Character: Revealing Human Nature

*By John Leggett*

Creating characters- telling what human beings are like- is the whole point of writing stories. A story is really only interesting to us as readers because of what it tells us about people and how it makes us feel about them.

A magazine editor once told me that all you need to tell a story is a character, an adjective, and a series of choices that the character must make. Let’s call our character Adam, give him the adjective *cheap*, have him invite Tina out for her birthday, and see what happens.

If we are told that he has fifty dollars yet walks Tina the sixteen blocks to the concert, pretending not to notice the approaching bus, we know our Adam. We are not surprised when Adam chooses cheap seats in the bleachers. Later, at the restaurant, we know he’ll be looking anxiously at the right-hand side of the menu (where the prices are listed).

What we are curious about is how Tina will respond to this cheap character. Suppose that at the restaurant, Adam recommends, instead of the four-dollar hamburger, the ten-dollar steak? A surprise, a change in character! Love, that powerful tonic, has done what no amount of reasoning could do- and we recognize with satisfaction a truth, a revelation of how we and our fellow human beings behave.

Of course, people are much more complex than a single adjective can suggest, and that is the joy and the difficulty, of storytelling. How does a writer build a character out of words, someone who will seem to become flesh and blood and rise off the page, a fully realized Scarlett O’Hara or Ebenezer Scrooge or Huck Finn?

Creating Character

1. The most obvious method of characterization is the character’s **speech**. Think of how you can recognize your friends from what they say- not just from their tone of voice, but also from the kinds of words they use (big inflated words or little punchy ones; formal words or slangy ones). Think of how some people reveal their values by using words that always allude to what things cost, rather than to how pleasurable it beautiful they are. Reading the characters’ dialogue in a story is like listening in on a conversation.
2. Writers also use **appearance** to create character. We can tell so much simply from the way a writer describes how a person looks and sounds. Charles Dickens lets us see Scrooge at once:  
     
   *The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice.*  
   Clearly, Dickens wants us to think of Scrooge as a character whose cold heart is reflected in his whole appearance.  
     
   The kinds of clothes a character wears can give us hints too. As readers, we will respond one way to a character wearing a pin-striped suit and carrying a briefcase, and another way to a character wearing faded jeans and carrying a copy of *Of Mice and Men*.
3. In fiction a writer can even take us into the character’s minds to reveal their **private thoughts**. In this sense fiction has an advantage over real life. We might learn that one character detests his brother’s drinking or that another one sympathizes with his father for his troubles at his job. We might learn how one character secretly feels when he sees the bully picking on the smallest kid in the schoolyard or how another feels as she watches her grandmother’s coffin being lowered into the ground.
4. We can learn about characters by watching **how other characters in the story feel about them**. We might learn, for instance, that a salesman is a good guy in the eyes of his customers and a generous tipper in the eyes of a local waiter; but he is cranky and selfish in the eyes of his family. Dickens tells us how Scrooge affected other people:  
     
   *Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, with gladsome looks, “My dear Scrooge, how are you? When will you come to see me?” No beggars implored him to bestow a trifle, no children asked him what is was o'clock, no man or woman ever once in all his life inquired the way to such and such a place, of Scrooge. Even the blind men’s dogs appeared to know him; and when they saw him coming on, would tug their owners into doorways...*
5. Most of all, we understand characters in fiction from their **actions**, from what we see them doing. How would you react to a girl of sixteen who, when you first meet her in a story, is dyeing her hair green? How would you react to another who, at five-thirty in the morning, is out delivering newspapers? Scrooge, when we first meet him on Christmas Eve, is working on his accounts- an action that instantly reveals his obsession with money.
6. Some writers use **direct characterization** too. This means that a writer tells us directly what a character is like or what a person’s motives are. In a famous listing of adjectives, Dickens tells us directly what kind of person Scrooge is:  
     
   *Oh, but he was a tightfisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching. Grasping, clutching, covetous old sinner!*

Modern writers do not tell us much directly about their characters. They most often use the first five methods listed here, which are called **indirect characterization**. This means that a writer *shows* us a character but allows us to interpret for ourselves the kind of person we are meeting. In fiction, as in life itself, it is much more satisfying to discover for ourselves what characters are truly like.

Working with a partner & using the photo provided, characterize ONE person is the picture using all SIX types of characterization. You will have SIX paragraphs on your completed assignment. You will have your own unique paragraphs for Personality, Appearance, Actions, and Thoughts & Feelings. Your partner will write the Other Character’s Opinion and you will have identical Speech paragraphs. Good luck & have fun.

Direct Characterization:

Personality

Indirect Characterization :

Appearance

Speech

Actions

Thought & Feelings

Other Character’s Opinions