
UNIT 3 CHARACTER

Structure

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3.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit aims at providing you with the notion of characterisation in the short story—its significance, its relationship to plot, its place in the atmosphere of **the story**, etc. You will be told:

- how to choose characters; and
- how to develop them during the course of a short narrative.

You will also learn

- how to avoid certain pitfalls in the creation and treatment of characters, specially because characterisation in a short story is quite different from that in a **full** length novel.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the preceding two Units you were told about a) **plot/structure** and b) atmosphere in the short story. The present Unit deals with another important element, namely, characterisation. A short story is basically a story of the human condition as the **writer** sees it. Consequently, it has to have **human characters**, apart from the events that happen to them.

Thus, it is **important** for you, as a story-teller, to

- choose your characters with care;
- develop them in a harmonious interaction with the events; and
- **maximise** the impression they create at the point of climax, so that you may achieve the best results with your story.

3.2 CHOOSING CHARACTERS

When planning a story at what stage does one start **thinking** about its characters?

The **question** resolves into a consideration of what comes first at the conceptual stage—the plot, **i.e.** the total framework, or the characters, who are but a component of the plot. This is largely a matter of strategy. In a **conventional short** story it would

be useful to lay down the structure first, **as** it is the turn of events that provides the result, and then **summon the characters**. **But** if the result consists in the surprise provided by the twists or **turnabouts** of the characters, or in an **essentially intellectual** or psychological revelation, it would be better to choose the characters carefully before **setting out the plot**. This is because **the** mental equipment and **conditioning** of the characters is **relatively** more **important** than the situations they are required to handle.

In choosing your characters you have to **bear** in mind that there is hardly any **place** in a short story, **as distinguished** from a novel, where a character is not called upon to make a **substantial** contribution to the interplay referred to above, but is allowed merely to add to the atmosphere or the scenario. The smaller canvas of the short story does not **allow** you the luxury of such cosmetics. **On the other hand**, there is real danger in **having** such extraneous or **hazy**, albeit interesting, characters loiter about in your story, **as** they tend to diffuse the focus, which is fatal to the result you wish to achieve. It **should** be remembered that in a short story, **unlike** in a novel, there is scope for only one peak, not an undulating range of mountains, howsoever beautiful it may be; a single flash of illumination and not an array of lights. That is the limitation or **rather** distinctive merit of a short story—a sharp and visible unity of impression.

Thus you should exercise utmost economy in the number of **characters** you choose for a story; and so **you should** choose only such characters **as** you

- i) can **visualise** in **fairly** clear **dimensions** right at the start; or
- ii) are confident of **making** whole and **full-bodied** during the **cause** of the story.

3.3 PARAMETERS TO BE OBSERVED IN THE CHOICE OF CHARACTERS

The parameters you **will** do well to adopt in the choosing of characters are, however, common to all **fiction**, **novels** or short stories, and would lead you to formulate answers to the following **questions**, among others:

3.3.1 Do you know your characters?

You must know the **likes** of them, **so** that you may write about them in realistic detail, and articulate their thoughts. They must **be** credible to you, **before** you **can** expect your readers to **fall** for them as 'real'. **William Faulkner** had said that experience, **observation** and imagination are the three sources you have to draw upon for your fiction, and the deficiency in one can be made up by generous supplies from the rest. But this is not to say that you can depend on your imagination to substitute entirely **for** experience **and** observation; a balanced use of **material** is always **to be** preferred for any **construction**. **So** you should recall the **men** and women within your **knowledge**, and see if one or more can fit in with the general idea of the **plot** and **whether** they **react** in a **manner** which suits the **purpose** of your story.

You need not **look** for exact prototypes, unless, of course, the story itself is suggested by a vastly interesting **character** you know in real life. More often than not, it would be convenient to create a living collage, **e.g.**, the facial expressions of A combined with the social habits of B and the philosophical outlook of C, and thus present a character, both **familiar** and fascinating. And in **so far as** central characters are concerned, you should not fight shy of projecting a bit of your own personality too into **him/her** for the best results; it will seep through any way if you are not insincere in your story-telling.

However, the general proposition in this paragraph needs to be modified to take care of a few variables **and** clarify some legitimate doubts. These are brought out below:

You need not **know** each of your characters sufficiently well in a story that demands more **than** one **character**. There may be a case for introducing exotica to claim the greater attention of the **reader**. You may also be tempted to mystify or amuse the

reader with the quality of strangeness in a character. In that case the central character/protagonist, who could also be the narrator in the First Person, should at least be one with whom you are sufficiently familiar so that his experiences may appear plausible.

Characters from a different milieu

For reasons of social motivation, you may sometimes feel compelled to choose characters from a totally different milieu. Thus a confirmed urbanite may wish to write about rural people, an affluent businessman, smitten with sympathy or remorse for the slum dwellers, may wish to write about him, and so forth. But any brave and admirable intentions of writing stories, well-removed from a familiar socio-economic (and hence cultural) milieu, must be matched by the efforts you have made to know them at first hand—just as George Orwell lived the life of vagrants for quite some time before he wrote his novel 'Down and Out in Paris and London', or Gopinath Mohanty lived with Adivasis in the jungles of Koraput before he wrote his award-winning book 'Anurutar Sentana'. Otherwise, you run the danger of patronizing your chosen characters or romanticising their lives, which would make them less real.

Characters in myths and legends

What about fantasies, or stories woven round myths or legends?

As regards fantasies, the characters must necessarily be 'incredible' in a facile sense. But unless they are written entirely for children, the apparent nonsense must make sense by being in purposeful juxtaposition to the real. Like Goya's paintings, you may deliberately distort reality, so as to provoke in the reader a certain awareness of the realities that he tends to ignore. But such demons and fairies that you may create must relate intrinsically to recognisable modes of human thought and behaviour. In this context, you may recall Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, or clever parables designed to hold the interest of children and adults alike, at different levels, like Alice in Wonderland

Insofar as myths and legends (other than fantasies) are concerned, the characters are expected, no doubt, to be larger than life. But you are advised not to stray too far away from recognisable reality, so that the resemblance to characters in real life is not entirely lost, and the purpose of 'pointing a moral or adoring a tale', as is usual in adopting such devices, is not defeated.

Natural phenomena as characters

Could you have an object of nature such as a river or a mountain as the central character in a story? Yes,

- i) in the nature of a fable, when it can be entirely humanised, or
- ii) as a constant backdrop, or a recurrent witness, to the movement in the story; so much so that it may appear to be the central character in empathy with the human condition, yet standing out in its separateness, thus lending a cosmic grandeur to the content of the story.

However, you will realise that the sharp and fluid movement in a short story does not ordinarily admit of the ambition as at (ii), and hence you should not undertake it without mapping out the sequence carefully in advance, so that the interplay between the Nature-character and others does not appear to be heavy and artificial. Here you may recall the river stairs in Rabindranath Tagore's short story of the same name.

3.3.2 Does the reader know them?

While it is important that you should know your characters, you should not ignore the consideration that they should not also be entirely unfamiliar to your target audience. In other words, ways of life and thought should not be alien to the sympathies and perceptions of those you want to reach. For example, a writer has to think twice before choosing characters from the Scandinavian society, with whom he is very familiar, when he has to communicate largely—due to the compulsions of logistics or language—with a rural or semi-urban readership in India. But he need have no such fears if his readers are from the metropolitan cities, who are expected to be fairly familiar with the ways of people in foreign lands.

3.4.1 Do they have to be 'characters'?

This is not a frivolous question. You have chosen prototypes, collages or **combinations** of real-life persons for your characters. Now do you want them to **behave** just as you want them to behave, just as people do in real life, and to think just as you would imagine such people to think? Your initial reaction would be—of course, yes! How else can the story be realistic? But it is a paradox that in fiction a totally **faithful** representation of real-life individuals would not only make them **much too** dull, ordinary and inconsistent (as most of us are), but unrealistic! This is so because the readers would like to apprehend that reality which is not perceived by them in their ordinary lives. This is what Shakespeare's Hamlet meant when he said that drama 'holds the mirror up to life'. In other words, the readers want to discover reality; there is no point, otherwise, in their stepping outside their daily lives into the land of fiction.

No Stereotypes

No character should appear to be a stereotype of other such characters in fiction. Thus it would be a mistake to attempt creating another Sherlock Holmes in detective fiction, a Don **Quixote** in social satire, or a Heathcliff in the literature of **high** romance. Imitations, however good, are at a heavy discount in **literature**.

Keep them ordinary and typical

The characters may stay ordinary, even typical, where the story attempts to deal with events of extraordinary historical **significance**; such as war, famine, etc. For, in such stories, the enormity of the events is of primary importance and should not be diluted and side-tracked by the interest created by characters, unless, of course, you wish to show how heroes are **moulded** out of common clay—thanks to the impact of **such** extraordinary events.

No archetypes

The licence to create characters, or characterisation, as the term applies to fiction, **does** not permit you—as a modern storyteller—to inflict archetypes, models of virtue or vice, dolls or demons of thoughtless sentiment, and such objects, on the **intelligent** reader. In **other** words, you should develop your characters in such a way **that** your reader is induced to believe that the out-of-the-ordinary trait in the **character** is but an interesting tilt of the commonplace, and the climaxing revelation is but the possibility that is ingrained in each one of us. (A comforting thought, for which he would be thankful to the writer.)

3.4.2 The growth of characters

Where do they go from here?

Obviously a plot denotes movement in time and space, and when the **characters** are but actors in the plot they **cannot** remain static. But the movement appropriate to a character **goes** beyond the time-space dimensions. **Any** character, howsoever well-conceived, would appear to be wooden and static if he just moved along with the demands of the plot and reacted predictably. It is essential that he must grow, **and** seem to grow. That is, his personality must unfold itself in the process of his thoughts and action, so that he reveals himself **fully**, and often surprisingly, only at the end of the story.

Consistent **as** he may be on the whole, **as** a character distinguished from an average man-in-the-street, you should subject him to the pains of growing up, and make him **go** through a measure of inconsistencies, anxieties, contradictions, et al, revealing **new** facets of his character each **time** he deals with a **situation**. You should make **such** unfolding **possible** even within the smaller canvas of a conventional short story.

However, take care to see that **the** pace is not too uneven. Thus:

- you should not allow the character to play all his aces right at the beginning, and
- you should ensure that the surprise of a revelation at the end is not such as **would** seem totally out of character, and hence unbelievable.

A clever storyteller should maintain an even flow in developing his character **m** such a way that the reader's interest is not only sustained **all through**, but an **element of**

suspense is also **built** into his absorption, so that **the** revelation at the end appears to be quite logical and yet eminently satisfying as a surprise.

A special mention **needs** to be made regarding the place of thought, as **distinguished from** action, in the **development** of a character. **Theoretically**, there can be no **objection** to the **substitution** of thought for action in a short story. On the other **hand**, there **has** been an increasing emphasis on thought at the expense of action in **modern storytelling**, subscribing to the theory that **'nothing** of importance happens in the **world**, except in the mind'. Thus, long stretches of **thought, which** were common **only** to novels in the earlier days, have come to invade short stories too, and these are sometimes in the nature of streams-of-consciousness, not yet **formulated** into **coherent** thought expressed in complete and **logical** sentences.

Activity 2

In the limited **space** available in a **short** story, is there room for 'developing a character'? If **so**, how can it be done? (50 words)

(Check your answer with that given at the end of the Unit)

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3.4.3 The writer speaks through the characters

Howsoever real and **formidable** the characters may seem to be, the fact **remains** that they are but **creatures** of imagination, willed into existence by the author. **This** 'genetic circumstance' carries with it **an** unstated obligation—namely, that the **characters** are expected to voice the world-view of their master and progenitor. True, the writer aims at being objective, and he may **well** be annoyed at the suggestion that his characters are Trojan horses designed to carry the battle into the enemy's camp by unfair means. But whether he likes it or not, his characters are bound to carry the **marks** of their parentage, in some way or other. For, after **all**, there is no such thing as the human **condition** as a concrete **demonstrable** fact subject to immutable physical laws.

It depends on how **you** look at it, **with** the world-view that you have developed over your adult years, as a sensitive and intelligent human being. Thus, the same combination of **characters** and events may result in a situation that is comic or tragic, trite or serious, **and so** forth, deriving from the tone, the **colour** and the sympathies that you, as a writer, put into it. **In** other words, a certain basic emotional coloration to your characters **is unavoidable**. But you should guard against the temptation to 'speak' through **your characters** in a manner which would give the impression that they are merely your **mouth-pieces**.

3.4.4 All characters need not be treated alike

It is no virtue in the writer of a short story to treat **all** his characters equally, in a story having more than one character. You should **know that** some are more equal than others. **That is, you** should discriminate not only between one and the other among the rest, **depending** on their relative importance in the story. It is only then that a proper sense of perspective can be achieved. Of course, a writer **has** got to play favourites for **the sake** of the story, so that it is both aesthetically **satisfying** and functionally effective **in** relation to the central idea **of** the story. However, this has to be a studied pattern. You should not **fall in** love with a minor character and linger over, **say**, the charms of a flower-girl or a courtier while the King **and** the **Queen** are waiting in the wings.

3.4.5 First person narrative

Telling the story in the first person, as if the writer has lived it out himself, has always had a special attraction for the story-teller, for it makes it appear as if the story is the entire truth, and nothing but the truth. And it can be so cleverly told, by using a direct conventional style, that the reader is likely to be taken in by the deception. However, the pretender (normally the central character or the protagonist), is subject to certain infirmities and temptations which have to be taken care of so that the story-telling is not faulted.

- The First Person is not omniscient and omnipresent. The writer who keeps himself in the background is free to describe not only the external happenings that each character is involved with, but also what happens in the mind of each. But this is not possible for the First Person narrator. You cannot eat your cake and have it too; you cannot hog the truths of other characters, when you have deliberately reduced the all-pervasive status of the narrator to the First Person only, for the sake of greater truthfulness. But this obvious limitation is sometimes lost sight of, and should be guarded against.
- A First Person narrator cannot behave selfconsciously. Every person in the world is largely self-righteous. So he tends to rate himself as essentially sane and good, following an exercise in self-analysis, whereas he is apt to be more ruthless and objective when he analyses others. In obedience to this basic psychological truth, the First Person narrator cannot afford normally to be too harsh to himself, as the reader may find it perverse or pretentious and hence not realistic. The only exception to the requirement is when the writer chooses deliberately to be confessional and wishes, as it were, to confide in the reader. But the confessional mode is appropriate only to a story which is not only character-oriented but where the character is of the intenser kind.

Conversely, the First Person narrator cannot afford to glorify himself, except in a fight-hearted manner, as if he invites the reader to take it with a pinch of salt.

3.5 THE ENDING

Not all characters need have a memorable 'exit line'. The minor ones may as well slink away after doing their job. But the final result, namely, the impact you would like to create with whatever you have to say on the human condition depends immeasurably for its success on the famous last lines of the central character/protagonist, before he leaves the stage. In other words, the way he performs at the point of climax is vitally important for your story. This is determined largely by the plot itself, and also by the style of presentation. But other things being equal, it will be useful to consider here a few guidelines. These are indicated below—taking into account, in particular, the increased sophistication in modern story-telling, in response to the greater complexities of modern life, and a consequent emphasis on intellection.

3.5.1 Place of melodrama

The character should not normally leave the stage with a bang—say, in a flood of tears, or uproarious laughter, to underscore the revelation.

Here is a melodramatic ending from a novel about the Wild West and cowboys:-

She went on, 'You saved my life. **Everything** you've done here has been brave and good and right. Without you—I—I admire you. And I don't want you to go. I want you to stay. I need you here with me. Please stay!'

She stopped, breathless. She had said it very fast, and she wasn't sure how much sense it had made. But she had said it, and now she looked at Six, awaiting—and dreading—his reaction.

The quiet undertones of an expression, with or without a small fact of observation in the external world, like the falling of a leaf or some charming nonsense uttered by a child, as a foil to the importance (or the seeming non-importance) of the occasion, can usually be more effective in doing honour to the revelation granted to him.

3.6 SUMMING UP

- **Though** there isn't enough room in the short story for an elaborate delineation of **character**, yet character is one of its most important elements. In fact, **a short** story may be built entirely round a character.
- **Choosing** a character is, of course, the primary task; the writer must show that he know;; his characters intimately.
- Despite the limited scope of the short story, characters can be shown to develop.
- All characters need not be treated alike.
- The treatment of characters is different in the first person narrative from the other **types** of narrative.
- The ending of the short **story**, **without** being melodramatic or too revealing, can be used for character portrayal.

3.7 ACTIVITIES : AIDS TO ANSWERS

Activity 1

The **factors** that one has to keep in mind while choosing characters for a short story are:

- a) in a character-dominated story, the choice of character takes precedence over its **plot/structure**. But in the majority of short stories, the plot, the situation, and even the atmosphere are more important;
- b) **clarity of visualisation is essential** in depicting character; and
- c) the characters must be familiar to the writer, and the reader.

Activity 2

Even within **the constraints** of space, the short story does have ample scope for **developing** a character. But the movement should not be jerky or sudden, it should be **evenly** paced. **Thought**, as distinguished **from** action, also can play a part, in the **development** of **character** in a short story.

Activity 3

Hints

- a) You can begin by writing **a simple story** around a hero figure **who** resembles a mythic or historical personality e.g. **Mahatma** Buddha, Vikramaditya, **Kabir** or **Mother Teresa**.
In most **modern** investigative stories the **central character** is **manipulated** to support **the plot** e.g., spy **stories**, or stories of **corruption** in 'high places'.

- b) An opening for a story on a highway robbery:
I was **aghast** at the refugees' tales of terror. **Dacoits** had attacked their caravan and robbed them and then **left** them in the arid gullies of the ravines **near Gwalior** to die of thirst.

Some stories (listed below) have been referred to in **this** Unit:

Sachi Kant Roy : **Flowers** are not for Burning
Rabindranath Tagore : River Stairs
Ernest **Hemingway** : Ten Indians

You are now **advised** to go to any university or college library close by and read **as** many of these **stories** as possible.