

CHARACTERIZATION

This handout contains examples of characterization from various literary sources.

Direct Characterization--telling or abstract commentary.

"He was drunken, disorderly, and promiscuous from early adolescence. We might have thought these irregularities normal and exploratory if he has shown even temporary contrition about them; but he indulged them as if he must, to maintain his self-respect. Non servism. All right, he could have taken that too, if we had found any fallen-angel grandeur of mind or spirit in him. But we had to observe that he was ungenerous, that he gave nothing and took all he could, that he felt responsibility for nothing, love for no one. He had such a gift for the wrong companions that it was fair to think of him, not them, as the bad influence. He sponged on people, especially women; he betrayed friends, especially women; and he fell for every crack-brained groupie arty-intellectual fad over a period of twenty years."

Stegner, *All the Little Live Things*

"He was, I think very handsome. Handsome, proud, and ingrown "like a toenail," somebody said. But he looked at me, as I grew older, like pictures I had seen of African tribal chieftains: he really should have been naked, with warpaint on and barbaric mementos, descriptably cruel in his personal life, and he was certainly the most bitter man I have ever met; yet it must be said that there was something else buried in him, which lent him his tremendous power and even, a rather crushing charm. It had something to do with his blackness, I think--he was very black--and his beauty, and the fact that he knew that he was black but did not know he was beautiful."

Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*

Indirect Characterization--showing or dramatizing

Salient Detail (Make use of unique, salient, contrasting detail in order to vivify character and give permanence).

"Her hair was not like ours. It was black, but softer, and finer and very long. The color of her skin reminded me of the color of bananas. Her skin was so bright as that, and contained that kind of promise and she had tiny freckles around her nose and a small

black mole just above her upper lip. It was the mole, I don't know why, which made her beautiful. Without it, her face might have been merely sweet, merely pretty. But the mole was funny. It had the effect of making one realize that our mother liked funny things, liked to laugh. The mole made one look at her eyes--large, extraordinary, dark eyes, eyes which seemed always to be amused by something, eyes which looked straight out, seeming to see everything, seeming to be afraid of nothing."

Baldwin, *Tell Me How Long The Train's Been Gone*

Metaphor and Simile (Bridges gap of the unknown between author and reader. Often used as or combined with salient detail).

"His face was like a black withered apple and almost destroyed; his polished forehead shone as though a purple light gleamed under the skin; his sickle-curved posture made him look as though his back were broken: a sad little brokeback dwarf crippled with age. Yet, and this impressed Joel's imagination, there was a touch of the wizard in his yellow, spotted eyes: it was a tricky quality that suggested, well, magic and the things read in books."

Capote, *Other Voices Other Rooms*

"He was a dirty snuff-dipping Court House figure, famous all over the country for being rich, who wore hightop shoes, a string tie, a gray suit with a black stripe in it, and a yellowed Panama hat, winter and summer. His teeth and hair were tobacco-colored and his face a clay pink pitted and tracked with mysterious prehistoric looking marks as if he had been unearthed among fossils."

O'Connor, *The Displaced Person*

Dialogue

1. Stilted--Sounds Written

"Try to understand. Try to love everyone you meet. I shall be in the parlor waiting for you every night. But you needn't come in and talk to me unless you wish to do so. I shall understand. I know there shall be times when your heart shall be unable to give your tongue one word of speech to utter."

Saroyan, *The Human Comedy*

"But we are just now in a mental world," Stephen continued. "The desire and loathing excited by improper esthetic means are really unaesthetic emotions not only because they are kinetic in character but also because they are not more than physical. Our flesh abinks from what it dreads and responds to the stimulus of what it desires by a purely reflex action of the nervous system."

Joyce, *Portrait of The Young Man As An Artist*

2. Authentic--Natural, with the illusion of reality

"I spoke to Mrs. Catlin," Peck said. "She wasn't bothered."

"You spoke to her? When?"

"Just now."

"Just now? Wasn't John there?"

"Yes, they were all there."

"Oh, good Christ! I said. "You rang their doorbell just now, a few minutes ago?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Never mind," I said. "I just makes it all the more necessary that you move out. I gave you a week,. You've still got five days.'

He straddled, head sunk, his arms down on the handlebars. His hands squeezed the brakes and let them out again. His feral eyes came up to meet mine. "Why do you hate us?" he asked softly.

"I don't hate you."

"Oh yes you do!"

"I disapprove of you, I disagree with you, I think you're dangerous. You want to know why I disapprove of you?"

"Not particularly," he said with curled mouth. "But if it will relieve your hang-up."

I had trouble keeping my hands at my sides. "Maybe it will," I said. "So I'll tell you. From the minute you showed up here you dared me to. For some reason I equal the Establishment. Do I remind you of your father, or what? You felt for some reason you had to challenge me. You asked me if you could camp, and you wanted to bait me into giving you permission without wanting to. You agreed to several conditions and you deliberately broke them all. You expanded your pad and you put in a shed an a mailbox and you moved in your gang and you threw garbage around and you built fires and you stole power from my pole and water from my well line and now you start a school. Doesn't it occur to you I might have a right to disapprove?"

"That's it, that permission bit, isn't it?" Peck said. "You've got to be asked. You want your authority recognized."

Stegner, *Little Live Things*

3. Combined with Casual Action

"I don't care." Lionel said?

"I see that. I see you don't," Boo Boo said. Her cigarette was angled peculiarly between her fingers; it burned dangerously close to one of her knuckle grooves. Suddenly feeling the heat, she let the cigarette drop to the surface of the lake. Then she took out something from one of her side pockets. It was a package, about the size of a deck of cards, wrapped in white paper and tied with green ribbon.

"This is a key chain," she said.....

Lionel leaned forward in his seat, letting go of the tiller. He held out his hands in a catching position, "Throw it?" he said. "Please?"

"Let's keep our seats a minute, Sunshine. I have a little thinking to do. I should throw this key chain in the lake."

Lionel stared up at her with his mouth open. He closed his mouth. "It's mine," he said... Boo Boo, looking down at him, shrugged. "I don't care."

Lionel slowly sat back in his seat, watching his mother and reached behind him for the tiller. His eyes reflected perception.

"Here," Boo Boo tossed the package down to him. It landed squarely in his lap. He looked at it in his lap, picked it off, looked at it in his hand, and flicked it--sidearm--into the lake. He then immediately looked up at Boo Boo, his eyes filled not with defiance, but tears. In another instant, his mouth was distorted into a horizontal figure-S, and he was crying mightily.

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