

Chapters 4 – 6

Standards Focus: Characterization

One of the important elements of fiction is **characterization**: the process by which a character is given human characteristics and personality. Basically, the author creates a character that possesses as many human qualities as possible, making the character seem like a real and tangible person. Hawthorne took an especially interesting twist by including the psychology of the characters as part of their characterization. Although many authors had used the thoughts of characters as part of their characterization technique, no one had delved into the emotions and motivations as deeply as Hawthorne did in *The Scarlet Letter*. By allowing the reader to “see” into the inner thoughts and emotions working in the minds of his characters, audiences are not just told about the actions of the character, but also learn about their inner motivations and why the character behaves in a certain way.

There are many aspects that go into good characterization and many classifications of a character. First, there is the way the audience learns about a character: directly or indirectly. **Direct** characterization is when the author tells the audience what the character is like, through a narrator, another character, or even through the speech of the character himself. **Indirect** characterization is made when the reader has to decide for themselves what the character is like; for example, by dialogue, actions, thoughts, or interaction with other characters.

Another aspect of characterization is the development of character type. There are two major classifications of character types: **flat** versus **round** and **dynamic** versus **static**. A **flat** character is one in which only a few human attributes are given, making them more of a background character or a symbolic character who does not have major involvement in the central plot. A flat character usually has one major trait which he/she carries throughout the novel and on which the author focuses. However, a **round** character is one that has many human qualities and that shows a range of emotions, actions, and motivations. Round characters are usually the main focus of the novel because they show growth and change over the course of the novel and because readers can more easily relate to their humanness.

The other type of classification, dynamic versus static, comes from studying a character arc. A **character arc** is a literary device that allows the reader to keep track of the change a character goes through in the story. A **static** character is the same at the beginning of the novel as he/she was at the beginning, not having learned from the experiences undergone during the novel. A **dynamic** character, on the other hand, is one that changes opinions or ideas and grows from the beginning to the end of the novel. The **protagonist**, the main character, is almost always a dynamic character because he or she undergoes the most change of anyone in the novel. The **antagonist** is the character that stands in the way of the protagonist's goal. Although it is easy to qualify the antagonist as “the bad guy,” this is not always the case. Often, the antagonist and protagonist are hard to tell apart because both can be likeable characters.

One more important element of characterization is the **naming** of characters. As is clear in *The Scarlet Letter*, many names can evoke a certain thought or feeling. For example, the name Chillingworth brings to mind a coldness and harshness that is synonymous with his character. It is no accident that a character's name is reflective of his or her personality. Often, an author will deliberately choose a name that sounds like what he or she wants the character to be, because a character's name says a lot about him and is one of the main influences on the reader's thoughts about the character. A character's name can tell the reader where the character is from and his social status, and can even set the tone for how the audience should feel about him or her.