**Characterization in Literature**

*by Karen Bernardo*

An important component of modern fiction is characterization. Historically, realistic characterization has only intermittently been considered an essential part of good writing; in eras when allegory and didacticism become more important than realism, characterization generally goes out the window.

For example, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, begun in 1387, has considerably more individualized and realistic characterization than does the anonymously-written *Everyman*, composed only a few years later; Shakespeare's works, written between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, have superb characterization, while *Pilgrim's Progress*, written in 1678, has virtually none.

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.

Unfortunately, characterization is one of the most difficult aspects of creative writing to master, because authors tend to naturally fall into the fatal trap of creating two-dimensional, cardboard characters. We may describe the grandmother in our story, for example, as kindly, with softly-curled gray hair, and a preference for polyester floral prints. Isn't that how all grandmothers look? Of course not; that's a stereotype. Good stories feature characters who turn the stereotypes upside down -- people who defy expectations.

Cervantes' Don Quixote, who believes he is a knight, is in actuality a gentle madman; but his good heart epitomizes the essence of real chivalry. Hemingway's protagonist in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" is not a Great White Hunter; he is a coward humiliated by his wife. The crippled daughter in Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" does not elicit our sympathy; she is so angry, hostile, and arrogant that one page into the story we are dying to see her get her just desserts. The common denominator between all good characters is that they are multifaceted, just as we are ourselves, and their personalities pose questions and challenges that keep us turning the pages.

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