

## THE DESCRIPTION OF CHARACTERS IN LITERATURE

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### Abstract:

American literature is the body of written works produced in the English language in the United States. Like other national literatures, American literature was shaped by the history of the country that produced it. American writing began with the work of English adventurers and colonists in the New World chiefly for the benefit of readers in the mother country.

**Key words:** literature, description of characters, dynamic, protagonist, antagonist  
Literature allows us to look into the lives of an endless collection of men and women and study human character. We can learn about people's hopes and fears, we can see them struggle through adverse circumstances, we can rejoice with them in moments of success and grieve with them in moments of desperation. In real life we have the opportunity to know intimately a relatively small number of people - family members, loved ones, close friends. Literature allows us to multiply that number by giving us access to the private thoughts and lives of an endless assortment of fascinating and memorable people.

### Defining characters

When we analyse characters in fiction, we must pay attention to the following aspects:

- their relationship to the plot that is whether they play a major part in the events of the story or have a minor role.
- the degree to which they are developed. It means whether they are they complex characters or one-dimensional.
- their growth in the course of story. In other words whether they remain the same throughout the story or some significant changes in their personalities take place.



In order to discuss these issues, we need to know the following terms.

The central character of the plot is called the **protagonist**. Without this character there would be no story. The character against whom the protagonist struggles is called the **antagonist**. In many novels, however, the antagonist is not a human being. It may, for example, be the natural environment in which the protagonist lives, or society, or illness, or even death.

The terms protagonist and antagonist do not have moral connotations and therefore, should not be confused with 'hero' and 'villain'. Many protagonists are a mixture of good and evil elements.

Other characters in a story may be referred to as major or minor characters, depending on the importance of their roles in developing the plot. Characters are either major or minor and either static (unchanging) or dynamic (changing). The character who dominates the story is the major character.

Any of the persons involved in a story or play may have the distinguishing moral qualities and personal traits of a character. According to their features we divided the characters as following:

**Round characters**, like real people, have complex, multi-dimensional and many-sided personalities. They show emotional and intellectual depth and are capable of growing and changing. Major characters in fiction are usually round.

**Flat characters** embody or represent a single characteristic. Flat characters whose personality are summed up in one or two traits. They are the miser, the bully, the jealous lover, the endless optimist. They may also be referred to as types or as caricatures when distorted for humorous purposes. Flat characters are usually minor characters. However, the term 'flat' should not be confused with 'insignificant' or 'badly drawn'. A flat character may in fact be the protagonist of the story, in particular when the writer wishes to focus on the characteristic he or she represents. Some highly memorable characters, particularly in satirical or humorous novels, can be defined as flat.

**Dynamic** A character who during the course of a story undergoes a permanent change in some aspect of character or outlook. This type of characters change as a result of the experiences they have. The most obvious examples can be found in initiation novels which tell stories of young people who grow into adults.



However, dynamic characters can be found in many other types of stories. Major characters in novels are usually dynamic.

**Static** characters remain untouched by the events of the story. Static character who is the same sort of person at the end of a story as at the beginning. They do not learn from their experiences and consequently they remain unchanged. Static characters are usually minor characters, but sometimes a writer makes a static character the protagonist of his story, because he wishes to analyse a particular type of personality. Static characters also play major roles in stories that show how forces in life, such as the social environment or the family, sometimes make it hard for people to grow and change.

**Foil** characters . A minor character whose situation or actions parallel those of a major character, and thus by contrast sets off or illuminates the major character; most often the contrast is complimentary to the major character.

**Stock** characters. A stereotyped character: one whose nature is familiar to us from prototypes in previous literature.

**Minor** characters. Those figures who fill out the story but who do not figure prominently in it.

**Existential** characters. A person, real or fictional, who, whatever his or her past or conditioning, can change by an act of will.

Readers can learn about characters in many ways, including:

- Physical traits
- Dialogue
- Actions
- Attire
- Opinions
- Point of view

There are no limits on the types of characters who can inhabit a story: male or female, rich or poor, young or old, prince or pauper. What is important is that the characters in a story all have the same set of emotions as the reader: happiness, sorrow, disappointment, pain, joy, and love.

Another important aspect of character analysis is determining how the author presents and establishes a character. There are two basic methods for conveying character: **telling and showing**.



**Telling** involves direct intervention and commentary by the author. He interrupts the narrative to comment on the character's personality, thoughts or actions. The guiding hand of the author is clearly evident as he helps us to form opinions about the character.

When an author uses the technique of **showing**, he steps aside and allows the characters to reveal themselves through what they do and say. His voice is silent. The reader is asked to infer character from the evidence provided in the dialogue and action of the story. When the author chooses the showing method, the revelation of character is generally gradual. The reader must be attentive and receptive, and use his intelligence and memory to draw conclusions about the character's identity.

Modern authors tend to favor showing over telling, but most writers use a mixture of both methods.

In real life what people say reveals a lot about who they are and what they think. Similarly, in fiction, what a character says can help us to understand basic elements of his personality. The character's attitude towards others may also emerge from the dialogue. Important information about his origin, education, occupation or social class may also be revealed by what he says and how he says it. However, characters in stories do not always say what they really think. Just like people in real life, they can be deceptive and create a false image of themselves.

We can learn a lot about a character's emotions, attitudes and values by examining what he does in the course of the story. We should try to understand the motives for the character's actions, and discover the underlying forces that make him behave the way he does.

The time and place in which the story unfolds may provide useful information about the characters. If events take place during a particular historical period (the Middle Ages, the French Revolution, the Vietnam War) the characters' ideas and actions may be shaped by important external events. The characters' physical surrounding may help us to understand their psychological make-up. References to the social setting may also give us some helpful insight.



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