

Literary Analysis Step 4 – Focus on Characterization

To analyze literature it is essential to study not just the storyline but also the characters that populate and create the story. Think of any work of literature and you think of characters: likeable, hateful, beautiful, important, but above all, memorable, if the work itself is to be remembered. In this article you will find an overview of the literary ‘types’ of characters and the purposes they serve in a story. So much of what we can learn about a story comes from ‘listening’ to the characters, so don’t short-change this Focus.

Literary Conflict

EVERY story has at least two essential elements: a central character and a problem. The problem is of course called the ‘conflict’. Conflict is the collision between two opposing ‘motivations’. The conflict is what drives the story forward and what essentially causes the changes in the main characters. The conflict can be between:

1. A character and nature – a story of survival against all odds [think 127 Hours]
2. Two characters – the good guy/bad guy stories [think James Bond]
3. Two sides of a single character – a decision that must be made, a character flaw that gets one in trouble [think Contents of a Dead Man’s Pocket]
4. A character and society – a person going against the assumptions and demands of his or her society [think Titanic]
5. A character and the supernatural – resisting ghosts and the occult [think True Blood]
6. A character and technology – the fight against the evils of over-mechanization [think Transformers]
7. A character and destiny – a human struggle for personal free will despite fate and expectations [think Macbeth]

Types of Characters

In order to be able to discuss the characters in a piece of literature and compare characters from more than one work, we need some vocabulary to use in describing them. There are many different terms used for this, covering all sorts of details about the characters. Here are the three most important aspects of literary characterization you need to understand.

Round vs. Flat

Some characters in a story we get to ‘know’ well. We learn what they look like, their back stories [history before the narrative opens], even what they want and why they do what they do. Usually these are the most important characters, for sure, but not always. Any character we learn much about is called ‘round’. Other characters who inhabit the story without letting us get to know them well are called flat.

It is very unusual to have a flat character as one of the main characters. Some depth of characterization is absolutely necessary if we are to learn to care about a character



very much! On the other hand, we don't NEED to know the motivation of a character that enters the story only briefly.

Dynamic vs. Static

All great stories are about change – things learned, characters refined, decisions made. You can be assured that your most important characters are dynamic – they change or cause change in others. Static characters, in contrast, do not change. Static characters have their places, but are almost never the central character[s] in the story.

Look for changes in characters, and the REASONS for those changes, and you will find the essential points of the story.

Developed vs. Stock

There are some characters we know enough about JUST because of their profession – the prissy librarian, the jovial barkeep, the sweet granny, the serious judge. These stereotypical Stock characters are very useful in story writing – they don't need a lot of description.

A developed character is one that the writer builds, sometimes beginning with a stock character, but then going deeper, farther into his personality and motivations. Quite often unexpected facets added to a stock character make for delightful, fascinating people in a tale.

Major Characters

Protagonist

The protagonist [or occasionally protagonists] is our central, sympathetic character. To figure out which IS the protagonist, ask yourself two simple questions:

1. Whose story IS it? Which character matters most to us? Who do we care the most about?
2. Which character makes the fateful decision or takes the fateful action that brings the conflict to climax [and then inevitably to resolution]?

When analyzing this character be sure to make notes about the following:

- Motivation – What does the protagonist want/need/have to achieve?
- Conflict – What is in the way? What does the protagonist THINK is in the way?
- Changes – How does the protagonist change – physically and/or in personality?
- Decisions – Which decision[s] was/were pivotal to the climax?

Antagonist



The antagonist is the character, or force that opposes the motivation of the protagonist. Record these things as you analyze:

- Description
- Personality [if there is one]
- Motivation[s]

Subordinate Characters

Subordinate characters are many. They are ‘everyone else’. However, no character is present just by chance. Each has one or more *raison d’etre*, or reason for being there. These reasons fall into three categories:

1. A Foil – a character who is in the tale to help us learn more about the protagonist. ‘Sidekicks’ do that, but so do other minor characters who demonstrate personality traits opposite to the protagonist, and so act as mirror-images that enhance our understanding of the protagonist. The two ‘Little Pigs’ who built their houses of hay and sticks help one see just HOW smart was the ONE who used bricks, for instance.
2. Comic Relief – the drama of a story is very often ‘interrupted’ by a funny scene that serves to heighten the overall tension in the piece. Some characters are just humorous by their appearance or personality, and their interaction with the protagonist is a humanizing one that can help keep a hero from being more irritating than sympathetic.
3. A Plot Device – a character who moves the story along without being a significant player. For instance, this might be the taxi driver who gets the detective to the crime scene. He is absolutely essential, but we need, and get, few if any details about him.

When reading you should record just a few things about subordinate characters.

- Name
- Description
- Personality
- Where in the plot they appear
- Purpose[s]

Remember that going forward with your analysis you will rely heavily on your understanding of the roles of the characters. Give this focus all the time it needs.

Download a blank Character analysis form [here](#).

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