

Characterization

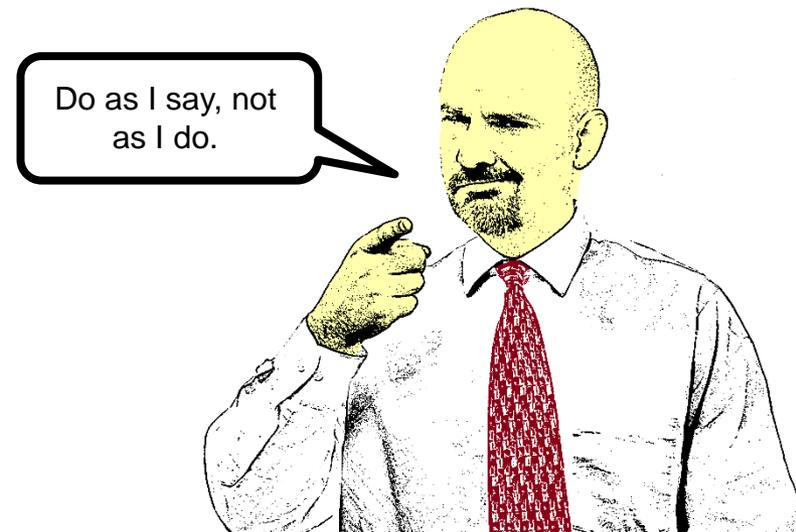
Part Two: The Utility of Analyzing Characterization

The Relative Usefulness of Direct and Indirect Characterization

Of the two, indirect characterization is by far the most useful. Asking yourself what a character's actions imply about the character's personality should be at the top of your list for things to look for when you read.

Direct characterization is less useful, as it is typically used for exposition purposes (defined as the background information necessary to understand a narration) or to clarify something the author does not want the reader to misunderstand. When there is a gap between direct and indirect characterization, though, it's a different story, as it might be a clue to the presence of irony. Be especially attentive to how characters see themselves, trying to determine whether they are (to some degree) hypocritical or lack self-awareness about their true nature.

When direct and indirect characterization seem to be giving contradictory information, the more reliable guide to true personality is what the characters do-- not what they say.



Reader Identification and Theme

On the most basic level, you have to figure out who is supposed to be sympathetic and unsympathetic. Thankfully, it is usually not terribly difficult to figure out with whom the text wants the reader to empathize.

The upshot to determining this is that it provides a rough and ready way to determine theme. The simple formula is: 1) if good things happen to good people, then the thing that allowed for the good stuff to happen is also good; 2) if bad things happen to good people, then the thing that caused the bad stuff to happen is bad; and 3) if good things happen to bad people, then the thing that caused the good stuff to happen is bad.

For example, if a hard working employee earns a comfortable pension at the end of a long career, then the narration values hard work. If a hard working employee is turned out on the streets at the end of a long career, the narration is critical of the system that enabled the injustice. If a lazy employee earns a comfortable pension at the end of a long career, then the narration is critiquing a system that allowed the worker to get away with it. Even if each of these examples is not the most important theme, it is almost certainly a theme.

Be aware that even sympathetic characters are probably going to be flawed in more sophisticated fiction. Real people are complicated. So are good literary characters.

First Person Narrators

Whether they would normally be sympathetic or unsympathetic, be aware that just by giving the reader one perspective it tends to make them *seem* sympathetic.

This is seldom an issue (as it is more common for first person narrators to actually be sympathetic). However, there are texts where the first person narrator is meant to be judged by the reader. In such cases, do not be lulled by the persuasive force of the first person point of view. As always, indirect characterization is a better guide to how you are supposed to feel about a character than what they say aloud or think in an interior monologue.

Flawed or unreliable first person narrators work by showing more than they intend to show, and they often are a poor judge of their own motivations and feelings. Again, if you are attentive to the indirect characterization, this should not be an issue.

The Unreliable Narrator

These are less common than you think. Many famous unreliable narrators are actually just unsympathetic narrators who are still giving the reader accurate information. That said, the unreliable narrator is obviously a real phenomenon.

Typically, an unreliable narrator exists in narratives with a lot of irony, and the presence of one can alert you to these kinds of tonal possibilities. Lewis Carroll's Alice is a good example. She's very young, so her perceptions are not 100% accurate (because she lacks experience). Because of this, the text really operates on two levels. Alice (and Carroll's younger readers) are more likely to interpret events literally, while the more adult perspective of the narrator (a surrogate for an adult reading the books to children) often has a bit of affectionate fun at Alice's expense.

Even limiting ourselves to the Humpty Dumpty excerpt, Alice does not know how seriously to take the arrogant egg, as he represents the voice of adult authority. He's talking nonsense, of course, and Alice even suspects it, but she cannot be sure. The adult reader can, however, and reading about her discomfort is the source of much of the humor. The irony is affectionate, but it's still there.

Young person narrators are typically unreliable to some degree, as are characters with mental illness (often only gradually revealed) and those with a slippery relationship to the truth. Obviously arrogant or pompous characters are often unreliable narrators in satirical texts.

The Authorial Voice

Author surrogates are usually the characters that are the most developed and possess the most interiority.

Do not assume, however, that even obvious author surrogates are meant to be wholly sympathetic. They're very likely the protagonist, and they're almost certainly meant to be broadly sympathetic. However, they can still be deeply flawed. Those who read the novel by I.B. Singer over the summer understand how unsparing this author can be to characters who are thinly veiled versions of himself. As always, pay attention to indirect characterization, and you won't get the wrong idea.

If you are dealing with an obvious author surrogate, this has obvious implications for determining themes, since you have more insight into the author's actual thoughts.

At the same time, author and character are distinct-- even in the case of author surrogates.

Static and Dynamic Characters

Do not assume that just because a character grows or changes (i.e., that s/he is dynamic) that the reader is supposed to sympathize with him or her. While this is generally true, be attentive to the possibility that characters can change for the worse.

By the same token, a static character (one who does not grow or change) need not be an unsympathetic one. One would not want, for example, a fundamentally good person to alter his or her course. That said, if a character was given the opportunity to change for the better, and s/he did not take advantage of this opportunity, the text probably intends for the reader to judge that character harshly.

