

# Skill Category 1: Characterization




'Tis no sea thou seest in the sea,  
'Tis but a disguised humanity.  
To avoid thy fellow, vain thy plan;  
All that interests man, is man.

—Henry Sutton

Although children enjoy fairy tales and nursery rhymes, human characters in complex literary works provide the mature reader with significant insights—the interest that Henry Sutton refers to. Your ability to understand how authors use details, descriptions, dialogue, and behavior to enable readers to see beneath the surface of complex characters is an essential skill to develop before taking the AP English Literature and Composition Exam. This unit will help you develop a sensitivity to how individual words, phrases, lines, sentences, or an entire passage reveal character.

## 1.A Characters' Details

Understanding characters involves more than simply noting their physical characteristics, what they say, and how they act. The AP exam assesses your understanding of **indirect characterization** by asking you to determine what specific textual details reveal about a character, that character's perspective, or that character's motives for his or her actions. To better understand the characters, consider their thoughts, words, and actions.



I know when to hang around and comfort the children and when to leave them to themselves.

Kathy's thoughts suggest she is an intuitive person.

**Indirect characterization**

This technique reveals details about a character's personality without directly stating them. Indirect characterization refers to the character's

- Thoughts
- Dialogue
- Actions
- Interactions with others

Read the following dialogue between the narrator and Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* to understand how the author uses indirect characterization to portray Tom.

"Civilization's going to pieces," broke out Tom violently. "I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read 'The Rise of the Coloured Empires' by this man Goddard?"

"Why, no," I answered, rather surprised by his tone.

"Well, it's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved."

Tom's choice of reading material and his concern about the fall of the white race reveal his racism. His comment that it's "all scientific stuff; it's been proved" also illustrates his tendency to accept wild theories uncritically.

## Key Concepts

**The way characters are described, their dialogue with other characters, and their behavior reveal aspects about that character.**

Rather than directly stating what a character is like, authors may use details to describe how a character looks to suggest his nature—or to suggest a contrast between his outward appearance and interior motives. How the character interacts with other characters also displays different **facets** of his personality. Even the types of words the character uses can reveal what he is like.

- Tom's comments in the example above portray him as a racist person, whose prejudice makes him susceptible to outlandish theories. The way he breaks into the conversation "violently," his appraisal of the racist work as "a fine book," and his use of the unsophisticated word "stuff" are all ways the author suggests Tom's coarseness.

**A reader's interpretation and understanding of a character are influenced by what the character says, thinks, and does, as well as by details the narrator provides.**

A complex character like Shakespeare's Hamlet has fascinated readers and playgoers for centuries because the richness of Hamlet's words and his actions have prompted a variety of interpretations.

- In Hamlet's first soliloquy, he shares his inner turmoil over his mother's marriage to his uncle and his desire for his own death. Is Hamlet a much more sensitive character than those around him? Is he merely momentarily depressed? Is he a morose individual unable to reconcile himself to the realities of his world? What Hamlet says and does form the audience's interpretation.

**Characters reveal their perspectives and biases through their words and actions. Perspective refers to a character's outlook or view, and a bias is the favoring of one person, group, or thing over another.**

Because characters don't always state what they think, look closely at what they say about other things and do to understand their perspectives and biases. Shakespeare reveals the evolving perspective of King Lear through the interaction between Lear his court jester:

In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, even though 80-year-old King Lear isn't dying, he gives away his power and land to two of his daughters, thinking they will take care of him as he nears death. The fool shares his own perspective on the king's actions by telling Lear that his decision is foolish because now the king has left nothing for himself.



**Characters' perspectives originate in and are formed by the characters' backgrounds, personalities, biases, and relationships with other characters, events, and the setting.**

Pay attention to the information the author presents about a character the first time the character appears, because this information may reveal important details about the character's background. As the action develops, consider how what the author has revealed about a character influences his or her reactions to the setting, other characters, and events in the plot.

- In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the feud between the Montague and Capulet families shapes the characters. The first time Tybalt appears on stage, he displays a fiery temper that has been kindled in the background of the feud between the two families. Tybalt, who is a Capulet, considers Romeo his enemy because he is a Montague, and his bias against Romeo ultimately leads to his own death.

**A character's perspective is revealed through thoughts and actions and may change as the character interacts with other characters.**

Some characters will gain new perspectives and leave behind old biases through the plot's action.

- For example, the perspective of Scout, the narrator in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, develops from a child's lack of understanding about her world to a more mature perspective due to her experiences throughout the novel. Her interactions with her father, brother, and other characters in her town deepen her perspective, making her more compassionate.
- Throughout the course of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the king's perspective undergoes a humbling transformation from a proud, unyielding tyrant to a wiser man who is sympathetic to all who suffer. His rejection by two of his daughters, his initial failure to see the devotion of his third daughter, and his own suffering move him from a narrow perspective to a deeper understanding of himself and the world.

**Different perspectives may reveal different information or influence how the reader interprets a text.**

Read carefully to "hear" the voice of the narrator as he or she presents the action. The voice of the narrator may not necessarily represent the views of the author, because the narrator may be a character in the work.

- For example, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is narrated by the main character, Huck, whose youthful voice is far different from the author. Also, the author may present the action through multiple narrators, as in William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying*, in which 15 different characters narrate the action, all from their individual perspectives.
- In *Romeo and Juliet*, different characters view the swiftness with which the two protagonists fall in love in different ways. For example, Romeo and Juliet view their lightning-fast commitment to each other as true love. However, Juliet's nurse views Juliet as suffering from a youthful infatuation that should be abandoned when Romeo is banished.

## What to Look for

As you read prose excerpts, look for the following details and determine what they reveal about a character.

- The character's thoughts, beliefs, and feelings
- The character's words and actions
- The characters' interactions and dialogue with other characters
- Other characters' descriptions of the character
- The narrator's descriptions of the character

### Practice Activity

**Directions:** In the passage below from Virginia Woolf's 1919 novel *Night and Day*, Katherine and her mother, Mrs. Hilbery, discuss the past. As you read the excerpt, highlight and annotate details that reveal both characters' perspectives about themselves, other characters, and events.

#### *From Night and Day*

Katharine knew by heart the sort of mood that possessed her as she walked upstairs to the drawing-room, her mother's arm in hers; and she could anticipate the pleasure with which, when she had turned on the lights, they both regarded the drawing-room, fresh swept and set in order for the last section of the day, with the red parrots swinging on the chintz curtains, and the arm-chairs warming in the blaze. Mrs. Hilbery stood over the fire, with one foot on the fender, and her skirts slightly raised.

"Oh, Katharine," she exclaimed, "how you've made me think of Mamma and the old days in Russell Square! I can see the chandeliers, and the green silk of the piano, and Mamma sitting in her cashmere shawl by the window, singing till the little ragamuffin boys outside stopped to listen. Papa sent me in with a bunch of violets while he waited round the corner. It must have been a summer evening. That was before things were hopeless...."

As she spoke an expression of regret, which must have come frequently to cause the lines which now grew deep round the lips and eyes, settled on her face. The poet's marriage had not been a happy one. He had left his wife, and after some years of a rather reckless existence, she had died, before her time. This disaster had led to great irregularities of education, and, indeed, Mrs. Hilbery might be said to have escaped education altogether. But she had been her father's companion at the season when he wrote the finest of his poems. She had sat on his knee in taverns and other haunts of drunken poets, and it was for her sake, so people said, that he had cured himself of his dissipation, and become the irreproachable literary character that the world knows, whose inspiration had deserted him. As Mrs. Hilbery grew old she thought more and more of the past, and this ancient disaster seemed at times almost to prey upon her mind, as if she could not pass out of life herself without laying the ghost of her parent's sorrow to rest.

Katharine wished to comfort her mother, but it was difficult to do this satisfactorily when the facts themselves were so much of a legend. The house in Russell Square, for example, with its noble rooms, and the magnolia-tree in the garden, and the sweet-voiced piano, and the sound of feet coming down the corridors, and other properties of size and romance—had they any existence? Yet why should Mrs. Alardyce\* live all alone in this gigantic mansion, and, if she did not live alone, with whom did she live? For its own sake, Katharine rather liked this tragic story, and would have been glad to hear the details of it, and to have been able to discuss them frankly. But this it became less and less possible to do, for though Mrs. Hilbery was constantly reverting to the story, it was always in this tentative and restless fashion, as though by a touch here and there she could set things straight which had been crooked these sixty years. Perhaps, indeed, she no longer knew what the truth was.

"If they'd lived now," she concluded, "I feel it wouldn't have happened. People aren't so set upon tragedy as they were then. If my father had been able to go round the world, or if she'd had a rest cure, everything would have come right. But what could I do? And then they had bad friends, both of them, who made mischief. Ah, Katharine, when you marry, be quite, quite sure that you love your husband!"

## Sample Annotations

Katharine knew by heart the sort of mood that possessed her as she walked upstairs to the drawing-room, her mother's arm in hers; and she could anticipate the pleasure with which, when she had turned on the lights, they both regarded the drawing-room, fresh swept and set in order for the last section of the day, with the red parrots swinging on the chintz curtains, and the arm-chairs warming in the blaze. Mrs. Hilbery stood over the fire, with one foot on the fender, and her skirts slightly raised.

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-Katharine and her mother, Mrs. Hilbery, share an appreciation of their surroundings.

-Mrs. Hilbery's comments reveal she is nostalgic for her childhood, a time when she enjoyed a lavish lifestyle.

-Mrs. Hilbery's demeanor reveals regret for something in her past.

-The narrator reveals that Mrs. Hilbery received little education after the death of her mother.

-Mrs. Hilbery was the reason her father overcame his dissipation, and she inspired him.

-The narrator reveals that Mrs. Hilbery is still haunted by her parents' broken marriage.

-The narrator reveals Katharine's doubt about the truth behind her mother's memories.

-Katharine has a great deal of curiosity about her grandparents' tragedy.

-Mrs. Hilbery's reflections about her parents' tragic marriage reveal she is unable to come to terms with it.

"If they'd lived now," she concluded, "I feel it wouldn't have happened. People aren't so set upon tragedy as they were then. If my father had been able to go round the world, or if she'd had a rest cure, everything would have come right. But what could I do? And then they had bad friends, both of them, who made mischief. Ah, Katharine, when you marry, be quite, quite sure that you love your husband!"

-Mrs. Hilbery's comments as she reflects on the past reveal that she is still traumatized by the events.

-Mrs. Hilbery's comments illustrate her love for her daughter and her wish to see her happy.