Literary Elements
Characterization

"A man's disposition is never well known till he be crossed."
Francis Bacon
Advancement of Learning

The above words by Francis Bacon tell us that we do not really know what a person is like until that person is faced with adversity. The way a person reacts when facing a problem will often reveal his true nature. In literature, we find that as we study the character in a story and examine the way he reacts to the problems in the story, we are able to get to know the character and come to an understanding of what his personality is like.

The word **character** refers to the people, animals, or objects that a story is about. **Protagonist** is a term that refers to the main character in the story. The protagonist is the person that the reader cares most about and is the "good guy" in the story. Often in stories the protagonist is in conflict with another character. The character that is against the protagonist and causes problems for him/her is known as the **antagonist.** The antagonist might be considered to be the "bad guy" in the story.

As an author writes a story, she will use a variety of techniques to help readers get to know the characters in the story and what the characters are like. **Characterization** is a name for the methods a writer uses to reveal a character's values, feelings, goals, etc. to readers. When revealing a character's traits, a writer can do so using direct characterization or indirect characterization.

Direct Characterization is when a writer conveys information about a character by *telling* the information directly to the reader. This is done through narration when the author comes right out and tells the reader things about the character. For example, the writer might tell us "Sarah was the smartest in the family." or that "Sarah was tall for her age and had an athletic build." In this instance readers have certain knowledge of Sarah's intellect in relation to the rest of the family and of her build/appearance. Direct characterization makes it easy for readers to come to clear understandings bout the character. However, most information about characters is not so easily ascertained. That is because most of our understandings about characters must be arrived at as a result of indirect characterization.

Indirect characterization occurs when the author *shows* the character in action, and lets the reader interpret what these actions reveal about the character. For example, the author may write, "At report card time Sarah was the one who brought home all "A"s." Readers must then rely on their own knowledge and experience to interpret that Sarah must be smart—perhaps the smartest in the family. There are a number of tools that a writer will use to impart personality traits to their characters. It is up to readers to correctly interpret the information in

order to have an accurate assessment of the character. There tools include the following:

- Character's Name—Names convey images. If a character has a strong name, readers interpret the character in a favorable way. If a character has a weak or undesirable name, then the character seems weak and is viewed less favorably by readers.
- Character's Looks—If a character is physically attractive, readers will perceive the character in a more favorable way than if the character were unattractive. How often do you remember the hero in a story being short, weak, ugly, or overweight? It would be a rare occurrence to have such a protagonist.
- Character's Job—Readers make assumptions about characters based on the work that they do. If the character is a fry cook in a diner, the readers will make different assumptions about the character than they would if the character is a neurosurgeon. In the one case, the character may be interpreted as uneducated, poor, or unambitious. In the other case, the character might be assumed to be quite intelligent, financially successful, and ambitious.
- Character's Home—The environment in which a character lives may cause readers to form certain assumptions about the character. For example, if a character lives in a mobile home in a trailer park, we might make different assumptions that we would if the character lived in the penthouse of a high-rise apartment in a high-rent district.
- Character's Habits/Actions—A character's behaviors can reveal a lot about a character. For instance, if a character bites his nails, we might interpret the character as nervous or lacking in confidence. Remember the saying, "Actions speak louder than works."
- Character's Dialog—What characters say to or about others can tell readers a great deal about what the character is like. Both *what* the characters say and *how* they say it should be considered.
- Character's Thoughts—What a character is thinking to himself can also reveal the character's personality in much the same way dialog can. A character's thoughts are like an inner dialog.

By correctly interpreting the characterization tools used by an author, readers can arrive at clear understandings of what characters in stories are like. It is important to have a good understanding of a character because of the personality of the character contributes greatly to the conflict in a story. Sometimes the character's personality will cause his problems in the first place. Other times a character's traits can be what impede him from dealing effectively with his problems. An understanding of these traits can help readers understand why the story unfolds the way it does and why the problem is so difficult for the character to overcome.

Finally, it is important to consider character development when analyzing characterization. Often, as characters deal with the problems they face in a story, the character will learn a lesson or change his/her behavior as a result of story events. When a character undergoes a change in values, beliefs, or behaviors as a result of his/her experiences, we refer to that character as a *dynamic character.* The protagonist in a story is usually a dynamic character. Sometimes, however, a character is unaffected by the experiences he/she undergoes. When a character remains unchanged by his/her experiences, that character is referred to as a *static character.* Often the minor characters and the antagonist in a story will be static. Sometimes the protagonist will be static if the story is more driven by plot (events) than by character. It is important to remember that only in stories can people be static. In real life people are always changing, often unwillingly, because of the things they encounter in life.