Characters and Characterisation

Characters are the most important component of a literary text. They are used to present cultural assumptions, attitudes, values and beliefs. As the readers, we are invited to perceive the characters in a certain way, and sometimes, we even resist this reading, exploring further interpretations. For example, in Unit 1, we explored the characters of *Macbeth* and exploring and challenging the invited reading. We react positively or negatively to characters depending on their actions and motivations. Characters also help to guide us through the plot of the text and through them we discover the underlying themes.

Major Characters

These are the most important characters in the story. There are two types, of which there may be a couple for each.

- **Protagonist**— This is the main character, around which the whole story revolves. The decisions made by the protagonist will be affected by a conflict from within, or externally through another character, nature, technology, society, or the fates/God.

- **Antagonist**— This character, or group of characters, causes the conflict for the protagonist. However, the antagonist could be the protagonist, who is torn by a problem within. Most times, something external is causing the problem. A group of people causing the conflict would be considered society, perhaps the members of a team, community, or institution. Additionally, the antagonist could be a part of nature, such as an animal, the weather, a mountain or lake.

Minor Characters

These are the other characters in a story. They are not as important as the major characters, but still play a significant part in the story. Their actions help drive the story forward. They may impact the decisions the protagonist or antagonist make, either helping or interfering with the conflict.

Character Traits

Characters can have different traits. Major characters will usually be more dynamic, changing and growing through the story while minor characters may be more static.

- **Foil**– A foil is a character that has opposite character traits from another, meant to help highlight or bring out another's positive or negative side. Many times, the antagonist is the

foil for the protagonist.

- **Static**– Characters who are static do not change throughout the story. Their use may simply be to create or relieve tension, or they were not meant to change. A major character can remain static through the whole story.

- **Dynamic**– Dynamic characters change throughout the story. They may learn a lesson, become bad, or change in complex ways.

- **Flat**– A flat character has one or two main traits, usually only all positive or negative. They are the opposite of a round character. The flaw or strength has its use in the story.

- **Round**– These are the opposite of the flat character. These characters have many different traits, good and bad, making them more interesting.

- **Stock**– These are the stereotypical characters, such as the boy genius, ambitious career person, faithful sidekick, mad scientist, etc.

Reader Response to Characters

How we respond to characters is affected by:

1. Our context – our experiences, values and beliefs
2. The construction of the character by the author, director, actor etc.

As you study the novella and play, consider:

- Why do you sympathise with a character?
- Why do you dislike a character?
- What about your personal context is influencing your reading of a character?

Elements of Characterisation

In a written text, such as a novel, a lot of what we understand about a character is not directly stated. As the reader we must infer this information based on the actions, speech and thoughts of the character.
As we read and view texts, we need to unpack the characters, focusing on the five main elements of characterisation:
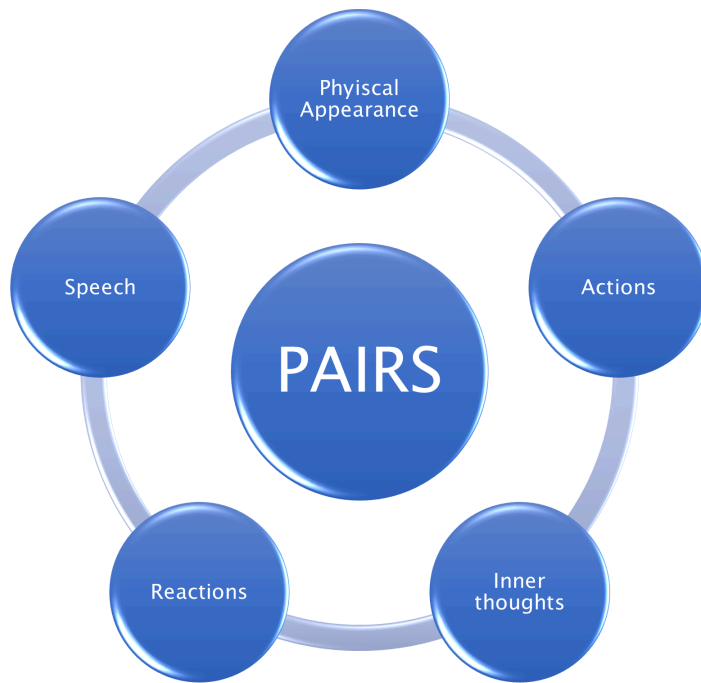
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Physical description – appearance and dress can reveal traits about a character

Actions (attitudes and behaviour) – a character's actions can be very telling. We can discern whether a character is good, bad, honest, compassionate etc.

Inner thoughts – as the we follow each character's narration, we read their inner thoughts, uncovering what they truly think and feel about their experiences, situation and other characters. Inner thoughts can reveal integral traits about a character and greatly assist in the reader's understanding of him/her/them.

Reactions – this is how others are affected by the character, how they respond to the character's words and actions. This can also reveal important traits about the character and help us to better understand the character.

Speech – reveals motivations and personality of a character. The way in which the character speaks in performance can help us to understand the character.

Epigraphs

The Penelopiad opens with two epigraphs from Homer's The Odyssey:

'…Shrewd Odysseus! You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarius' daughter! How loyally she kept the moment of the husband of her youth The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of the constant Penelope.'

The Odyssey, Book 24 (191-194)

image-1.png

> '...he took a cable which had seen service on a blue-bowed ship, made one end fast to a high column in the portico, and threw the other over the round-house, high up, so that their feet would not touch the ground. As when long-winged thrushes or doves get entangled in a snare...so the women's heads were held fast in a row, with nooses round their necks, to bring them to the most pitiable end. For a little while their feet twitched, but not for very long.'
>
> *The Odyssey*, Book 22 (470-473)

image-2.png

Activity 1:

1. The epigraphs that the text opens with focus on Penelope and then maids. **Explain** why you think Atwood made this choice.

2. **Read** the first epigraph. **Identify** the language that represents characterisation of Penelope.

3. **Compare and contrast** the language that Homer uses to describe Penelope with the language that Penelope uses to describe herself

4. **Identify** the perspective of Penelope that Atwood is trying to represent in her retelling of Homer's text.

5. The second epigraph is plot. There is no characterisation of the maids, just a description of their murders. **Explain** why Homer has not included characterisation.

6. **Identify** how Atwood's retelling differs from the original text in its handling of the maids.

Character Map: https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Penelopiad/character-map/

Activity 2:

1. **Create** a character map for Penelope. You may choose to use the graphic below to help organise your ideas. It is based on the PAIRS characterisation review above.
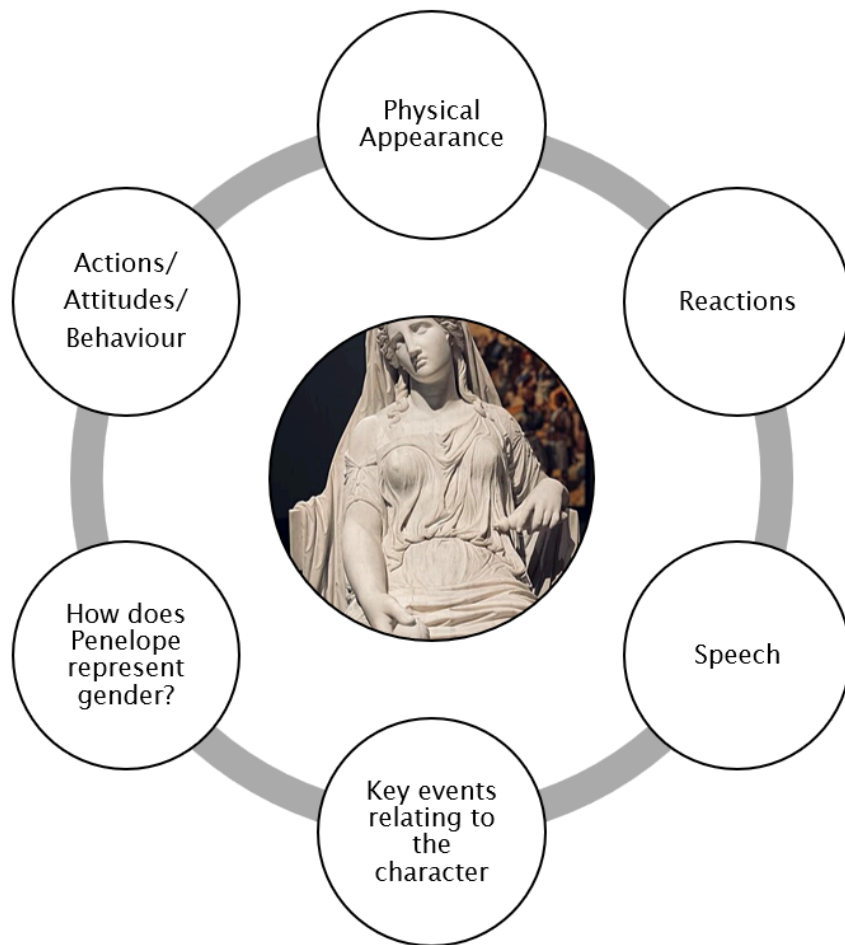
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2. In *The Penelopiad* here is a preoccupation with appearances and aesthetic value. In the text Penelope frequently compares herself to her cousin Helen and it is proposed that the suitors are only interested in her wealth. **Explain** how this makes readers respond to Penelope.

3. Penelope is represented as highly intelligent, expertly managing Odysseus' estate in his absence. She narrates: 'Now I was running the vast estates of Odysseus all by myself...My policy was to build up the estates of Odysseus so he'd have even more wealth when he came back than when he left...I had such a clear picture in my mind – Odysseus returning, and me – with womanly modesty – revealing to him how well I had done at what was usually considered a man's business. On his behalf, of course. Always for him.' **Analyse** the characterisation of Penelope in the passage.

4. Penelope also narrates that "cleverness is a quality a man likes to have in his wife as long as she is some distance away from him". **Explain** the significance of this quote in relation to Penelope's character.

5. Penelope's cleverness catches up with her. On the surface, the shroud weaving scheme appears ingenious. However there are consequences. The maids suffer terrible fates as a result of this collusion, including sexual abuse and their eventual murders. Despite the

maids' suffering abuse, Penelope persists with the scheme. **Analyse** how this affects reader response to Penelope.

Activity 3:

1. **Read** page xiii of Atwood's introduction in the text
2. **Identify** the ways in which Odysseus has been perceived in Homer's text.
3. **Explain** how the character Odysseus has been constructed in Atwood's text.
4. **Compare and contrast** the two versions of the character.
5. **Identify and explain** why Atwood's Odysseus is different to Homer's Odysseus.

Activity 4:

1. **Identify** the antagonists in the text by completing the table below:

Antagonist	Evidence in the text	Way in which readers are positioned to respond to the character	Ways in which your own personal context influences your response

Select two of the questions below. **Respond** to your selected questions.
2. Atwood's purpose in writing *The Penelopiad* is to give voice to the marginalised. **Discuss** this statement in a paragraph.

3. The suitors are a symbol of the patriarchy. To what extent do you agree with this statement? **Create** a paragraph response to the question.
4. Helen serves as a foil for Penelope. To what extent do you agree with this statement? **Create** a paragraph response to the question.
5. In her review of the text, "The Penelopiad: The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus", Heather Birell writes: '"in their state of bonelessness, liplessness, breastlessness," the maids reminds us that if myths are powerful, they are also fragile, malleable things.' **Discuss** this statement in a paragraph.