

**Lesson
Four**

Character

Aims

The aims of this lesson are to enable you to

- recognize and appreciate the ways in which an author builds characters
- recognize some of the many ways in which relationships are presented in literary texts

Context

In this lesson you will need to apply some of the basic techniques discussed in previous lessons – recognizing imagery, paying detailed attention to the choice of words, etc., – as these are essential building blocks with which an author creates character. Your personal response to a character is very important – and different readers often have different reactions, as they bring a different set of views and experiences to the text. However, it is also important to observe carefully and in detail in order to make sure your response isn't hasty or only vaguely based on the character being presented.



Oxford Open Learning

Introduction

Whenever we meet someone new, we build up our impression of them on the basis of their appearance, speech, actions and surroundings. In literature, authors introduce 'characters' – or people – to us as readers, and we get to know them in much the same way, making our judgments accordingly. Of course, as readers, we may be privileged with extra insights not available to real acquaintances (e.g. we might be told what someone is thinking). The more we get to know someone, the more subtle and complex our response to them will be.

In fiction, however, there is not time or space to develop this acquaintance without rigorously selecting details which are felt to be important in revealing character. In novels, short stories or poetry we come to understand characters and interpret their behaviour and their relationships very quickly. A good author can make his characters really believable (if that is his intention, though this is not always the case). The shorter the work of literature, the more rigorously the author needs to select the right details in order to capture the reader's interest and bring his characters alive.


The Character Portrait

The presentation of a character in literature is often called a character 'sketch' or 'portrait'. This is a metaphor from painting. Physical features and appearance are obviously part of what's involved in a 'pen portrait' but with words much more is possible. Character portraits range from in-depth psychological studies and life-histories – for instance, the character Isabel Archer in Henry James' novel *The Portrait of a Lady* – to short sketches which develop one major aspect of an individual, e.g. age, meanness, innocence, etc.

Physical Appearance

Sometimes an author may present a character in a very straightforward manner, discussing personality, psychology, temperament without elaboration:

Isabel Archer was a young person of many theories; her imagination was remarkably active. It had been her fortune to possess a finer mind than most of the persons among whom her lot was cast...

Activity 1	Try writing a character sketch of this type of yourself, a member of your family, or a friend.
	

You will probably have found it very difficult to do this type of personal analysis **and** make it interesting **and** make the description totally individual and precise. Henry James is a specialist in this type of deep, rather abstract, characterisation. Most authors prefer to communicate in more concrete terms, thus enabling the readers to see for themselves what kinds of people the author has created.

One of the most frequently used ways in which characters are depicted in literature is the description of physical appearance. This seems natural as, no matter how much else we know about someone, it is difficult to have any real sense of separate individual identity without a 'face' to attach it to. Usually it is not necessary to given an exhaustive portrayal; an author may choose one or two details which are most effective:

Gab - an aproned hemisphere and round, red greasy face.

Some details may be more revealing than others. For instance, in this story, by H.E. Bates, we are introduced to a rather eccentric character called Great Uncle Crow:

...a big gangling red-faced man with rusty hair came to the door. His trousers were black and very tight. His eyes were a smeary vivid blue, the same colour as the stripes of his shirt...

This, in itself, does not tell us a great deal although the story has given us other clues. Later, we are told more about Crow's appearance:

His belly was tight as a bladder of lard in his black trousers, which were mossy green on the knees and seat.

This small detail is perhaps more revealing of Uncle Crow's lifestyle than the previous description. In fact, physical appearance is actually most interesting when it is used to say something more about personality. Consider, for instance, the following description of a fair-haired young man with a ruddy complexion and blue eyes:

He had a ruddy, roundish face, with fairish hair, rather long. Flattened to his forehead with sweat. His eyes were blue, and very bright and sharp. On his cheeks, on the fresh ruddy skin were fine, fair hairs, like a down, but sharper. It gave him a slightly glistening look. Having his heavy sack on his shoulders, he stooped, thrusting his head forward.

Here, D.H. Lawrence uses basic physical details to give a very distinct, and threatening impression of this man's personality. In the story – called *The Fox* (can you see any connections?) – he has only just walked through the door, but has already made an impact, and the reader is somewhat intrigued to know what part he will play in the story.

We are born with such features as brown or blue eyes, black or blonde hair, and so on (though these we can change, too). To a large extent this sort of detail can only be made expressive of character through an act of imagination: if our eyes are small and our lips thin, it doesn't imply we are mean or small-minded, if our nose is pointed, we aren't necessarily a nosey character, and so on. These are *stereotypes*, which a good author will probably avoid. Physical features can be used in a less conventional way to express personality, however:

When she looked at him again, his face was like a mask, with strange, deep-graven lines and a glossy dark skin and a fixed look – as if carved half grotesquely in some glossy stone. His black hair on his smooth, beautifully shaped head seemed changeless.

And it can be used as a sign of feeling or emotion, as Adrian Mole shrewdly noticed:

Pandora's father stayed for a quick drink, then a pre-lunch one, then a chaser, then one for the road. Then we had one to prove that he never got drunk during the day. Pandora's lips started to go thin (women must teach young girls to do this). Then she confiscated her father's car keys and phoned her mother to come and collect the car... They were both drunkenly singing when Pandora's mother came in. Her lips were so thin they had practically disappeared.

Often, it is the more flexible aspects of our appearance which are potentially very rich in implication for character – such details, as, the way a person 'does' their hair (or not), the clothes they wear and their state of neatness, cleanliness and so on. In our own lives, the way we modify our appearance is a personal statement whether we intend it to be or not: a punk haircut, a school uniform, a suit, a prison outfit are some more obvious examples. We may learn only fairly superficial details about someone from their clothing – for instance, about their occupation and standard of living:

Entered the little lady in her finery and her crumpled prettiness. She would not be very old... perhaps younger than fifty. And it was odd that her face had gone so crumpled, because her figure was very trim, her eyes were bright, and she had pretty teeth when she laughed. She was very fine in her clothes: a dress of thick knitted white silk, a large ermine scarf with the tails only at the ends, and a black hat over which dripped a trail of green feathers of the osprey sort.

But there are many very subtle impressions which an author can exploit: for instance, whether we wear a uniform neatly or not may say something about our attitude to the authority which imposes the uniform, or about our neatness in other ways. Even in the descriptions above of Mrs. Hepburn, the fact that she is rather crumpled and wrapped thickly in furs and clothes is eventually used in the story as a sign of her rather 'dried up', artificial, doll-like nature. Although personal appearance is never a foolproof guide to personality, writers often use the expressive aspect of dress, fashion, etc. to develop character.

For example:

(i)

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress.

(ii)

She was broad-shouldered, with a regular face, and sat in one corner of the sofa. She was powdered carefully, had a reddened mouth – her golden hair was brushed fiercely up from the sides of her head, so that it formed a stiff ornament, like a curious helmet. Her right hand lay quiescently holding a burning cigarette, and she wore a checked tweed costume.

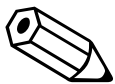
Activity 2

For each of the following extracts, write a paragraph saying:

- (a) what kind of person you think you are seeing, and
 (b) which words and phrases tell you this. Both of the extracts are by Dickens:

(i) 'The man who growled out these words, was a stoutly-built fellow of about five-and-thirty, in a black velveteen coat, very soiled drab breeches, lace-up half-boots, and grey cotton stockings, which included a bulky pair of legs, with large sweating calves; – the kind of legs, which in such costume, always look in an unfinished and incomplete state without a set of fetters to garnish them. He had a brown hat on his head and a dirty belcher handkerchief round his neck: with the long frayed ends of which he smeared the beer from his face as he spoke. He disclosed, when he had done so, a broad heavy countenance with a beard of three days' growth, and two scowling eyes; one of which displayed various parti-coloured symptoms of having been recently damaged by a blow.'

(ii) 'He was a rich man – banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not. A big, loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him. A man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins in his temples, and such a strained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open and lift his eyebrows up. A man with a pervading appearance on him of being inflated like a balloon, and ready to start. A man who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man. A man who was always proclaiming through that brassy speaking trumpet of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty ...'





Caricature

The portrayal above of Mr. Bounderby of Coketown stretches our imagination. If an author creates a character's physical appearance in this way with such freedom of invention, as to make it so heavily suggestive of personality that it quite loses an air of realism, the characterization is called a 'caricature'. This may be compared to 'regular' pen portraits just as cartoons may be compared to straightforward portraits. As in a cartoon, the physical quirks of an individual (who may have started off something like a real human

being) are exaggerated in order to express in an imaginative way the personality that the author wishes to evoke (and often mock). This can be a very effective technique, and was used with mastery by Dickens:

The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom, and the speaker's square forefinger emphasized his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster's sleeve. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves overshadowed by the wall. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's mouth, which was wide, thin and hard set. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's voice, which was inflexible, dry and dictatorial. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs like the crust of a plum pie, as if its head had scarcely warehouse room for the hard facts stored inside.

Activity 3

Look at the cartoon caricatures in some current newspapers. Do the physical features, which have been distorted beyond realism, in any way express the public personalities which are attributed to these various figures? Or are they just aiming at general ridicule?



Actions

Another way in which character can be expressed is through actions; in the same way that a nervous tic or stammer might reveal someone to be of a nervous disposition, or a slow, strolling gait might reveal someone to be relaxed and easy-going, an author can pick out a gesture, a habit or a single action and use it to illuminate another aspect of his character's personality. For instance, in this poem by T.S. Eliot, we read of a woman who is now past her prime, and is in some way trying to manipulate a younger man. She may be trying to make him feel guilty about leaving her. This situation, and the woman's desire to control, is neatly summed up in this small gesture:

Now that lilacs are in bloom
 She has a bowl of lilacs in her room
 And twists one in her fingers while she talks

Activity 4

Read the following passage from Susan Hill's novel *I'm the King of the Castle*.

What impression do you get of this eleven-year-old boy? Is it what you would expect from a child of that age? Which details in this passage, in your view, say the most about Edmund Hooper's personality?

'Edmund, why have you locked yourself in here? You will please open the door.'

Hooper stood very still, turning the pencil round and round inside the sharpener and watching the shaving of wood uncurl itself out of the ride, like a moth emerging from the larva.

'I am quite sure that you are in there, you need not pretend.'
 Silence.

'Edmund!'

In the end, he had to open the door.

'What are you doing, locked away here? It does not seem to me a very normal way to behave. You should be outside, getting plenty of fresh air, you should be showing Charles Kingshaw about the village.'

A great sheet of white paper was pinned on the wall, covered with curious lines, - little coloured dots, in blocks, together. In one corner, there was written:

Green	=	Napoleon's infantry
Blue	=	Napoleon's cavalry
Red	=	

Joseph Hooper looked at it. But he felt unwelcome here, his son stood, moving the pencil sharpener from hand to hand, waiting.

'But that is not what any battlefield ever was, that...' he made a gesture – for he wanted to talk, he did not wish to feel like an intruder in his son's room. He thought, we should be close together, we have only one another, I *ought* to be able to talk freely with him. But more than anything it angered him to see his son's careful map, he wanted to say this is nothing, *nothing*, this tight, neat, careful little plan, he wanted to tell the truth of the matter, to impart a vision of men and blood and horses, the boom and stench of gunfire and the noise of pain, the terrible confusion of it all. But he could not begin. Edmund Hooper stood, watching, sullen.



Speech

Although actions do speak very loudly in revealing personality, very few characters in literature have no opportunity to speak for themselves; the words we speak and the way that we say them are extremely important tools in characterization. For instance, read the following passages where the words that someone uses reveal to us something of their nature:

Now I have mentioned, and you have mentioned, that I am this day married to Tom Gradgrind's daughter. I am very glad to be so. It has long been my wish to be so. I have watched her bringing-up, and I believe she is worthy of me. At the same time – not to deceive you – I believe I am worthy of her.

Surroundings

Authors may also like to use the environment in which a character is 'found' or placed as an indirect – but very effective – way of bringing a character to life. The environment which one lives in or chooses is particularly important (e.g. a bedroom, or house, or street, or area where that person has chosen to live). The following example very clearly aims to tell us something about Mr. James Duffy, one of James Joyce's *Dubliners*:

Mr. James Duffy lived in Chapelizod because he wished to live as far as possible from the city of which he was a citizen and because he found all the other suburbs of Dublin mean, modern and pretentious. He lived in an old sombre house and from his windows he could look into the disused distillery or upwards along the shallow river on which Dublin is built. The lofty walls of his uncarpeted room were free from pictures. He had himself bought every article of furniture in the room: a black iron bedstead, an iron washstand, four cane chairs, a clothes-rack, a coal-scuttle, a fender and irons and a square table on which lay a double desk. A bookcase had been made in an alcove by means of shelves of white wood. The bed was clothed with white bed-clothes and a black and scarlet rug covered the foot. A little hand-mirror hung above the washstand and during the day a white-shaded lamp stood as the sole ornament of the mantelpiece. The books on the white wooden shelves were arranged from below upwards according to bulk. (...) Mr. Duffy abhorred anything which betokened physical or mental disorder.

Notice also the number of hard sounds in the sentences which describe Mr. Duffy's room ('c's and 'k's). Is this significant?

Activity 5

What kind of person would you expect to live here?

The little titty bit of a house, when he first saw it, surprised him very much. It was not at all unlike a black tarred boat that had either slipped down a slope and stuck there on its way to launching or one that had been washed up and left there in a flood. The roof of brown tiles had a warp in it and the sides were mostly built, he thought, of tarred beer-barrels.

The two windows with their tiny panes were about as large as chess-boards and Uncle Crow had nailed underneath each of them a sill of sheet tin that was still a brilliant blue, each with the words 'Backache Pills' in white lettering on it, upside-down.

H.E. Bates



The Use of Images to Describe Character

One major way in which writers communicate a sense of character is through the use of metaphor. For example, read this extract from a poem by Charles Causley, entitled *Ten Types of Hospital Visitor*:

The first enters wearing the neon armour
of virtue.
Ceaselessly firing all-purpose smiles
At everyone present

She destroys hope
In the breasts of the sick,
Who realize instantly
That they are incapable of surmounting
Her ferocious goodwill.

Such courage she displays
In the face of human disaster!

Fortunately, she does not stay long.
After a speedy trip round the ward
In the manner of a nineteen-thirties destroyer
Showing the flag in the Mediterranean,
She returns home for a week
– With luck, longer –
Scorched by the heat of her own worthiness.

In this satirical sketch, Causley paints a picture of the type of self-righteous hospital visitor who thinks she is doing an enormous amount of good. He achieves this mostly by using the metaphor of a gunship going to battle – rather than doing any good, she is something to be feared by patients, she imposes herself, she is belligerently benevolent. Causley manages to turn the situation round so that it is she who feels courageous – and in need of recuperation – despite the fact she is supposed to be offering support to the sick.

Relationships

Characters in literature, of course, are not usually portrayed in isolation, but in relationships with others, and as in 'real life', we come to understand personality much better by seeing how individuals interact. Authors use many of the methods mentioned above to depict credible relationships, and ones which might give us fresh insight into the way human nature works.

Conversation is very important. For instance this story is told almost all in dialogue of one type or another. After only a few words from each character, it is possible to understand the relationship between these two people, and in particular, the reason why Walter Mitty does so much daydreaming:

'We're going through!' The Commander's voice was like thin ice breaking. He wore his full-dress uniform, with the heavily braided white cap pulled down rakishly over one cold gray eye. 'We can't make it, sir. It's spoiling for a hurricane, if you ask me.' 'I'm not asking you, Lieutenant Berg' said the Commander. 'Throw on the power lights! Rev her up to 8,500! We're going through!'

'Not so fast! You're driving too fast!' said Mrs. Mitty. What are you driving so fast for?'

'Hmm?' said Walter Mitty. He looked at his wife, in the seat beside him, with shocked astonishment. She seemed grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in a crowd.

'You were up to fifty-five', she said. 'You know I don't like to go more than forty. You were up to fifty-five.' Walter Mitty drove on toward Waterbury in silence, the roaring of the SN202 through the worst storm in twenty years of Navy flying fading in the remote, intimate airways of his mind.

'You're tensed up again,' said Mrs. Mitty. 'It's one of your days. I wish you'd let Dr. Renshaw look you over.'

Writers also make use of environment and surroundings to evoke the atmosphere within a relationship. This extract from a skilful poem by Thomas Hardy, called *Neutral Tones*, describes the bleakness and drabness of the landscape as two people exchange a few words of conversation. Years later, the poet recalls the scene in the light of bitter experience, and those surroundings here come to be emblematic, for him, of the disappointments and deceptions of human relationships, and in particular of this relationship:

We stood by a pond that winter day,
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;
– They had fallen from an ash, and were gray...

Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,
And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me
Your face, – the God-curst sun, and a tree,
And a pond edged with grayish leaves.

The close observation of behaviour is the key to good characterization, whether the writer explores in great psychological detail or merely suggests personality by the apt choice of a few observations. Engaging characters – who we can hate, love, sympathise with, want to know better, and believe in, – are vitally important, especially in novels and short stories, in making literature interesting to read, and in keeping the reader's interest once captured.

Activity 6

Look at the following passage, taken from *The Young Visitors* by Daisy Ashford (nine years old). It exhibits an innocent and yet subtle insight into human nature, and a sensitivity to the significance of words and actions remarkable in so young an author.

Read through the passage carefully, and then write a paragraph tracing the thought and feelings of the two characters. What can we learn about either of them from reading the extract?

A Proposal

They arrived at Windsor very hot from the journey and Bernard at once hired a boat to row his beloved up the river. Ethel could not row but she much enjoyed seeing the tough sunburnt arms of Bernard tugging at the oars as she lay among the rich cushions of the dainty boat. She had a rather lazy nature but Bernard did not know of this. However he soon got dog tired and suggested lunch by the mossy bank.

Oh yes said Ethel quickly opening the sparkling champagne.

Dont spill any cried Bernard as he carved some chicken.

They eat and drank deeply of the charming viands ending up with merangs and chocolates.

Let us now bask under the spreading trees said Bernard in a passuinate tone.

Oh yes lets said Ethel and she opened her dainty parasole and sank down upon the long green grass. She closed her eyes but she was far from asleep. Bernard sat beside her in profound silence gazing at her pink face and long wavy eye lashes. He puffed at his pipe for some moments while the larks gaily caroled in the blue sky. Then he edged a trifle closer to Ethels form.

Ethel he murmured in a trembly voice.

Oh what is it said Ethel hastily sitting up.

Words fail me ejaculated Bernard horsly my passion for you is intense he added fervently. It has grown day and night since I first beheld you.

Oh said Ethel in supprise I am not prepared for this and she lent back against the trunk of the tree.

Bernard placed one arm tightly round her. When will you marry me Ethel he uttered you must be my wife it has come to that I love you so intensely that if you say no I shall perforce dash my body to the brink of yon muddy river he panted wildly.

Oh dont do that implored Ethel breathing rather hard.

Then say you love me he cried.

Oh Bernard she sighed fervently I certinly love you madly you are to me like a Heathen god, she cried looking at his manly form and handsome flashing face I will indeed marry you.
How soon gasped Bernard gazing at her intently.
As soon as possible said Ethel gently closing her eyes.
My Darling whispered Bernard and he seized her in his arms we will be marrid next week.
Oh Bernard muttered Ethel this is so sudden."



Summary of Lesson Four

Characters are the life of literature. In novels, stories, plays and much poetry, without them it would be impossible to get or keep the reader's interest.

Authors use a variety of methods to bring their characters 'alive' and to allow the reader to get to know them. These include:

- analysing thoughts and feelings and personality directly
- describing physical appearance and clothing, hair etc.
- using caricatures
- describing actions and gestures
- using speech — the words they say and how they say them
- describing their surroundings
- using imagery

Authors also portray their characters nearly always in relationships and this both enables us to get to know them as individuals and to see how they interact with others. For this, an author may describe relationships through:

- conversation
- imagery
- evoking the surroundings
- observing behaviour

Self-Assessment Test

1. Write detailed character sketches for the following extracts. What comments can you make for how character is presented?

(a)

Mr. Tansley was really, Lily Briscoe thought, in spite of his eyes, but then look at his nose, look at his hands, the most charming human being she had ever met. Then why did she mind what he said? "Women can't write, women can't paint" – what did it matter, coming from him, since clearly it was not true to him but for some reason helpful to him, and that was why he said it? Why did her whole being bow, like corn before the wind, and erect itself again from this abasement only with a great and rather painful effort? She must make it once more. There's the sprig on the table-cloth; there's my painting; I must move the tree to the middle; that matters – nothing else. Could she not hold fast to that, she asked herself, and not lose her temper, and not argue; and if she wanted a little revenge take it by laughing at him?

"Oh, Mr. Tansley", she said, "do take me to the Lighthouse with you. I should so love it."

(b)

"My dear Sir Thomas, I perfectly comprehend you, and do justice to the generosity and delicacy of your notions, which indeed are quite of a piece with your general conduct; and I entirely agree with you in the main as to the propriety of doing everything one could by way of providing for a child one had in a manner taken into one's own hands; and I am sure I should be the last person in the world to withhold my mite upon such an occasion. Having no children of my own, who should I look to in any little matter I may ever have to bestow, but the children of my sisters? And I am sure Mr. Norris is too just – but you know I am a woman of few words and professions. Do not let us be frightened from a good deed by a trifle. Give the girl an education, and introduce her properly into the world, and ten to one but she has the means of settling well, without farther expense to anybody. A niece of ours, Sir Thomas, I may say at least, of yours, would not grow up in this neighbourhood without many advantages. I don't say she would be so handsome as her cousins. I dare say she would not; but she would be introduced into the society of this country under such very favourable circumstances as, in all human probability, would get her a creditable establishment."

(c)

An insolent man is a fellow newly great and newly proud; one that hath put himself into another face upon his preferment, for his own was not bred to it; one whom fortune hath shot up to some office or authority, and he shoots up his neck to his fortune, and will not bate you an inch of either. His very countenance and gesture bespeak how much he is, and if you understand him not, he tells you, and concludes every period with his place, which you must and shall know. He is one that looks upon all men as if he were angry, but especially on those of his acquaintance, whom he beats off with a surlier distance, as men apt to mistake him, because they have known him: and for this cause he knows not you till you have told him your name, which he thinks he has heard, but forgot and with much ado seems to recover.