

Plot has been considered apart from character, as if the two were separable. Actually, like the ends of a seesaw, the two are one substance; there can be no movement at one end without movement at the other. The two ends of the seesaw may be talked about separately, however, and we can determine which element in any story is being emphasized - which end is up and which is down. As fiction passes from escape to interpretive, the character end is likely to go up. The good reader is less interested in actions done by characters than in characters doing actions.

Reading for character is more difficult than reading for plot, for character is much more complex, variable, and ambiguous. Anyone can repeat what a person has done in a story, but considerable skill may be needed to describe what a person is. Even the puzzles posed by the detective story are less complex and put less strain on comprehension than does human nature. Hence, escape fiction tends to emphasize plot to present characters that are relatively simple and easy to understand. The limited reader demands that the characters be easily identifiable and clearly labelled as good or bad; they must not be so complex as to tax his understanding.

The limited reader also demands that the main character always be an attractive one. Though he need not be perfect, he must ordinarily be fundamentally decent - honest, good-hearted, and preferably good-looking. If he is not virtuous, he must have strong compensatory qualities - he must be daring, dashing, or gallant. He may defy law and order - only if he has a tender heart, a great love, or a gentleman's code. The reader who makes these demands does so because for him the story is not a vehicle for understanding but material for a daydream. Identifying himself, as he reads, with the main character, he vicariously shares that character's adventures and escapes and triumphs. The main character must therefore return him a pleasing image of self. He must be someone such as the reader imagines himself to be or such as he would like to be. In this way the story subtly flatters the reader, who forgets his own inadequacies and satisfies his ego. If the hero has vices, they must be such as the reader himself would not mind or would enjoy having. Some escape fiction has been about the man or woman who is appealing but sexually casual. The reader has thus been able to indulge imaginatively in forbidden pleasures without losing a flattering self-image.

Interpretive fiction does not renounce the attractive central character. It simply furnishes a greater variety of central characters, characters that are less easily labelled and pigeonholed, characters that are somewhat unsympathetic. Human nature is not often either black or white, interpretive fiction deals usually with characters that are neither.

Once we get past the need of a mechanical opposition between and villain we discover that fiction offers an unparalleled opportunity to observe human nature in all its complexity and multiplicity. It enables us to know people, to understand them, and to learn compassion for them, as we might not otherwise do. In some respects we can know fictional characters even better than we know real people. For one thing, we are enabled to observe them in situations that are significant and which serve to bring forth their character as ordinary situations of life only occasionally do. For another, we view their inner life in a way that is impossible to us in ordinary life. An author can tell us, if he wishes, exactly what is going on in a character's mind and exactly what the character feels. In real life we can only guess at these inner thoughts and feelings from a person's external behaviour which may be designed to conceal what is going on inside. In limited ways, therefore, we can know people in fiction more thoroughly we can know them in real life, and by knowing fictional characters can also understand people in real life better than we otherwise do.

An author may present his characters either directly or indirectly. In **direct presentation** he tells us straight out, by exposition or analysis, what a character is like, or has someone else in the story tell us what he is like. In **indirect presentation** the author *shows* us the character in action; we infer what he is like from what he thinks or does. In "The Little Business Man", Callaghan uses direct presentation when he describes Henry's thoughts about keeping the dog. "As he sat down slowly in the rocking-chair and stroked the side of his big face, he wanted to say weakly, "All right, keep the dog," but he was ashamed of being so weak and sentimental. He stubbornly refused to yield to this emotion; he was trying desperately to turn his emotion into a bit of good, common sense, so he could justify his distress." The author uses indirect presentation when he shows Uncle Henry talking to his wife and to Luke about getting rid of the dog. We realize what a practical man Uncle Henry is because of his own words.

The method of direct presentation has the advantages of being clear and economical, but it can never be used alone. The characters must act, if there is to be a story; when they do not act, the story approaches the condition of an essay. The direct method, moreover, unless supported by the indirect, will not be emotionally convincing. It will give us not a character but an explanation. The reader must be shown as well as told. He needs to see and hear and overhear. A story will be successful only when the characters are dramatized - shown speaking and acting, as in a drama. If we are really to believe in the selfishness of a character, we must see him acting selfishly. The successful writer must therefore rely mainly upon indirect presentation, and may use it entirely.

To be convincing, characterization must also observe three other principles. First, the characters must be **consistent** in their behaviour: they must not behave one way on one occasion and a different way on another unless there is a clearly

sufficient reason for the change. Second, the characters must be clearly **motivated** in whatever they do, especially when there is any change in their behaviour: we must be able to understand the reasons for what they do, if not immediately, at least by the end of the story. Third, the characters must be **plausible** or lifelike. They must be neither paragons of virtue nor monsters of evil nor an impossible combination of contradictory traits. Whether we have observed anyone like them in our own experience or not, we must feel that they have come from the author's experience - that they could appear somewhere in the normal course of events.

In proportion to the fullness of their development, the characters in a story are relatively flat or round. The **flat character** is characterized by one or two traits; he can be summed up in a sentence. The **round character** is complex and many-sided; he might require an essay for full analysis. Both types of character may be given the vitality that good fiction demands. Round characters live by their very roundness, by the many points at which they touch life. Hamlet, in all respects an individual, lives vigorously in the imagination of the reader, while scholars and critics debate his moral development. Flat characters, though they touch life at only one or two points, may be made memorable in the hands of an expert author through some individualizing detail of appearance, gesture, or speech. Ebenezer Scrooge, in Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, can be summed up and fully expressed in the two words "miserly misanthropy," but his "Bah! Humbug!" makes him live vividly in every reader's memory.

The requirement of good fiction is that each character be fully enough characterized to justify his role in the story and make it convincing. Most short stories will hardly have room for more than one or two very fully developed characters. Minor characters must necessarily remain flat. If the primary intention of a story is something than the exhibition of character, none of the characters need be developed. Inferior fiction, however, is often developed with characters who are insufficiently characterized to justify their roles. The nature and motivations of the protagonist may be so vaguely indicated that we are neither shocked nor convinced by any unusual performs or change of nature he undergoes. If a thief suddenly reforms and becomes an honest man, we must obviously know a great about him if the change is to be truly convincing. It is easier, however, for the writer to leave the characterization shadowy and hope that this weakness will slip by his readers unnoticed - as with uncritical readers it well may do.

A special kind of flat character is the **stock character** - the stereotyped figure who has occurred so often in fiction that his nature is immediately known: the strong silent sheriff, the brilliant detective with eccentric habits, the mad scientist who performs fiendish experiments on living human beings, the beautiful international spy of mysterious background, the comic Englishman with a monocle and an

exaggerated Oxford accent, the handsome brave hero, the beautiful heroine, the cruel stepmother, the sinister villain with waxed mustaches. Such stock characters are found very often in inferior fiction because they require neither imagination nor observation on part of the writer and are instantly recognizable to the reader. Like changeable parts, they might be transferred from one story to with little loss of efficiency. The really good writer, however, may take a conventional type and by individualizing touches, create a new and memorable figure. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is constructed on a pattern often imitated since, but he outlives the imitations and remains in our imaginations long after we have forgotten the details of his adventures. In proportion as an author gives his characters individualizing touches, they become less flat and accordingly less stock.

All fictional characters may be classified as static or developing. The **static character** is the same sort of person at the end of the story that he was at the beginning. The **developing** (or **dynamic**) **character** undergoes a permanent change in some aspect of his character, personality, or outlook. The change may be a large or a small; it may be for better or for worse; but it is something important and basic: it is more than a change in condition or a minor change in opinion. Cinderella is a static character, though she rises from cinder girl to princess.

Obviously, we must not expect many developing characters in any piece of fiction: in a short story there is not usually room for more than one. A not infrequent basic plan of short stories, however, is to show change in the protagonist as the result of a crucial situation in his life. When this is done in an interpretive story, the change is likely to be the surest clue to the story's meaning. To state and explain the change will be the best way to get at the point of the story. In escape fiction changes in character are likely to be more superficial, intended merely to ensure a happy ending. Such changes will necessarily be less believable. To be convincing, a change must meet three conditions: (1) it must be within the possibilities of the character who makes it; (2) it must be sufficiently motivated by the circumstances in which the character finds himself; and (3) it must be allowed sufficient time for a change of its magnitude believably to take place. Basic changes in human character seldom occur suddenly. The interpretive writer does not present bad men who suddenly reform at the end of the story and become good, or drunkards who jump on the wagon at a moment's notice. He is satisfied with smaller changes that are carefully prepared for. The Christian *Bible* relates that human life began when God breathed life into a handful of dust and created Adam. Fictional life begins when an author breathes life into his characters and convinces us of their reality. Though fullness of characterization need not be his aim, soundness of characterization is a test by which he stands or falls. The reader of good fiction lives in a world where the initial act of creation is repeated again and again by the miracle of imagination.

(Source - *Story and Structure*)