convey about that character.

Indirect characterization is showing. Direct characterization is telling. Indirect characterization requires no work on the reader's part. Direct characterization requires the reader to figure something out.

Elaboration on the Concept: Direct Characterization

If direct characterization is telling the reader what a character is like at a certain point in the story, this information can come from a variety of places.

First, the character can give this information about him or herself. Humpty Dumpty does this when he says, “It’s very provoking to be called an egg” (9). He defines himself as irritated. He says this aloud, but if the narration gave the reader access to his thoughts, it could occur there as well.

Second, another character can give this information. Alice does this when she tells Humpty Dumpty, “You seem very clever at explaining words, Sir” (10), although I’m stretching this example a bit, since technically Alice is only describing her conditional perception of Humpty Dumpty by using the verb *seem*. She hasn’t quite decided yet if he’s *actually* clever or just a charlatan.

Finally, the narration can give this information. Carroll writes, “Alice was too much puzzled to say anything” (9). He could have simply have written *Alice did not immediately reply* or words to those effect. Instead he adds the extra information that defines this action in terms of puzzlement.

Elaboration on the Concept: Indirect Characterization

Characters in fiction are not real people, and even when based on real people, they are still fictionalized. This should almost go without saying.

One corollary of this truism, however, is that the author has made choices about what the characters say, think, and do-- which is to say that the characters are constructs of the author's imagination. Thus, in order for the reader to understand what a character is like, the author chooses what words, thoughts, and actions will best communicate the author's intended meaning onto the written page. This is indirect characterization.

If an author intends for a character to be perceived as brave, for instance, the author will write the character as doing things that correlate with the idea of *bravery*. It's up to the reader to make the inference that a character who does brave things can be plausibly described as *brave*. In other words, you are given evidence of personality, but it is up to you to draw the correct conclusions.

The big idea, though, is that if the reader has to draw conclusions about what a character is like, it is indirect characterization.

Examples from the Text: Direct Characterization

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

'Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the **manxome** foe he sought —
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And **as in uffish thought** he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

'And has thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my **beamish** boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!
He chortled **in his joy**.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Examples from the Text: Indirect Characterization

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

'Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!'

→ Inference: The father loves his son, as he wishes to protect him from harm.

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought —
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

↘ Inference: The son is both brave and anxious to prove himself.

And as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

↘ Inference: The Jabberwock is a fearsome beast.

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

↑ Inference: The son is a bit of a badass..

'And has thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!
He chortled in his joy.

↘ Inference: The father is proud of his son.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

NOTE: Because you are making inferences, there is no one right answer-- only more or less plausible possibilities. For example, I could read the son's disregard of his father's advice as *foolhardy*, rather than *brave*. This would probably change my conclusions about the poem's themes when considering the work as a whole. This is why you explain your thinking when writing about the inferences you make. You have to convince the reader that you are correct. Never forget that you are making an argument when you write about a text.

Common Misunderstandings

Characterization is not *just* what a character is like (in general), but also what a character is like *at a particular moment*. In “Jabberwocky,” for example, the boy’s stance as he awaits his foe is compared to being in “uffish thought” (13). The text is telling us that the boy is “uffish” at that moment (more precisely, that it is *as if* he were “uffish” at that moment). Whether he is normally “uffish” (or inclines in that direction) is both irrelevant to the narration and undeterminable given the information in the text (especially since “uffish” is a nonsense word with an ambiguous meaning).

Obviously a sentence like *The boy was courageous and anxious to test himself against any danger* would register as direct characterization. However, these kind of statements are rare in a text. More commonly, direct characterization is found in adjectivals or adverbials, such as the “*manxome* foe” (10) or when the father “chortled *in his joy*” (24).

Students sometimes assume the ratio of direct to indirect characterization will be roughly equal. This is almost never the case except in very simple texts. There will typically be a lot more indirect characterization.