

Unit 1: Character

Introduction

I am starting our study of the contemporary short story with a consideration of *character* because it is at the core of what distinguishes contemporary short stories from earlier short stories by writers like Poe and Hawthorne. As your readings in Appendix I and II tell you, earlier writers of the form did not primarily concern themselves with making their characters three-dimensional people. They were abstract and archetypal figures, there to serve the purpose of illustrating the author's overarching moral perspective. Then came Melville with his first published short story, "Bartleby the Scrivener," and we have a new **realism** introduced in character development, with the reader now engaged in the story in a very different way. We enter the story through engagement and empathy with a seemingly real person on the page, in a situation so detailed that it sounds like real life.

Today, many beginning writers who aspire to publish a short story start their research by looking into what editors are looking for. And most of these editors will tell the writer that what counts more than anything else these days is a story in which the characters are fully realized, accurately drawn people who act on their own particular motives.

You even sometimes hear writers say that as their characters take on realness in their minds, the characters begin to dictate the story, not the writer. Realness means that these characters now have a sense of autonomy; the writer can now imagine them outside his story and how they would act other situations. Even if the entire story takes place inside a car, the writer knows the kind of soap he will use if he decides to take a shower later tonight, and if he will forget to wash his neck.

Part 1: Understanding Character in a Metaphorical Sense—What kind of car is Kugelmass?

There also is a deeper level at which we can understand characters in the contemporary short story. Have you ever played the game, “Smoke?” John Gardner, in *The Art of Fiction*, tells us that beyond knowing the facts about a character’s behavior, we grasp what kind of person a character is in a **metaphorical** way. “Often,” says Gardner, “our deepest sense of character comes from symbolic association.” As an example of symbolic association, he proposes that we look at the parlor game, “Smoke,” which some of us may have played. Gardner writes: “In this game the player who is ‘it’ thinks of some famous personage living or dead, such as Ghandi or Frank Sinatra, then tells the other players, “I am an Asian,” “I am an American,” or whatever. The players, in order, try to guess the name of the personage by asking such questions as, “What kind of smoke are you? What kind of weather are you? And so on. The player who is “it” answers not in terms of what the personage might have liked to smoke, or what weather he might have preferred, but what kind of smoke the personage would *be* if he were incarnated not as a human being but as a certain kind of smoke—cigarette, cigar, pipe, White Owl...As they ask their questions the players develop a powerful sense of the personality they’re seeking...it depends on metaphoric intuition...the players discover that the metaphors that describe the personage have a remarkable precision.”

Following Gardner’s idea about knowing a character in a metaphorical way, we can take a look at our next story, “The Kugelmass Episode.” When Kugelmass in his leisure suit claims to have “soul,” but pays Persky twenty bucks so he can have his “affair with a French woman,” what associations do you make with these details? What kind of guy do we have here? If Kugelmass were a car, what kind of car would he be? What kind of smoke is the mother in Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”?

Part 2: Interior Life and “Girl”

In thinking about how to describe a character to see if you have understood his full dimensions, I also like what Anne Lamott says in her book, *Bird by Bird*. Her advice is to writers, but I think it applies to all readers of contemporary literature, too: “Each character has an emotional acre that they tend, or don’t tend, in certain specific ways. One of the things you want to discover as you start out is what each person’s acre looks like. What is the person growing, and what sort of shape is the land in? This knowledge may not show up per se in what you write (or read), but the point is that you need to find out as much as possible about the interior life of the people you are working with.”

Jamaica Kincaid is quite sure about the emotional acre of the mother who is giving all that advice in “Girl.” How would you describe that acre? When you read the Related Commentary on “Girl” (p. 1518), you’ll understand just how well Kincaid knows the mother’s acre. In this very short experimental story, the author is able to give us a sense of the absolute clarity of this mother’s stance toward her daughter. Although the daughter is only granted two lines, these two lines also clearly define *her* dilemma of drawing boundaries in the face of such a strong, forceful parent.

Part 3: The Character Must Make His Own Kind of Sense

Interest in a story depends upon how quickly one can enter into a character's dilemma, imagining what it would be like to be this person faced with this problem. But unlike novels, short stories have the added demand of rounding out a believable world in a few pages. Because of this, they provide an added delight. Because of its brevity, the short story brings into sharp focus the deciding event upon which the character hangs the motive for his action. If the character is believable, and the author has provided the right details to make his choice of action the logical one for *him*, we can't put it down. We avoid all interruptions until we can complete reading the last sentence. We come to a short story expecting a well-lit stage upon which no character wastes a gesture. Our ears are open to receive encoded messages in the sentences because we'll reach the end in a few pages.

People sometimes make the mistake of generalizing short stories as a genre that can only handle a small bite of life in a few pages. This is not true. In a few pages, a short story can portray grand themes, its characters just as fully imagined as those in novels. The demand to make believable characters is the same for the contemporary short story writer as it is for the novelist. In their landmark book, *Understanding Fiction*, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren emphasize this point to all readers of fiction: "A character must be credible—must make sense, must be able to command our belief. True, the character in question may be an eccentric; he may be brutally criminal; he may even be mad. But his thoughts and actions must ultimately be coherent. But we must remember that the kind of sense a character must make is his own kind, not our kind. For example, a more sensible, less proud woman than Madame Loisel in "The Necklace" might have made a clean breast of things to her friend and been spared the terrible and unnecessary consequences, but it is the coherence of Madame Loisel's character that Maupassant must convince us of. If he does not convince us that his Madame Loisel is really capable of accepting, and persisting through, the life of hardship that comes with the loss of the necklace, then the story itself is incredible."—Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Fiction*. If you want to read it, "The Necklace," is on pp.966–72 in *The Story and Its Writer*.

Part 4: Understanding Character is as Important as Understanding the Plot

The evolution of character development has brought us today to a place where the interior life of characters is extremely important. (Art always has exceptions. An exception is a story we'll read later, "An Old Man With Enormous Wings." In it, Gabriel García Márquez writes the story without entering *any* of the character's minds. It will be their actions will make them seem real.)

In the short stories we'll read in this course, characters will be **round**, not **flat**. In just a few strokes, characters will enter into our imaginations in such a full way that they will propel the plot. *Who* they are will be the main reason *why* what happens, happens.

Today we are more globally aware than we used to be even twenty years ago. The fiction section in American bookstores now includes writers from South America to South Africa, from France to Japan. Fresh new writing is translated almost immediately into English, French, Spanish, German, Japanese—and *how* new writers use language changes as fast as the language on the street. Ann Charters, the editor of our text, writes in Appendix II that "the significant differences among contemporary short stories are in the attitudes toward life that govern an author's sense of reality and the literary techniques of expression that these attitudes call forth."

Assignments

Reading:

- short story “Girl” (pp. 839–40)
- short story “The Kugelmass Episode” (pp. 21–9)
- related author biographies, Kincaid, (p.838) and Allen, (p. 20)
- related commentary on “Girl” (p.1518–19)

Discussion Forum questions on “Girl” and “The Kugelmass Episode”

You must choose ONE Discussion Forum question. Please indicate the number of the question to which you choose to respond.

*1. After you have read the Related Commentary on “Girl” (p. 1518), think about what Kincaid in this interview says about the relationship between the mother and the girl, and Europe and Antigua. This gives yet another dimension to “Girl.” Re-read the story after reading this interview, and discuss your response this time. Listen to the reading of “Girl” to hear the West Indian prose rhythms.

OR

*2. Looking at “The Kugelmass Episode,” discuss some specific ways Woody Allen makes Kugelmass a round character. What do you think Woody Allen’s bias is toward Kugelmass (is the author critiquing people like him)?

Questions to Ponder

“Girl” and “The Kugelmass Episode”
(use as a study guide for yourself):

1. In “Girl,” what are the major subjects in this litany of advice? What kinds of advice is the mother offering?
2. In “Girl,” string together the lines that admonish the potential “slut.” What do we think of the mother? What connection is there between the subjects the mother is speaking about and the idea of a slut?
3. In “Girl,” what’s the difference between the advice that precedes and follows the reference to aborting a child? Which is more concrete? More abstract? Why does the advice change because of the listener’s age?

4. The girl has only two lines of her own. Why isn't the story called "Mother" instead of "Girl"?
5. When you read "Girl," a) What do you notice about Antiguan life? b) Is there any humor in the mother's advice?
6. Why does "Girl" end the way it does? Does it seem resolved to you? Can you make a case for saying this story *does* have a resolution?
7. How does Kugelmass in "The Kugelmass Episode" respond to supernatural occurrences?
8. What does Allen achieve by noting the effect of the sudden appearance of the Kugelmass episode in the novel on various readers?
9. Even though Woody Allen's Kugelmass is very funny, what do you think he also may be critiquing about society?
10. What kind of car is Kugelmass? Explain your answer. (What am I talking about? See reference to the game "Smoke" in my remarks on "Understanding Character in a Metaphorical Sense.") What kind of smoke is the mother in "Girl"?

~~"Go Further"~~ (optional)

~~Considering the short story "Girl":~~

~~Perhaps some of the mother's advice here is an **interior monologue**, unspoken, but transferred to the daughter nonetheless.~~

- ~~• Think about how your parents' voice became a part of you. In ways do parents transfer guidance and a self concept to the child *other than* saying them aloud?~~
- ~~• If some of you are yourselves parents, talk about the unspoken ways you have transferred guidance and a self concept to your child.~~
- ~~• Relate your personal experience to "Girl."~~

~~Creative Exercise~~ ~~shared in a workshop atmosphere of experimentation!~~

~~I'd like you to try your first creative exercise this week. It's just a sketch, not a full story, but it will give you the opportunity to try making a vivid fictional character. Here goes: Select a supernatural being from a fairy tale or other familiar source (a cartoon involving animals for instance), and imagine the being as a physical reality *in your surroundings*. **Think about the details you will use to make the setting and the characters in your sketch seem real.**~~