

Flat Character

Definition of Flat Character

A flat [character](#) is a type of character in [fiction](#) that does not change too much from the start of the [narrative](#) to its end. Flat characters are often said not to have any emotional depth.

E. M. Foster has discussed some features of flat characters in his book, *Aspects of the Novel*. According to Foster, a flat character is a simple character, shown by the author as having just one or two qualities, which generally remain the same throughout the story, not undergoing significant growth or changes. The [audience](#) does not know much about these characters, because the writer does not provide detailed information about them.

Characteristics of Flat Character

- The role of flat characters is to support the main character.
- They do not go through a substantial growth or transformation in the course of the narrative.
- They have recognizable characteristics that make them appear stereotypical.
- They are often referred to as one- or two-dimensional characters, usually having one [perspective](#) or [point of view](#) about life, things, or events.

Examples of Flat Characters in Literature

Example #1: Gertrude from *Hamlet* (William Shakespeare)

Outwardly, Queen Gertrude seems to be a caring mother of Hamlet, but inwardly she is a weak-willed lady, who walks blindly through her life, is not aware that Claudius has trapped her by murdering her husband, or that he has seized her husband's throne. Gertrude has no idea why Hamlet is

upset about her marriage. She behaves like a tool of fate in the whole [tragedy](#), even when she stops Hamlet from going back to Wittenberg for studies.

Gertrude is a weak character, whom Claudius and Polonius have used for their own interests. She arranges a meeting with Hamlet, so that Claudius could spy on him, and also lets Polonius remain behind the curtains to hear the conversation between them. Thus, throughout the narrative, she proves her flat character and does not transform. She remains passive, never acts on her own until she becomes a victim herself.

Example #2: Miss Maudie from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (By Harper Lee)

Miss Maudie is a flat character because she maintains the same characteristics and outlook throughout the narrative. She begins and ends the novel by acting as a [voice](#) of reason for kids, and supporting and explaining Atticus' motivations and actions. She is the one who does not openly give a warning to Atticus for taking the case of Tom Robinson. Her positive and optimistic [attitude](#) remains steady, even after losing her house to a fire. Also, she represents more open-minded woman in the novel, as she sees error in social structure of Maycomb.

Example #3: Elizabeth Proctor from *The Crucible* (By Arthur Miller)

Another example of flat character is *The Crucible*'s Elizabeth Proctor, who is a self-righteous woman, who always believes in doing something right. Whatever happens in the story, she stays faithful to her husband, John Proctor. Though she feels dejected due to John's cheating, she does not turn against him despite his wrongdoing.

Elizabeth Proctor is basically an honest person who, when John asks for her recommendation as to whether he should confess his sin, she leaves the decision to him. She does not judge her husband, and assures him that she would support him for any decision he makes. Thus, she does not transform throughout this play, proving her as a flat character from beginning to the end.

Benvolio is another flat character, who remains unchanged throughout the play. He is temperate, solid, and loyal, who always tries to maintain peace and harmony between the two families. Benvolio's purpose is to support Romeo to get married to Juliet. However, the [irony](#) is that others accuse him for his hot temperament and wild attitude.

Function of Flat Character

The role of a flat character is to help the main character in pursuing his ambitions and goals. Flat characters often play a supporting role in the story, play, or novel. Though they are not very prominent characters, nor are they unimportant, because they bring harmony, peace, and [comedy](#) to the story. Writers use these characters to create a specific [atmosphere](#) in the complex narrative structure.