

## More Help with the Kōno Assignment – Direct and Indirect Characterization

**Characterization** is defined as the method a writer uses to reveal the personality of a character in a literary work.

Personality may be revealed (1) by what the character says about him or herself; (2) by what others reveal about the character; and (3) by the character's own actions. (1) and (2) are examples of **direct characterization** (because someone is stating a conclusion that tells the reader something the personality of a character), and (3) is an example of **indirect characterization** (because the reader is being supplied with information and forced to draw her own conclusions).

This sounds terribly complicated and self-important, but it really isn't. It's as simple as the old show/tell distinction that one learns in elementary school. When one *tells* (I say something about myself; someone says something about me; a narrator says something about me) the author is directly charactering me (*He is like this*). When an author *shows* (describing my action), on the other hand, you learn about me through my actions, drawing your own conclusions.

Let us analogize to real life to make this concept clear. If you are going to a class for the first time, you will have to accommodate yourself to that particular instructor and what he or she expects from you. Perhaps you've heard before what a demanding grader he or she is. *This is like direct characterization because someone has told you that the teacher is demanding.* When the teacher introduces him or herself, perhaps he or she also mentions his or her high standards. *This is also like direct characterization because someone is telling you (the teacher herself) that he or she is demanding.* Later, once you've gotten some feedback on your assignments, however, you draw your own conclusions (which may or may not agree with what others say about the teacher or what the teacher says about him or herself). *This is like indirect characterization because one examines the data and draws the relevant conclusions.*

Elementary and middle school language arts teachers love to repeat blanket rules like, "Show, not tell," but really that's a bit of an oversimplification, as there will almost always be some combination of the two. In general, yes, it's probably better to let the reader draw his or her own conclusions about characters, but there are number of very good reasons why an author also might want to use direct characterization too.

For now, read the following passage from Chapter 28 of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, in which the author introduces one of the most famous characters in literature-- Captain Ahab, the master of the whaling vessel *Pequod*-- through the eyes of his narrator Ishmael:

It was one of those less lowering, but still grey and gloomy enough mornings of the transition, when with a fair wind the ship was rushing through the water with a vindictive sort of leaping and melancholy rapidity, that as I mounted to the deck at the call of the forenoon watch, so soon as I levelled my glance towards the taffrail, foreboding shivers ran over me. Reality outran apprehension; Captain Ahab stood upon his quarter-deck.

There seemed no sign of common bodily illness about him, nor of the recovery from any. He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness. His whole high, broad form, seemed made of solid bronze, and shaped in an unalterable mould, like Cellini's cast Perseus. Threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish. It resembled that perpendicular seam sometimes made in the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree, when the upper lightning tearingly darts down it, and without wrenching a single twig, peels and grooves out the bark from top to bottom, ere running off into the soil, leaving the tree still greenly alive, but branded. Whether that mark was born with him, or whether it was the scar left by some desperate wound, no one could certainly say. By some tacit consent, throughout the voyage little or no allusion was made to it, especially by the mates. But once Tashtego's senior, an old Gay-Head Indian among the crew, superstitiously asserted that not till he was full forty years old did Ahab become that way branded, and then it came upon him, not in the fury of any mortal fray, but in an elemental strife at sea. Yet, this wild hint seemed inferentially negatived, by what a grey Manxman insinuated, an old sepulchral man, who, having never before sailed out of Nantucket, had never ere this laid eye upon wild Ahab. Nevertheless, the old sea-traditions, the immemorial credulities, popularly invested this old Manxman with preternatural powers of discernment. So that no white sailor seriously contradicted him when he said that if ever Captain Ahab should be tranquilly laid out-- which might hardly come to pass, so he muttered-- then, whoever should do that last office for the dead, would find a birth-mark on him from crown to sole.

So powerfully did the whole grim aspect of Ahab affect me, and the livid brand which streaked it, that for the first few moments I hardly noted that not a little of this overbearing grimness was owing to the barbaric white leg upon which he partly stood. It had previously come to me that this ivory leg had at sea been fashioned from the polished bone of the sperm whale's jaw. "Aye, he was dismasted off Japan," said the old Gay-Head Indian once; "but like his dismasted craft, he shipped another mast without coming home for it. He has a quiver of 'em."

I was struck with the singular posture he maintained. Upon each side of the *Pequod's* quarter deck, and pretty close to the mizzen shrouds, there was an auger hole, bored about half an inch or so, into the plank. His bone leg steadied in that hole; one arm elevated, and holding by a shroud; Captain Ahab stood erect, looking straight out beyond the ship's ever-pitching prow.

Notice the narrator starts with a lot of direct characterization (Ahab is lean, sculptural, and commanding in bearing-- creating in Ishmael an impression of "overbearing grimness").

*Why does Melville start with direct characterization?* Pretty simple, really. Ishmael has never seen Ahab before, so he's forming first impressions, and Melville has him describe what he sees and draw the appropriate conclusion.

*Wouldn't that mean that only the conclusion ("the whole grim aspect of Ahab") is the direct characterization and that the rest is indirect?* If you like. These aren't hard and fast categories, merely distinctions that are more or less useful depending on the circumstances. I would characterize the first bit of the passage (staves and sculptures and scars) *more* as direct characterization because Ishmael is hard at work telling you exactly what it all means, but if a student were to write about how the indirect characterization (looking like a man partially burned at the stake/sculpted demi-god and possessing a sinister white scar) agrees with the direct characterization (Ahab's a bit grim), I wouldn't quibble too much. It's a very obvious and straightforward way to complete the assignment, the sort of approach that would result in a B or C without too much thought or effort (but would be unlikely to result in an A because it is such an obvious point).

More interesting to me, however, is to compare what is (at least broadly) direct characterization with what is obviously indirect characterization, namely the discussion of Ahab's whalebone leg at the end of the passage. I write *obviously* indirect because (unlike the first part of the passage) Ishmael doesn't tell the reader what to think about it.

What do we know? Ahab lost the leg off the coast of Japan, but continued the voyage with the whalebone prosthetic. *Hmmm, sounds like someone who is very resolute of purpose. Nothing's going to stop this guy from achieving his goals.* The artificial limb is fashioned from the same material as that which cost him his natural limb (whether it was literally chewed off by a whale or, more broadly, lost in the business of hunting whales). *This one's more difficult to read. What kind of guy likes to continually remind himself of what was probably his greatest failure? A perfectionist (who doesn't like to repeat mistakes), perhaps?* Ahab has a lot of these whalebone peg legs. *A careful man, then. One who prepares for the worst-case scenario.* He has bored holes into the deck to allow himself to stand steady no matter the weather. *This is the sort of man who does not take "no" for an answer. When circumstances are less than ideal, he nonetheless finds a way to get what he wants. A problem-solver, this one.*

Notice, I'm drawing these conclusions, not the narrator. That's what makes it indirect characterization.

*But can't one draw conclusions from direct characterization too?* Sure, I suppose, but unless there's irony or humor involved, it's generally not going to help you understand the character any more than the conclusion that is supplied to you. Ishmael concludes that Ahab is grim because he looks like a man partially burned at the stake. He's right; that *is* a bit grim. Imagine, however, if Ishmael were to say Ahab is a bit grim, but proceeds to describe him laughing and joking and chatting up a camp parrot perched on his shoulder. At that point-- where there's an obvious and measurable gap between the conclusions the reader is drawing and how the reader is being told to interpret what she reads-- you'd have something interesting to write about. In your more garden-variety direct characterization, not so much.

So how would I do the assignment? I might write something like this:

Ishmael initially characterizes Ahab as grim and foreboding based on his reaction to his physiology. For example, the narrator compares Ahab to “a man cut away from the stake,” where the fire had burned away that which had been inessential-- a desiccation or reduction to that which is most essential. Aside from unusual connotation of the image (Is Ahab a martyr? A heretic? A failed prophet? The novel will eventually support all of these readings), it suggests both an Ahab that has weathered experience and, more interestingly, an Ahab who has emerged from this tribulation as something both less (the burning away) and more (the survival from that which should have killed him) than an ordinary man. This idea is clearly linked to the next image, comparing Ahab to a statue made of “solid bronze” (paragraph 2). Obviously a statue does not live, yet it captures life-- a moment, a pose, a motion-- even in its solidity. Ahab, too, is a man, yet more than a man, compared as he is to a bronze of Perseus, the Greek demi-god of legend (significantly, a hero who also battled against sea monsters). All of this suggests someone who is both human but more than human and, paradoxically, its converse as well: a human who is less than human (a figurative rendering of Ahab’s lost leg). Here, the (mostly) direct and indirect characterization agree, as the reader is told how to interpret Ahab’s appearance, but leaving the reader to make sense of the puzzling imagery that perhaps reveals more about Ahab than even Ishmael realizes.

Interestingly, that which solidifies Ishmael’s impression of grimness, namely the whalebone prosthetic leg, is not noticed at first, reduced to a near afterthought in the description. Yet even though the description of the leg is more prosaic, the reader infers much through the catalog of detail Ishmael provides. Again, in this regard, Ahab is both less and more than a man. Described as “barbaric,” the connotation suggests both an excess (freedom, lack of restraint) as well as a lack (untempered by civilization). Similarly, the leg itself is compared to a ship’s mast by the Gay-Head Indian, an obvious correspondence to an artificial leg (as it is inert and lifeless), but a surprising one for a once vital limb. Once “dismasted,” however, Ahab acquires the prosthetic “without coming home,” illustrating not only Ahab’s resoluteness of purpose but the rough equivalence between flesh and whalebone-- as if the two were interchangeable (further supported by the idea of having a “quiver” of them). In other words, there is an obvious loss of humanity (in the loss of flesh replaced by a simulacrum), though it is not interpreted as loss by either the Gay-Head Indian (who makes the comparison), Ishmael (since it contributes to the larger-than-life impression Ishmael forms), or Ahab himself (as he does not bother to mourn his leg, replacing it immediately with an almost casual disdain) (paragraph 3). Thus, Ahab is set apart from the rest of the crew, a man whose handicap is not interpreted as such by those around him, a man whose intensity and focus transcend the mundane, inspiring a sense of awe in all who surround him. Paradoxically, his disability becomes a near-asset, as it establishes him as something more than ordinary, even as it is literally a reduction in form.

*How did you know to talk about the tension between less and more in the text? The assignment wasn't to do this.* Rather than responding to the assignment in a very literal and obvious way, I used the concept (direct and indirect characterization) to talk about what I found interesting in the text. Nobody should have to give you permission to use your brain, but somehow students don't understand that this is even an option. Not only are you allowed to use the task as a springboard for developing your own insights, it is strongly encouraged. This is among the things that separate good writers from great writers.

*Aren't you leaving out a lot of stuff you could have talked about?* Correct. For example, I ignored the entire discussion of Ahab's scar, even though I certainly could have used it in a discussion of this concept. Similarly, I could have talked at much greater length about what the indirect characterization implies. You have to narrow, though, when you choose your approach to a task. Going a mile wide and an inch deep has its place, but in this class, on this test, you're almost always better off focusing intensely on a sub-set of possible ideas. If you are incapable of developing an interesting idea at length (usually because you don't understand the passage or what to do)-- then *and only then* should you be practicing hit-and-run analysis.

*Why didn't you use the words "indirect characterization" in the second paragraph, even though this was what you were writing about?* I paraphrased the concept by writing, "The reader infers much through the catalog of detail Ishmael provides." This allows me to avoid repeating words (since I had just used the term at the end of the last paragraph), making my analysis seem more sophisticated than it really was. A lot of times it is better to avoid jargon altogether, as it often doesn't help to clarify your argument. A classic example of this is diction analysis, where it is usually best to avoid the word "diction" (notice I did this with the word "barbaric" in paragraph two).