

Characterization = Author's Attitude

Introduction

The following passage is excerpted from our *Literature* textbook:

Although readers usually consider plot the central element of fiction, writers usually remark that stories begin with characters. They imagine a person in loving detail and then wait to see what that character will do. “By the time I write a story,” said Katherine Anne Porter, “my people are up and alive and walking around and taking things into their own hands.” A story’s action usually grows out of the personality of its protagonist and the situation he or she faces. As critic Phyllis Bottome observed, “If a writer is true to his characters, they will give him his plot.”

Not all characters are created equal. A sure sign of a skilled writer is the ability to create memorable characters. A great writer like Jane Austen or Charles Dickens can create characters so vivid and compelling that readers almost have the illusion the figures are real people. (111)

Author's Attitude toward Character

Among the three essays you will write for the AP English Literature test, one essay will ask you to analyze and discuss a prose passage—usually, a scene from a short story or novel. However the specific writing prompt is worded for that prose passage, it usually demands you to discuss the author's attitude toward the character(s) and situation portrayed and to analyze how the author's use of language helps communicate this attitude.

To state it perhaps too simplistically, an author's “attitude” toward a character can be positive or negative. To be a bit less simplistic, we might say that an author can present a character in a sympathetic or unsympathetic way. However, especially in modern and contemporary fiction, not all characters are presented in a strictly positive or negative way, or in a strictly sympathetic or unsympathetic way. Quite often, authors present characters in a complex way; authors communicate their attitude toward characters by suggesting or revealing specific traits of the characters and by leaving the reader to infer whether these traits are positive, negative, or ambiguous.

The term **characterization** is the process by which the author reveals the personality of the character. **Characterization is the main way we can discern an author's attitude toward her or his characters.** There are two types of characterization: direct and indirect.

Direct characterization occurs when the author explicitly tells the reader what the personality of the character is. For example, “The patient boy and the quiet girl were both well-mannered and did not disobey their mother.” This method of characterization was rather common 200-300 years ago, but it is far less common nowadays.

Indirect characterization is far more common in fiction, simply because authors rarely make direct, explicit statements about their characters; usually authors show character traits indirectly, which means readers must make inferences regarding character traits and, therefore, regarding the author's attitude.

Character Traits

A character **trait** is a quality of mind or habitual mode of behavior, such as never repaying borrowed money, avoiding eye contact, or always thinking oneself the center of attention. To read critically, don't simply notice the primary (or major) traits of a character, but look for the subtler, more nuanced ways authors present character traits; then consider whether these traits are positive or negative, strengths or weaknesses, of the character—or whether a trait is ambiguous and difficult to judge easily.

Characterization – How Authors Disclose Their Attitude toward Character

Authors create character traits by means of language, setting, tone, and circumstances.

- 1 – a character's **actions** and responses
- 2 – an **author's descriptions** (of appearance, circumstances, even thoughts) of a character
- 3 – what a character **says** (in dialogue or interior monologue)
- 4 – what a character **thinks** (though usually handled by means of #2 or #3 above)
- 5 – what **other characters say** to or about a character (MAY reveal traits accurately)
Note: Ironically, speeches often indicate something other than what the speakers intend, perhaps because of the speaker's ignorance, prejudice, stupidity, or foolishness.
- 6 – an **author's judgments** about a character (when the author actually offers them)
- 7 – an author's **style** that helps to convey his or her attitude toward a character
- 8 – the **tone** (or the collection of attitudes used) in presenting the character

“Round”

vs.

“Flat” Characters

-full, life-like, and memorable;

-one-dimensional & predictable;

-possessing individuality and unpredictability

-often are important as foils that highlight the development of round characters;

-*dynamic* (i.e., recognize, change with, and adjust to circumstances)

-*static* (i.e., remain the same & do not grow)

The Importance of Tone

Tone is a literary technique that encompasses the writer's implied attitudes in a literary work—both toward the subject portrayed in the text (i.e., the situation, the experiences, and the characters) and toward the audience.

(Note: We readers are included in the tone of a piece, since we are the author's audience).

- Tone may be *formal, informal, intimate, solemn, somber, playful, serious, ironic, condescending*, or many other possible attitudes. Often, the tone of a work is best described as a combination of attitudes, for example: *ironic amusement, objective detachment, bitter sarcasm, urgent exhortation, or restrained sorrow*.
- The tone of a work often changes and evolves; **tone can shift** in important ways throughout the movement of a piece—which is another reason why paying attention to structure is so important.
- A common synonym for tone is the term **narrative voice**.
- Since literary works portray characters who may not share the attitude of the author, **the tone in a literary work is often a complex, multi-layered entity** because it conveys not only the attitude of the author, but also the attitude of one or more characters.
- In many literary works, the author's attitude is often implied—rather than being conveyed in a straightforward, direct way. Hence, we must make inferences from textual details and look for possible irony—or indirection—on the author's part.