

LESSON 2

**BRINGING CHARACTERS TO LIFE –
UNDERSTANDING & CRAFTING MEMORABLE
PERSONALITIES**



Path to Understanding

Characters

Now, let's talk about the people in the story—the characters! Every story needs them because they're the ones who make things happen.

Types of Characters:

1. **Protagonist:** The protagonist is the “hero” of the story. This is the main character who faces challenges and tries to solve problems. Example: In "My Father Goes to Court", the father is the protagonist. He's brave, funny, and determined to protect his family.
2. **Antagonist:** The antagonist is the “villain” or the one causing the problem. This could be another person, an idea, or even nature. For example, in the same story, the rich neighbor is the antagonist because he accuses the protagonist's family of wrongdoing.

How do characters drive the story? Think about your favorite superhero movie. The hero is always trying to do something good, and the villain is trying to stop them, right? That's how stories work! The push-and-pull between the protagonist and antagonist is what makes it exciting.

Characterization

Have you ever read about a character that felt so real that you could almost imagine them as friends? That's good characterization—how writers make their characters come to life!

How do writers do this?

1. Through actions and decisions: What a character does shows us what kind of person they are. Example: The father in "My Father Goes to Court" proves he's intelligent and resourceful by defending his family in court.
2. Through dialogue or thoughts, what characters say and think gives us a peek into their emotions and ideas. For example, in "The Mats," the father's words about each mat show his deep love for his family.
3. For example, the appearance and descriptions of low-income families and the appearance of low-income family characters can give us clues about who they are. For example, the low-income family in "My Father Goes to Court" may have simple clothes but rich in happiness and love.
4. Through other characters' perspectives, what other characters say about someone adds more detail. Example: The neighbors in "My Father Goes to Court" admire the father for his cleverness.

While characters drive every story, the objects around them often hold the most profound tales. The Mat is woven with love, legacy, and connection threads. Let's uncover the world of meaning it carries.

The Mats

By Francisco Arcellana

SETTINGS:

- Place: Nana Emilia's House
- Time: The action takes place in the afternoon. This story happened sometime between the 1950s and the present. It has no specific season, but the story evolves in the evening.

CHARACTERS:

- Protagonist: Mr. Angeles
- Antagonist: Himself

THEME: "We must not forget and take for granted the people who passed away because they contributed to our life and we must respect them by commemorating them."

For the Angeles family, Mr. Angeles' homecoming from his periodic inspection trips was always an occasion for celebration. But his homecoming—from a trip to the South—was fated to be more memorable than the others.

He had written from Mariveles: "I have just met a marvelous mat weaver—a real artist—and I shall have a surprise for you. I asked him to weave a sleeping-mat for every one of the family. He uses many different colors, and for each mat, the dominant color is that of our respective birthstones. I am sure that the children will be very pleased. I know you will be. I can hardly wait to show them to you."

Nana Emilia read the letter that morning, repeatedly every time she had a chance to leave the kitchen. When all the children were home from school in the evening, she asked her oldest son, José, to read the letter at the dinner table. The children became very excited about the mats and talked about them until late into the night. She wrote this to her husband when she labored over his reply. For days after that, mats continued to be the chief topic of conversation among the children. Finally, Mr. Angeles wrote again from Lopez: "I am taking the Bicol Express tomorrow. I have the mats with me, and they are beautiful. God willing, I shall be home to join you at dinner."

The letter was read aloud during the noon meal. Talk about the mats flared¹ up again like wildfire. "I like the feel of mats," Antonio, the third child, said. "I like the smell of new mats." "Oh, but these mats are different," interposed Susanna, the fifth child. "They have our names woven into them, and in our ascribed² colors, too."

The children knew what they were talking about. They knew just what a decorative mat was like; it was nothing new or strange in their experience. That was why they were so excited about the matter. They had such a mat in the house, one they seldom used, an older mat than any of them.

This mat was given to Nana Emilia by her mother when she and Mr. Angeles were married, and it has been with them ever since. It is served every night and has not been used except on special occasions.

Nana Emilia always kept that mat in her trunk. When any of the family was taken ill, the mat was brought out, and the patient slept on it—he had it all to himself. Every one of the children had slept on it at some point in their lives; not a few had slept on it more. The mat was primarily kept in Nana Emilia's trunk, and when it was taken out and spread on the floor, the children were always around to watch. Only Nana saw the mat spread. Then a child—a girl—watched with them. The number of watchers increased as more children came.

The mat did not always appear to Nana Emilia as new as when laid on the nuptial bed. To the children it seemed as new as the first time it was spread before them. The folds and creases³ are always new and fresh. The smell was always the smell of a new mat. Watching the intricate design was an endless joy. The children's pleasure at the golden letters was boundless even before they could find meaning. Somehow they were always pleasantly shocked by the sight of the mat: so delicate and so consummate the artistry of its weave.

Taking out that mat to spread has become a kind of ritual. The process had become associated with illness in the family. Illness, even serious illness, had not been infrequent⁴. There had been death.

In the evening, Mr. Angeles was with his family. He had brought the usual things home with him. There were a lot of fruits, as always (his itinerary⁵ carried him through the fruit-growing provinces): pineapples, lanzones, chicos, atis, santol, sandia, guyabano, and avocado, according to the season. He had also brought home a jar of preserved sweets from Lopez.

As usual, putting away the fruit and sampling it was accomplished with animation and lively talk. Dinner was a lengthy affair. Mr. Angeles was full of stories about his trip but would interrupt his tales with, "I could not sleep nights thinking of the young ones. They should never be allowed to play in the streets. And you older ones should not stay out too late at night."

The stories petered out, and dinner was over. Putting away the dishes, wiping the dishes, and wiping the table clean did not seem tedious. Yet Nana and the children, although they did not show it, were all on edge about the mats. Finally, after a long time over his cigar, Mr. Angeles rose from his seat at the head of the table and crossed the room to the corner where his luggage had been piled. From the heap he disengaged a ponderous⁶ bundle.

Taking it under one arm, he walked to the middle of the room where the light was brightest. He dropped the bundle and, bending over and balancing himself on his toes, strained at the cord that bound it. It was intense; it would not break or give way. He tried working at the knots. His fingers were clumsy; they had begun shaking.

He raised his head, breathing heavily, to ask for the scissors. Alfonso, his youngest boy, was to one side of him with the scissors ready. Nana Emilia and her eldest girl, who had long returned from the kitchen, were quietly watching the proceedings. One swift movement with the scissors, snip! And the bundle was loose. Turning to Nana Emilia, Mr. Angeles joyfully cried: "These are the mats, Miling." Mr. Angeles picked up the topmost mat in the bundle.

"This, I believe, is yours, Miling."

Nana Emilia stepped forward to the light, wiping her still moist hands against the folds of her skirt, and with a strange young shyness received the mat. The children watched the spectacle silently and then broke into delighted, though a little self-conscious, laughter. Nana Emilia unfolded the mat without a word. It was a beautiful mat: to her mind, it was even more attractive than the one she received from her mother at her wedding. There was a name in the very center of it: EMILIA. The letters were large, done in green. Flowers—cadena-de-amor—were woven in and out among the letters. The border was a long winding twig of cadena-de-amor.

The children stood about the spreading mat. Their breathless exclamations of delight punctuated the air.

"It is beautiful, Jaime; it is beautiful!" Nana Emilia's voice broke, and she could not say anything more. "And this, I know, is my own," said Mr. Angeles of the next mat in the bundle. The mat was instead simply decorated, the design almost austere, and the only colors used were purple and gold. The letters of the name Jaime were in purple.

"And this, for you, Marcelina."

Marcelina was the oldest child. She had always thought her name too long; it had been one of her worries about the mat. "How on earth are they going to weave all of the letters of my name into my mat?" she had asked almost everyone in the family. Seeing her whole name spelled on the mat delighted her, even if the letters were small. Besides, a device above her name pleased Marcelina very much. It was in the form of a lyre, finely done in three colors. Marcelina was a music student and quite a proficient pianist.

"And this is for you, José."

José was the second child. He was a medical student already in the third year of medical school. Over his name the symbol of Aesculapius was woven into the mat.

"You are not to use this mat until your internship year," Mr. Angeles said. "This is yours, Antonia."

"And this is yours, Juan." "And this is yours, Jesus."

Mat after mat unfolded. On each of the children's mats there was somehow an appropriate device. At least all the children had been shown their mats. The air was filled with their excited talk, and through it all Mr. Angeles was saying over and over again in his deep voice:

"You are not to use these mats until you go to the University."

Then Nana Emilia noticed bewilderingly that some more mats remained to be unfolded. "But Jaime," Nana Emilia said, wondering, with evident repudiation, "there are some more mats."

Only Mr. Angeles seemed to have heard Nana Emilia's words. He suddenly stopped talking, as if he had been jerked away from a pleasant fantasy. A puzzled, reminiscent look came into his eyes, superseding the deep and quiet delight that had been briefly there, and when he spoke his voice was different.

"Yes, Emilia," said Mr. Angeles. There are three more mats to unfold. The others who aren't here..." Nana Emilia caught her breath. There was a swift constriction in her throat. Her face paled, and she could not say anything. The children's self-centered talk also died. There was silence as Mr. Angeles picked up the first remaining mats and began slowly unfolding it.

The mat was almost as austere⁷ in design as Mr. Angeles' own, and it had a name. Above the name, there was no symbol or device; only a blank space, emptiness. The children knew the name, but somehow the name, and the letters spelling it, seemed strange to them.

Then Nana Emilia found her voice. “You know, Jaime, you didn’t have to,” her voice held his tears back; there was something swift and savage in the movement.

“Do you think I’d forgotten? Do you think I had forgotten them? Do you think I could forget them? “This is for you, Josefina!

“And this is for you, Victoria! “And this is for you, Concepcion.”

Mr. Angeles called the names rather than uttered them.

“Don’t, Jaime, please don’t,” was all that Nana Emilia managed to say.

“Is it fair to forget them? Would it be just to disregard them?” Mr. Angeles demanded rather than asked. His voice had risen shrill⁸, almost hysterical; it was also stern, sad, and somehow vindictive⁹. Mr. Angeles had spoken nearly as if he were a stranger. Also, he had spoken as if from a deep, grudgingly-silent, long-bewildered sorrow.

The children heard the words exploding in the silence. They wanted to turn away and not see their father’s face, but they could neither move nor look away; his eyes held them, and his hand and voice held them where they were. They seemed rooted to the spot.

Key Concept Unveiled!

Key Cultural Elements and Traits Present in the Story:

1. **Sentimentality and Cherishing Memories**

The mats symbolize the family’s history and memories. The mat given to Nana Emilia by her mother on her wedding day is a cherished heirloom, used only on special occasions and during illness, reflecting the Filipino tendency to treasure sentimental objects. The personalized mats for the deceased children further emphasize the importance of remembering and honoring loved ones.

2. **Emotional Resilience and Grief**

The story portrays the family’s ability to cope with loss and grief by honoring their departed members. Mr. Angeles’s insistence on remembering his deceased children through the mats reflects the Filipino belief that the dead should not be forgotten and remain part of the family’s identity.

Nana Emilia shivered once or twice, bowed her head, and gaudily ripped her clasped hands between her thighs. There was a terrible hush. The remaining mats unfolded in silence. The names, which revealed with infinite slowness, seemed strange and stranger still; the colors were not bright but dead. The dull; These pale letters, spelling out the names of the dead among them, did not seem to glow or shine with a festive sheen like the other living names.



Word Wizard – Power Up Your Vocabulary

¹**Flared.** Something that spreads out or gets wider at the end.

²**Ascribed.** To say that something belongs to or is caused by someone or something.

³**Creases.** Lines or folds appear when bent on something, like clothing or paper.

⁴**Infrequent.** Something that doesn’t happen very often.

⁵**Itinerary.** A plan or list of places to do during a trip.

⁶**Ponderous.** Something very heavy or hard to move; can also mean slow and boring.

⁷**Austere.** Simple and plain, without any extra decorations or comforts.

⁸**Shrill.** A very high-pitched and sharp sound that can be unpleasant.

⁹**Vindictive.** Wanting to hurt or get back at someone for something they did.



Extend Your Learning!

Woven Memories: Family's Journey, Loss, and Legacy

"The Mat" is one of Arcellana's most celebrated short stories. It is a poignant tale that explores the intricate dynamics of a family and the impact of a seemingly insignificant object, a mat, on their lives. The story delves into themes of memory, nostalgia, and the passage of time. Through the eyes of a young boy, Arcellana captures the essence of childhood innocence and the bittersweet nature of growing up.

Instructions: Reread the story carefully and respond to each comprehension question with clear, concise, and well-supported answers based on evidence from the text. Each question is worth 2 points.

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1. Why was Mr. Angeles so excited about bringing home the mats?
2. What made the mats special for each family member?
3. Why do you think Nana Emilia became sad when she saw there were extra mats?
4. What was the children's reaction when their father started discussing the mats for their deceased siblings?
5. How do you think Mr. Angeles' actions show his love for his family, including those who have passed away?
6. What does the mat symbolize in the story? Why is it important?
7. What lesson can we learn from Mr. Angeles's insistence on remembering his deceased children?

Trivia Time– About The Author

Francisco Arcellana was a renowned Filipino writer, poet, essayist, critic, journalist, and teacher. Often hailed as one of the pioneers of the modern Filipino short story in English, he played a significant role in shaping Philippine literature. His works, characterized by their lyrical prose and poetic style, often delve into themes of love, loss, and the complexities of human relationships.

If you'd like to learn more about Francisco Arcellana's works, feel free to check out this link!
<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/prayer-175/>

