Character

What is Character?
In a literary work, characters are the persons who are given certain moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities by the author. There are two major types of characters: static and dynamic. Readers can analyze characters by their appearance, behavior and actions, biography, dialogue, emotions, and thoughts.

Two Major Types of Characters:
1. **Static**. The static character is one who is "flat" and two-dimensional. Such a character is usually recognized by one or two simple traits. The hallmark of a static character is that he or she will not change in spite of experience or conflict. This type of character remains unchanged by events and experiences. An example of a static character is Mistress Quickly in *Henry IV.*

2. **Dynamic**. The dynamic character is one who is "round" and three-dimensional. His or her personality, motives, and attitudes are complex. Such a character cannot be summed up by one or two traits. The hallmark of a dynamic character is change. This type of character will be changed and influenced by events and experiences. An example of a dynamic character is Pip in *Great Expectations.*

Criteria for Analyzing Character:
The reader can use the criteria below in order to analyze, interpret, and draw conclusions about a character.

- **Appearance.** Appearance generally falls into two categories: external and physical. External appearance consists of extrinsic qualities, such as clothing, jewelry, tattoos, or hairstyle. Through these external factors, you may determine a character's taste, social status, occupation, or personality. Physical appearance, on the other hand, consists of intrinsic qualities, such as height, weight, facial expression, or tone of voice. These physical factors can suggest different personality traits. For example, a muscular physique might suggest strength; a skinny physique might suggest weakness. Be careful, however, not to judge a character on appearance alone. Appearance and reality are not always the same.

- **Behavior and Actions.** In literature, all behavior and actions help define character. Nothing a character does is arbitrary or incidental. Small nuances of behavior need to be interpreted, as well as major decisive actions.

Therefore, when trying to define what a character is like, consider what that character does. Do his or her actions reveal courage, ignorance, cunning, or generosity? For your analysis to be complete, consider involuntary behavior, such as nervous twitching, fast talking, or profuse sweating.

- **Biography.** Often in short stories or novels, biographical information about a character will be revealed: place of birth, era of childhood, type of education, early careers, successes, failures, even the identity and occupation of the character's parents. Such information can be used to sharpen the picture of a character, or to give added credibility to traits and values that have been identified.

- **Dialogue.** Closely scrutinize what characters say and how they say it, for dialogue is significant. A character's speech reveals traits and values in two principal ways:
  1. **Direct Expression.** The correlation is patently clear between what the character says and who the character is. Nothing is hidden; nothing is subtly suggested. Direct expression requires little or no interpretation by the reader. What the character says provides immediate insight. For example, in *Paradise Lost*, the fallen angel Moloch states how he would like to deal with the angels left in heaven, "My sentence is for open war." Moloch's hostile nature is revealed directly.

  2. **Indirect Expression.** The correlation is implied between what the character says and who the character is. The meaning of words may be hidden or suggested. Thus, the reader must determine the unstated meaning of a character's words. For example, at a ball in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Darcy is asked if he'll join in the dancing. He replies, "All savages dance." At its face value, the statement could be a harmless observation about dancing. Instead, it reveals Mr. Darcy as a haughty man whose sense of superiority makes him disdainful of his company.

- **Emotions.** When interpreting a character, you will be trying to get below the surface of that character to see deeper meanings. To do so, take into account a character's temperament. Temperament may manifest itself in some general traits, such as whether a character is introverted or extroverted, optimistic or pessimistic, sensitive or indifferent. Or, temperament may reveal itself in specific emotional states, such as anger, melancholy, anxiety, compassion, or happiness.

- **Thoughts.** If an author uses "direct expression" to reveal a character's thoughts and values, you need only to note what these thoughts and values are, explaining why they are significant. However, a character's thoughts are rarely revealed directly. Therefore, you will need to interpret, infer, and draw conclusions about a character's thoughts. To do so, gather evidence from the above criteria. These criteria can all come together to form a composite sketch of a character, revealing his or her true opinions and beliefs.

- **What other characters say and think**. The statements and thoughts of one character regarding another can be a valid source of information. However, this information can be double-edged. While you may learn about a character based on the statements and thoughts of another, you will have to evaluate the accuracy and reliability of those statements and thoughts. A reliable character will usually be perceptive and a good judge of character; an unreliable character will be flawed in some way that inhibits his or her judgment.

How To Write about Character:
When writing about character, use the following three-step process. Keep in mind that this is a general approach; your instructor may have specific criteria for the writing assignment.

1. **Establish major character traits.** Pin down the character's traits. Because the main characters in a work will have depth and complexity, you should be able to distinguish at least three prominent traits. These traits may be closely related, but they must be distinctly different.

2. **Support major character traits with examples.** The traits you establish in step 1 will be based on general impressions. In step 2, however, you must support these traits with concrete examples. For example, if you assert that "vindictiveness" is a trait, you must substantiate vindictiveness with examples from the literary work.

3. **Explain how and why your examples substantiate a particular trait**. Step 3 is the most important (and most difficult) stage of your paper. You must go beyond merely linking examples with traits; you must elaborate your views of a character's traits with explanation. Your explanation must tell how and why your examples reveal a particular trait, whether the trait is moral, intellectual, or emotional.

Note:
This handout refers to characters in terms of people; however, other non-human entities can perform in the role of "characters." For example, animals, nature (rivers, mountains, oceans, etc.), and man-made creations (cities, machines, houses, etc.) can function as characters.

Remember:
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