

Analyzing Characters

Slovenly manners, a magnetic personality, a competitive streak—these are the kinds of qualities that can shape your impressions of other people. For example, an egomaniac is probably not someone you would want as a friend. But finding out *why* that person behaves the way he or she does might change your opinion. Characters in literature can be just as complicated as real people. By closely analyzing characters, you can get more out of the stories you read and gain insights into human nature.

COMMON CORE

Included in this workshop:
RL 3 Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or theme of a text.

Part 1: Character Development

Writers use many techniques to create their characters. Sometimes, the narrator of a story will tell you directly about a character, as in this example: “Enrique’s active imagination often got him into trouble.” More often, though, you will find out about characters indirectly. The writer may describe

- a character’s physical appearance
- a character’s actions, thoughts, and speech
- other characters’ reactions to and comments about the character

By examining these characterization techniques, you can infer a character’s **traits**, or qualities, such as insecurity or bravery. For example, what can you infer about this character from the following sentences? “Elena eyed her teammates critically. Am I the *only* one who knows how to play this game? she thought.”

The extent to which a writer develops a character depends on the character’s role in a story. Complex, highly developed characters, known as **round characters**, take center stage and seem the most lifelike. **Flat characters**, on the other hand, are one-sided.

ROUND CHARACTERS

Characteristics

- are complex; exhibit a variety of traits
- show a range of emotions
- display strengths and weaknesses
- often change over the course of a story



Role in the Story

- to serve as main characters who advance the plot
- to help develop the theme

FLAT CHARACTERS

Characteristics

- are defined by only one or two traits
- show only a few emotions
- may be stereotypes or stock characters
- don’t grow or change



Role in the Story

- to serve as minor characters who advance the plot or provide information
- to reveal something about the main characters

MODEL 1: CHARACTER TRAITS

How do Mrs. Wilson's thoughts about her daughter affect your impression not only of the daughter but also of Mrs. Wilson herself?

from **The Opportunity**

Short story by **John Cheever**

Mrs. Wilson sometimes thought that her daughter Elise was dumb. Elise was her only daughter, her only child, but Mrs. Wilson was not so blinded by love that the idea that Elise might be stupid did not occasionally cross her mind. The girl's father had died when she was eight, Mrs. Wilson had never
5 remarried, and the girl and her mother lived affectionately and closely. When Elise was a child, she had been responsive and lively, but as she grew into adolescence, as her body matured, her disposition changed, and some of the wonderful clarity of her spirit was lost. At sixteen she seemed indolent, and to have developed a stubborn indifference to the hazards and rewards of life.

Close Read

1. Based on Mrs. Wilson's thoughts about her daughter, how would you describe Elise?
2. What do Mrs. Wilson's thoughts reveal about the kind of mother she is? Cite details to support your answer.

MODEL 2: ROUND AND FLAT CHARACTERS

Here, a man named César reflects on the unfortunate turn his life has taken. As you read, pay attention to César's thoughts about his son.

from **A Place Where the Sea Remembers**

Novel by **Sandra Benítez**

When he was twenty-one, he had married Concha Ojeda. It was she who had allowed him to turn himself over to the sea. But now Concha was gone and in the months since the accident, the boy had gone mute and was clearly in decline. The boy needed a mother's love, he needed a father's strength, and
5 there was none of one and little left of the other. César thought of Concha's sister, who lived in Oaxaca. She had asked for the boy. She would raise him with her own, she had said at the wake. Since that time, César Burgos had agonized over his sister-in-law's offer and there were moments when he thought he would have to let the boy go.
10 He turned to his son, who sat at the table. . . .
"Why don't you speak?" Cesar cried, heat surging up his neck and into his cheeks.

Close Read

1. Is César a round or flat character? Cite details to support your answer.
2. Reread the boxed text. What do you learn about César from his thoughts about his sister-in-law's offer?

Part 2: Character Behavior

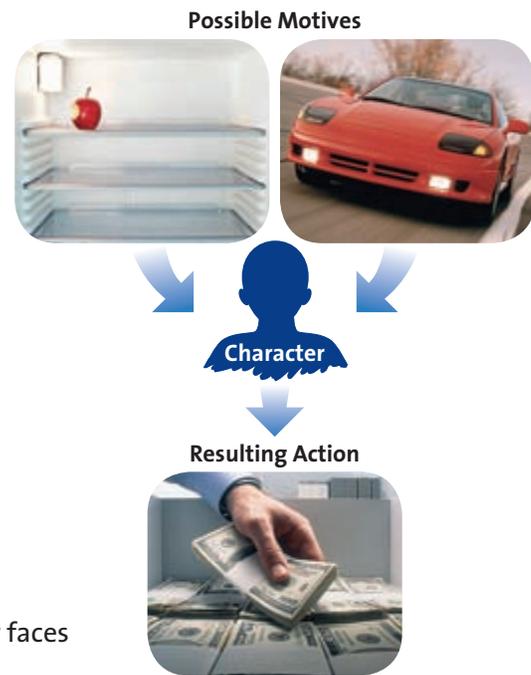
Once you understand *who* the characters are, the next questions concern *why* they act a certain way and *how* they change. Attempting to answer these questions not only takes you deeper into the story but also brings you closer to understanding the complexity of human behavior, including your own.

CHARACTER MOTIVATION

What prompted the man to steal a large sum of money? A character's **motivation**—the reasons behind his or her actions—can affect your perception of that character. For instance, the man might steal money to feed his family or to achieve a lifelong dream of wealth. How do these reasons affect your opinion of him?

Sometimes a character's motivation is stated directly in a story. Usually, though, you need to look for clues and details to try to figure out the motivation. As you read, pay attention to

- the narrator's direct comments about a character's motivation
- the character's actions, thoughts, and values
- the moral dilemmas, or questions, the character faces
- your own insights into human behavior



STATIC AND DYNAMIC CHARACTERS

In addition to knowing why a character acts a certain way, it is important to analyze how a character changes as a result of the events in a story. A character might grow emotionally, learn a lesson, or alter his or her behavior. Characters who change and grow as the plot develops are **dynamic characters**. In contrast, characters who remain the same are **static characters**.

STRATEGIES FOR ANALYZING CHARACTER CHANGE

First examine the change:

- Compare how a character was at the beginning of the story with how he or she is at the end.
- Is the change **external**, such as in appearance or circumstance? Is it an **internal** change of attitude or belief?
- What factors, events, or characters contributed to or caused the change?

Then analyze the meaning:

- What lesson does the character learn, or what insight does he or she gain?
- Does the change show personal growth, or does it lead to the character's downfall?
- Would the character be motivated to change without the contributing factors?

MODEL 1: CHARACTER MOTIVATION

These two excerpts come from a story about a girl's initiation into a sorority. Why does Millicent want to join the exclusive club?

from **INITIATION**

Short story by **Sylvia Plath**

What girl would not want to be one of the elect, no matter if it did mean five days of initiation before and after school, ending in the climax of Rat Court on Friday night when they made the new girls members? Even Tracy had been wistful when she heard that Millicent had been one of the five girls to receive an invitation.

"It won't be any different with us, Tracy," Millicent had told her. "We'll still go around together like we always have, and next year you'll surely get in."

"I know, but even so," Tracy had said quietly, "you'll change, whether you think you will or not. Nothing ever stays the same."

And nothing does, Millicent had thought. How horrible it would be if one never changed . . . if she were condemned to be the plain, shy Millicent of a few years back for the rest of her life.

Close Read

1. The boxed text reveals how difficult it is to get into the sorority. Find another place that explains Millicent's more personal reason for wanting to belong.
2. What does Millicent's desire to join the sorority reveal about her?

MODEL 2: CHARACTER CHANGE

Now read to see how Millicent changes by the end of the story.

As part of her initiation, Millicent has had to ask strangers on a bus what they had for breakfast. One man answered cheerfully, "Heather birds' eyebrows on toast." His unusual response helped Millicent put the experience in perspective.

Outside, the sparrows were still chirping, and as she lay in bed Millicent visualized them, pale gray-brown birds in a flock, one like the other, all exactly alike.

And then, for some reason, Millicent thought of the heather birds. Swooping carefree over the moors, they would go singing and crying out across the great spaces of air, dipping and darting, strong and proud in their freedom and their sometime loneliness. It was then that she made her decision.

Seated now on the woodpile in Betsy Johnson's cellar, Millicent knew that she had come triumphant through the trial of fire, the searing period of the ego which could end in two kinds of victory for her. The easiest of which would be her coronation as a princess, labeling her conclusively as one of the select flock.

The other victory would be much harder, but she knew that it was what she wanted. It was not that she was being noble or anything. It was just that she had learned there were other ways of getting into the great hall, blazing with lights, of people and of life.

Close Read

1. How has Millicent changed since the beginning of the story? Explain whether her change is external or internal.
2. What insight does Millicent gain? Cite details to support your answer.

Part 3: Analyze the Text

The following excerpts are from a story set on a farm in Ireland. Two characters, husband and wife, are bickering over something that they have clearly argued about many times before. As you read, analyze the characters' traits, motivations, and changes.

from **Brigid**

Short story by **Mary Lavin**

“I see there’s no use in talking about it,” said the woman. “All I can say is God help the girls, with you, their own father, putting a drag on them so that no man will have anything to do with them after hearing about Brigid.”

5 “What do you mean by that? This is something new. I thought it was only the bit of bread and tea she got that you grudged the poor thing. This is something new. What is this?”

“You oughtn’t to need to be told, a man like you that saw the world, a man that traveled like you did, a man that was in England and London.”

10 “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He took up his hat and felt it to see if the side he had placed near the fire was dry. He turned the other side toward the fire. “What are you trying to say?” he said. “Speak plain!”

“Is any man going to marry a girl when he hears her aunt is a poor half-witted creature, soft in the head, and living in a poke of a hut, doing nothing all day but sitting looking into the fire?”

15 “What has that got to do with anybody but the poor creature herself? Isn’t it her own trouble?”

“Men don’t like marrying into a family that has the like of her in it.”

20 “Is that so? I didn’t notice that you were put off marrying me, and you knew all about poor Brigid. You used to bring her bunches of primroses. And one day I remember you pulling the flowers off your hat and giving them to her when she started crying over nothing. You used to say she was a harmless poor thing. You used to say you’d look after her.”

25 “And didn’t I? Nobody can say I didn’t look after her. Didn’t I do my best to have her taken into a home, where she’d get the proper care? You can’t deny that.”

“I’m not denying it. You never gave me peace or ease since the day we were married. But I wouldn’t give in. I wouldn’t give in then, and I won’t give in now, either. I won’t let it be said that I had a hand or part in letting my own sister be put away.”

30 “But it’s for her own good.”

Close Read

1. What do you learn about the wife’s personality from the things she says to her husband? Cite specific statements to support your answer.
2. The boxed sentence gives one reason why the wife wants to put Brigid in a “home.” What other motivation is revealed in this excerpt?
3. Reread lines 18–22 and 26–29. What do you learn about the husband’s traits from the way he responds to his wife?

Later in the story, a sudden tragedy prompts the wife to reflect on her relationship with her husband and their argument over Brigid's care.

After their argument, the husband goes to visit Brigid at her tiny cottage within walking distance of the house. When he doesn't return by dark, his wife gets worried and goes to look for him. She finds his body at the cottage, his head badly burned by the hearth fire where he had fallen, while Brigid sits uncomprehending nearby.

It was dark at the pump, but she could hear people running the way she had pointed. Then when they had reached the cottage, there was no more running, but great talking and shouting. She sat down at the side of the pump, but there was a smell off her hands and desperately she bent forward and began to wash them under the pump, but when she saw there was hair stuck to her fingers she wanted to scream again, but there was a great pain gathering in her heart, not yet the pain of loss, but the pain of having failed; failed in some terrible way.

I failed him always, she thought, from the very start. I never loved him like he loved me; not even then, long ago, the time I took the flowers off my hat. It wasn't for Brigid, like he thought. I was only making myself out to be what he imagined I was. I didn't know enough about loving to change myself for him. I didn't even know enough about it to keep him loving me. He had to give it all to Brigid in the end.

He gave it all to Brigid; to a poor daft thing that didn't know enough to pull him back from the fire or call someone when he fell down in a stroke. If it was anyone else was with him, he might have had a chance.

Oh, how had it happened? How could love be wasted and go to loss like that? . . .

Suddenly she thought of the heavy feet of the neighbors tramping the boards of the cottage up in the fields behind her, and rising up, she ran back up the boreen.¹

"Here's the poor woman now," someone said, as she thrust past the crowd around the door.

They began to make a way for her to where, on the settle bed, they had laid her husband. But instead she parted a way through the people and went toward the door of the room off the kitchen.

"It's Brigid I'm thinking about," she said. "Where is she?"

"Something will have to be done about her now all right," someone said.

"It will," she said, decisively, and her voice was as true as a bell.

She had reached the door of the room.

"That's why I came back," she said, looking around her defiantly. "She'll need proper minding now. To think she hadn't the strength to run for help or pull him back a bit from the fire." She opened a door.

Sitting on the side of the bed, all alone, she saw Brigid.

"Get your hat and coat, Brigid," she said. "You're coming with me."

1. boreen: a narrow country lane.

Close Read

1. Reread the boxed text. What motivated the wife to be kind to Brigid initially?
2. How does the wife change during the story? Explain the lesson she has learned by the end.
3. Do you think the wife would have changed had her husband not died? Support your opinion with evidence.
4. "Brigid" is the title of this story, yet Brigid herself never speaks. Is she a flat or round character? Support your answer.