**Narrative: CHARACTER[[1]](#footnote-1) & CHARACTERISATION**

Q: Why are people in narratives called characters rather than persons?

* To emphasise that they are only representations of people, constructions of the author to serve a certain function in the narrative
* We form a mental construct of the character on the basis of the information we get from the text – that image will necessarily be informed by our experience (life/reading/film/pictorial)

Analysing characters, we focus on two areas of enquiry:

1. **Techniques of Characterisation** – HOW does the text inform us about the characters?
2. **Character functions** – WHAT FUNCTION do characters have in the narrative?

**1. TECHNIQUES OF CHARACTERISATION**

- are used to create the mental construct of a character in our minds

- some aspects to be considered:

1. HOW is the character described?
2. BY WHOM is the character described?
3. HOW is characterization distributed through the text?
4. HOW RELIABLE is the source of information?
5. WHAT do we learn about the character’s inner life?
6. WHAT arrangements of contrasts are used to depict the character?

**1.1. EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT CHARACTERISATION**

* **someone tells EXPLICITLY** what a character is like

- sometimes a character is described explicitly through a **telling** (speaking) **name** (Squire Allworthy in Fielding’s *Tom Jones*)

* **characterization given IMPLICITLY**, through other character’s attitudes, actions, speech etc.

**1.2. CHARACTERISATION BY CHARACTER OR NARRATOR**

Characters can be described IMPLICITLY or EXPLICITLY

* by **narrator**
* by **another** **character** – when a character introduces another character, they often turn out to be an unreliable source and they reveal more about their own character than the one they are describing
* by the characters themselves (**self-characterisation**) – the picture the characters will give of themselves will often clash with how the narrative (including the language it uses) implicitly characterises them

**1.3. BLOCK CHARACTERISATION**

Crucial information about a character is given all at once

* It often includes features of both implicit and explicit description
* Is usually used when characters are first introduced
* More complex characters are usually characterised gradually throughout the narrative

Other aspects to be considered:

**1.4. RELIABILITY**

We automatically consider the reliability of the source of characterisation

* Self-characterisation will mostly be viewed with caution by readers
* Characterisations given by a heterodiegetic narrator will mostly considered the most reliable by readers

**1.5. INNER LIFE OF CHARACTER**

* The way characters are described provides us with different degrees of knowledge about their **inner life**. This is essential for the reader’s ability to identify and empathise with the character.

**1.6. CONTRASTS AND CORRESPONDENCES**

Characters are often defined in opposition to other characters, using

* explicit comparison – differences commented upon by the narrator
* implicit comparison – juxtaposition (often when characters are faced with the same difficulty/object/opponent; e.g. *Lord of the Rings* – the reaction of characters to the ring, how susceptible they are to its influence)

**2. CHARACTER FUNCTIONS**

Analysing characters, it is as important to consider how they are described as it is to think about their function in the narrative; this is also often based on their relation to other characters

* Plot- and character-oriented narratives mostly have one or more **MAIN CHARACTERs** (protagonists) and any number of **MINOR CHARACTERs**.

- the term “**PROTAGONIST**” has the advantage of not implying a value judgement (unlike hero/heroine; anti-hero/heroine)

- PROTAGONISTS dominate the narrative – sometimes they have an opponent – **ANTAGONIST**

- **MINOR CHARACTERS** often serve as “**FOILS**” to main characters (to make them shine fully); or they act as **CONFIDANTS** to the protagonist, thus allowing them to express themselves (this often allows self-characterisation on the part of the protagonist)

2.1. CHARACTER COMPLEXITY AND DEVELOPMENT

In this we consider how characters are **typified** and **individualised** in a narrative.

* **MINOR CHARACTERS** are often **mono-dimensional, static**

- often reducible to types (naïve innocent, philandering beau, wicked stepmother, faithful servant etc.)  
- allegorical characters may be considered as part of this category

* **FLAT** **characters** (term coined by E. M. Forster), i.e. **mono-dimensional** and **static** characters

- they represent one characteristic (e.g. Hopeful in J. Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*)

- they are often minor characters

* **MAJOR CHARACTERS** are mostly **multi-dimensional, dynamic/ round** (E. M. Forster)

- notable exceptions: Oliver Twist – good and unchanging (one-dimensional and static); Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (multi-dimensional but static).

- Sometimes minor characters are the dynamic ones and the protagonists stay the same (cf. Jane Eyre [static] and Mr. Rochester [dynamic])

Another way to consider **CHARACTERS**[[2]](#footnote-2)

Formalist approaches to text traditionally focus on plot and narrative structure. Methods informed by psychoanalysis focus on characters. But to consider character presentation is an essential part of narratological structures and analysis.

Characters rendered as either **TYPES (flat, static, mono-dimensional)** or **INDIVIDUALS (round, dynamic, multi-dimensional)**

* **TYPIFICATION** – used in Medieval allegories – to typify vices, virtues

- today they are widely relied on in advertising and cinema/TV  
- characters as types are juxtaposed or presented as part of a social setting – to offer feminist/abolitionist/anticlerical/post-colonial commentary

* **INDIVIDUALISATION**

- important feature of the novel

* Many modern fictional texts involve **both types of characterisation** (e.g. Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*)

**METHODS OF PRESENTATION** of CHARACTERS

* **TELLING** (cf. explicit characterisation above)

- **explanatory characterisation** – telling – character described by the narrator

* **SHOWING** (cf. implicit characterisation above)

- **dramatic characterisation** – showing – the narrator’s position avoided, the reader is not influenced by the narrator’s judgement

- this method creates the impression that the characters are perceived as in a play (Hemingway’s texts offer some famous examples)

**SUMMARY:**

Kinds of characters  
**typified character individualised character**flat, static, mono-dimensional round, dynamic, multi-dimensional

Models of presentation  
**explanatory method dramatic model  
(explicit characterisation) (implicit characterisation)**narration/telling dialogue/monologue/juxtaposition

1. Based on Stefanie Lethbridge and Jarmila Mildorf, *Basics of English Studies*,‘Chapter 2, Prose’, 49–55. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Based on Mario Klarer, *An Introduction to Literary Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998),16–20. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)