

## Types of Characters in Fiction

*"What does characterization do for a story? In a nutshell, it allows us to empathize with the protagonist and secondary characters, and thus feel that what is happening to these people in the story is vicariously happening to us; and it also gives us a sense of verisimilitude, or the semblance of living reality. An important part of characterization is dialogue, for it is both spoken and inward dialogue that afford us the opportunity to see into the characters' hearts and examine their motivations. In the best of stories, it is actually characterization that moves the story along, because a compelling character in a difficult situation creates his or her own plot."*

Karen Bernardo, *Characterization in Literature*

In fictional literature, authors use many different types of characters to tell their stories. Different types of characters fulfill different roles in the narrative process, and with a little bit of analysis, you can usually detect some or all of the types below.

- **Major or central** characters are vital to the development and resolution of the conflict. In other words, the plot and resolution of conflict revolves around these characters.
- **Minor characters** serve to complement the major characters and help move the plot events forward.
- **Dynamic** - A dynamic character is a person who **changes over time**, usually as a result of resolving a central conflict or facing a major crisis. Most dynamic characters tend to be central rather than peripheral characters, because resolving the conflict is the major role of central characters.
- **Static** - A static character is someone who **does not change over time**; his or her personality does not transform or evolve.
- **Round** - A rounded character is anyone who has a **complex personality**; he or she is often portrayed as a conflicted and contradictory person.
- **Flat** - A flat character is the opposite of a round character. This literary personality is notable for **one kind of personality trait or characteristic**.
- **Stock** - Stock characters are those types of characters who have become **conventional or stereotypical** through *repeated use* in particular types of stories. Stock characters are instantly recognizable to readers or audience members (e.g. the femme fatale, the cynical but moral private eye, the mad scientist, the geeky boy with glasses, and the faithful sidekick). Stock characters are normally one-dimensional **flat** characters, but sometimes stock personalities are deeply conflicted, rounded characters (e.g. the "Hamlet" type).
- **Protagonist** - The protagonist is the central person in a story, and is often referred to as the story's main character. He or she (or they) is faced with a conflict that must be resolved. The protagonist may not always be admirable (e.g. an anti-hero); nevertheless s/he must command involvement on the part of the reader, or better yet, empathy.
- **Antagonist** - The antagonist is the character(s) (or situation) that represents the opposition against which the protagonist must contend. In other words, the antagonist is an obstacle that the protagonist must overcome.
- **Anti-Hero** - A major character, usually the protagonist, who lacks conventional nobility of mind, and who struggles for values not deemed universally admirable. Duddy, in Mordecai Richler's *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, is a classic anti-hero. He's vulgar, manipulative and self-centered. Nevertheless, Duddy is the center of the story, and we are drawn to the challenges he must overcome and the goals he seeks to achieve.
- **Foil** - A foil is any character (usually the antagonist or an important supporting character) whose personal qualities contrast with another character (usually the protagonist). By providing this contrast, we get to know more about the other character.
- **Symbolic** - A symbolic character is any major or minor character whose very existence represents some major idea or aspect of society. For example, in *Lord of the Flies*, Piggy is a symbol of both the rationality and physical weakness of modern civilization; Jack, on the other hand, symbolizes the violent tendencies (the Id) that William Golding believes is within human nature.
- **Direct presentation (or characterization)** - This refers to what the speaker or [narrator](#) **directly says or thinks about a character**. In other words, in a direct characterization, the reader is **told** what the character is like. When Dickens describes Scrooge like this: "I present him to you: Ebenezer Scrooge....the most tightfisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner!" - this is very direct characterization!
- **Indirect presentation (or characterization)** - This refers to what the *character* says or does. The reader then **infers** what the character is all about. This mimics how we understand people in the real world, since we

can't "get inside their heads". In other words, in an indirect characterization, it's **the reader** who is obliged to figure out what the character is like. And sometimes the reader will get it wrong.

### Ten (Direct or Indirect) Ways in which a Character Can Be Revealed

- a. By psychological description.
- b. By physical description.
- c. By probing what s/he thinks.
- d. By what s/he says.
- e. By how s/he says it.
- f. By what s/he does.
- g. By what others say about him or her.
- h. By his or her environment.
- i. By her reaction to others.
- j. By his reaction to himself.

### ★ Things to Remember:

1. Literary characters may embody more than one of these character types at the same time. A dynamic character may also be the antagonist, and a protagonist can also be, say, a flat and stock character (i.e. the one-dimensional hero).
2. Here's a **very common mistake**: while characters are often round and dynamic, that does not mean these two terms mean the same thing. The former refers to a character's **complexity**, while the latter refers to a character's **development** over time. Students also make this mistake with flat and static characters.

For more information, check out the Open School's discussion of [characterization](http://learn.lexiconic.net/characters.htm).