

Literary Analysis - Step 4 Example – *The Lady or the Tiger?*

To analyze literature it is essential to study not just the storyline but also the characters that populate and create the story. Here is a look at the characters in Frank R. Stockton's classic short story, *The Lady or the Tiger?*

Conflict

This story is a morass of conflicts. There is conflict between the King and the 'thinking' folk, between the Princess and the King, between the Princess and the Lady, between the Young Man and the King. But none of these is the central conflict. Stockton is not shy about this. The central problem is: in what way can the Princess bear to lose her love? An internal conflict within the Princess is what drives, and ultimately ends, the story.

Types of Characters

Round vs. Flat

This story, you might say, has really only two round characters: the King and the Princess. After an extended description of the King and his 'semi-barbaric fancies,' we have a fairly good idea of his personality. When Stockton turns to the Princess, he tells us that she is the 'apple of his eye' and shares his 'semi-barbaric' character. What more do we need to know?

Now, as for the Young Man, the only information we get about him is that the Princess finds him the most honorable of men.

This kind of description of characters by the author is called Direct Characterization. In *The Lady or the Tiger* Stockton makes great use of Indirect Characterization. Indirect Characterization is the term for all those things the reader learns not through descriptions, but rather from the actions and dialog of the story.

When we take Indirect Characterization into consideration, we learn a lot more about both the Princess and the Young man. We see her love for him in her determination to learn the secrets behind the doors and also in her pale gaze as her love enters the arena. His love and trust in the Princess are shown in his certainty that she knows the secret and in the pure bravery with which he flings open the right hand door. This is a couple very deeply in love.

All of the other characters are flat. Their purpose is to provide the background for the heart of the conflict.

Dynamic vs. Static

Who changes in *The Lady or the Tiger?*



After consideration, it seems only the Princess changes. She ‘travels’ from imperious and powerful to horribly uncertain and then again to a horror at the pivotal decision that finally drives the story to its conclusion.

Developed vs. Stock

Nearly every character in this story begins with a stock archetype, and most never break out of these stock roles. One, however, does – the Princess. Isn’t it surprising that a powerful and passionate, semi-barbaric Princess should be driven to uncertainty by love and loss? If she, or we, were sure of the outcome, the tale would be so very much less effective!

Major Characters

Protagonist

Without a doubt the Princess is our Protagonist. Her motivation is love for her Young Man, but don’t forget her loathing for the chosen Lady behind one door! Her problem is clear – she must let him go, but can she more easily watch him die on the spot or watch him live as the husband of another, hated woman?

Antagonist

The King is, at least indirectly, the antagonist, since it is he who creates the situation that engenders conflict. His motivation, however, is not one of evil, but indeed one of love. He adores his daughter, and the Young Man is not good enough for her, and so he must go!

It’s funny how often the antagonist is not a ‘bad guy’ at all!

Subordinate Characters

Finally we need to consider the minor characters and their purpose in the story.

The Young Man. He is a plot device used to create the motivation for the Princess. One might also say he is a foil for the Princess, because he is willing to follow her lead without question.

The Lady Behind the Door. She is a plot device, pure and simple. She exists for the Princess to distrust and hate her and to provide one of two intolerable options.

The Tiger. Once again, here we have a plot device. Perhaps he is not exactly a character, but his carnivorous passion is important to the plot.

The Crowd. Entirely a foil for the Princess – excited where she is still, surprised where she is certain what fate awaits the Young Man.



The Thinking People. Here we have a fleeting touch of comic relief. How could anyone question the justice of the King's arena? Of course a thinking person could, but would not be wise to do so under the circumstances!

So you see how the whole story is encompassed in our study of the characters. Keep your notes on characterization – you will need them.

You can download the story of [The Lady or the Tiger?](#) You can also get a copy of my [Character Review for this story](#), as well as a [blank form](#) for your own use.

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