

The Story of Don Achille (Chapter 2)

It was her fault. Not too long before-- ten days, a month, who can say, we knew nothing about time, in those days-- she had **treacherously taken my doll and thrown her down into a cellar**. Now we were **climbing toward fear**; then **we had felt obliged to descend, quickly, into the unknown**. Up or down, **it seemed to us that we were always going toward something terrible that had existed before us yet had always been waiting for us, just for us**. **When you haven't been in the world long, it's hard to comprehend what disasters are at the origin of a sense of disaster: maybe you don't even feel the need to**. **Adults, waiting for tomorrow, move in a present behind which is yesterday or the day before yesterday or at most last week: they don't want to think about the rest**. **Children don't know the meaning of yesterday, of the day before yesterday, or even of tomorrow, everything is this, now: the street is this, the doorway is this, the stairs are this, this is Mamma, this is Papa, this is the day, this the night. I was small and really my doll knew more than I did. I talked to her, she talked to me**. She had a plastic face and plastic hair and plastic eyes. She wore a blue dress that my mother had made for her in a rare moment of happiness, and she was beautiful. Lila's doll, on the other hand, had a cloth body of a yellowish color, filled with sawdust, and she seemed to me ugly and grimy. The two spied on each other, they sized each other up, they were ready to flee into our arms if a storm burst, if there was thunder, if someone bigger and stronger, with sharp teeth, wanted to snatch them away.

We played in the courtyard but as if we weren't playing together. Lila sat on the ground, on one side of a small barred basement window, I on the other. **We liked that place**, especially because behind the bars was a metal grating and, against the grating, on the cement ledge between the bars, **we could arrange the things that belonged to Tina, my doll, and those of Nu, Lila's doll**. There we put rocks, bottle tops, little flowers, nails, splinters of glass. I overheard what Lila said to Nu and repeated it in a low voice to Tina, **slightly modified**. **If she took a bottle top and put it on her doll's head, like a hat, I said to mine, in dialect, Tina, put on your queen's crown or you'll catch cold**. If Nu played hopscotch in Lila's arms, I soon afterward made Tina do the same. Still, it never happened that we decided on a game and began playing together. **Even that place we chose without explicit agreement**. **Lila sat down there, and I strolled around, pretending to go somewhere else**. **Then, as if I'd given it no thought, I, too, settled next to the cellar window, but on the opposite side**.

Direct characterization

→ How Elena explicitly characterizes Lila and childhood: 1) Lila is treacherous; 2) children are obliged to explore the world; 3) children exist in a world of the concrete present

Indirect characterization →

Behaviors and attitudes from which the reader must draw an inference to characterize: 1) Lila throws Elena's doll into a cellar; 2) the children descend into a frightening place; 3) Elena describes (without comment) the perspective of a child (thoughts and actions)

Conclusions → In this section the direct and indirect characterization agree. Elena characterizes a behavior then gives an illustrative example that supports her interpretation.

In the second paragraph, the connection is less straightforward. Elena **directly** says the two liked the place, and then **describes** fun behaviors that illustrate why. However, one can also infer something about the early dynamic of the relationship from this first sustained encounter: 1) Lila leads; Elena follows; 2) Lila doesn't instinctively need Elena; Elena courts her favor.

Conclusions → Yes, they liked the place because fun stuff happens there. More tellingly, however, they like the place because they are together, and everything that defines the initial stages of their relationship is already present. In other words, there is a subtle gap in awareness between what they understand as children (*we like it because we do fun stuff*) and what makes the episode truly meaningful (*we forged a lasting connection*). The adult narrator understands this (the previous paragraph's discussion differences between an adult and child's perspectives makes this clear), but she allows this understanding to exist at the level of an inference that is most clearly made once one knows more of the nature and importance of the relationship.