

Ergänzung der Materialien zum selbstständigen standardorientierten Lernen in der gymnasialen Oberstufe im Fach Englisch – *Text production*

Analyzing a literary character

1 Criteria for analyzing a literary character

If you are asked to characterize, give a characterization of or analyze a literary character, you need to analyze thoroughly the means used by the author to present the character in order to find out what is special about her/him.

Read the text at hand carefully while highlighting passages where the author describes the character (e.g. experiences, behaviour, feelings and thoughts) as well as passages with direct speech by the character. Examine the role the character plays in the excerpt and her/his relationship to other characters.

There are different types of literary characters. The main character is called the **protagonist**, the protagonist's opponent an **antagonist**, the character she/he opens up to a friend or **confidant(e)**. A character who is portrayed in detail and who shows development is a **round character** with a complex personality. In contrast, a static character does not change and often has merely a few character traits. This type of character is called a **flat character**. Flat characters are usually minor characters.

Authors can portray their characters in an explicit or implicit way, either by means of a **first-/third-person narrator** or character who directly tells the reader what a character is like (**direct characterization**) or by describing a character's outward appearance, background, experiences, attitudes, values, behaviour, way of speaking and thinking, and making the readers draw their own conclusions about the character's personality (**indirect characterization**). In your analysis, focus on the narrative technique, stylistic devices, the language as well as the structure, and the way these means affect the reader's perception of the character. Say whether the narrator is **reliable** or **unreliable**. Unreliable means that the narrator lacks objectivity in presenting the character while focusing on only one perspective. Explain what is special about the character and how this specialness is conveyed to the reader. Do not forget to give text evidence.

PREPARATION

- 1) Read the task to find out which character you are expected to examine.
- 2) Study the text carefully. Find and underline or highlight the information about the character.
- 3) Take notes, e.g. on the character's
 - name, gender, age, ethnicity, origin, religion
 - family and social status, profession, general situation
 - outward appearance, behaviour, way of speaking/thinking, attitudes, values
 - character traits
 - interests, ambitions, aims
 - relationships and conflicts.
- 4) Do not forget to note down evidence from the text (quotes and line numbers) and the means of characterization used by the author, e.g.
 - narrative technique (first-/third-person (un)reliable narrator), (un)limited point of view
 - scenic/panoramic presentation
 - flashback, foreshadowing
 - detailed description (of behaviour and feelings)

- (in)direct speech, dialogue, reported thought, interior monologue
 - stylistic devices/language.
- 5) Put your notes in a convincing order. Begin with general information / descriptions before you elaborate on details that are relevant for the character.
 - 6) Make sure your notes are relevant to the task.

ANALYZING A LITERARY CHARACTER

INTRODUCTION

- State which character you are focusing on.
- Briefly explain what is special about him/her and what her/his role for the storyline is.

MAIN PART

- Begin by giving basic information about the character.
- Say what is special about the character.
- Describe the character traits, experiences, behaviour, motivations, attitudes, values, way of speaking and thinking, relationships, conflicts etc. in detail. Begin with the most important features.
- Give evidence by quoting from the text and indicating line numbers.
- Say how the author conveys what is special about the character by naming the devices the author uses and by explaining their effect on the reader.
- Consider whether the character is dynamic, that means showing development (round character), or static with only few character traits (flat character).
- Explain how the reader can relate to the character, e.g. by developing empathy.

CONCLUSION

- Make a final statement on the character. Sum up your findings in a few sentences.

THROUGHOUT YOUR TEXT

- Write clear sentences. Use linking words, but be careful with lengthy sentences. Unlike German, English tends to use shorter sentences and active verbs.
- Follow a clear and logical structure and use paragraphs.
- Use the present tense and a wide variety of precise adjectives to describe the character.
- Write in a way that helps the reader gain a better understanding of what is special about the character.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Make sure everything you write is based on a thorough analysis of the text and supported by evidence.
- Do not merely list devices of characterization but always explain how they convey what is special about the character.

2 Useful phrases

Narrative technique and point of view

First-person narration with a limited point of view (e.g. “...” ll. 11-12) helps the reader **feel empathy with / understand / identify with...**

The story is told by a **third-person narrator with a limited point** of view who focuses on the protagonist’s situation and thus **helps the reader understand** his/her inner conflict about ... This can be seen in e. g. lines 15-17 (“...”).

The reader sees the character/development **through the confidant(e)s/friend’s eyes** (cf. “...” ll. 6-8). In the end, the reader finds out that Thus, it becomes clear that the **narrator is unreliable**.

Direct characterization

The **most striking characteristic** of the protagonist is ... as the reader is **directly told** in l. 7 “...”.

The main character is **explicitly/directly characterized/described** as “...” (l. 10)

The narrator portrays/presents the protagonist as ... / a person who can be considered ...

The narrator helps/makes the reader realize/see/believe/feel/understand ...

The narrator **draws attention to** ... which **illustrates / offers an insight into** ...

The narrator’s **description of/comment/reflection on** ... in l. 20 (“...”) **illustrates/reveals/conveys** ...

The relationship between the protagonist and ... **is described/portrayed as** ...

Indirect characterization

The protagonist is mainly **characterized implicitly/indirectly** by her/his way of speaking. **Proof/evidence for this can be found** in ll. 30-32 “...”.

The **reported thought / inner monologue / dialogue / direct speech** in ... / The protagonist’s **way of thinking/speaking reveals** ..., e.g. “...” l. 7.

She/He **appears/seems to be** ... when she/he ... as described in l. 11 (“...”)

The character’s comment on ... in l. 20 (“...”) **illustrates/reveals** ...

His/Her **language/way of speaking/behaviour indicates/implies/proves/reveals/shows** that ...

From the way she/he acts/behaves when ... /thinks/feels about ... (cf. “...” ll. 22-23) **the reader can infer/conclude** ...

The **following statement shows / quote illustrates** that ...: “...” (ll. 3-4)

The **relationship** between the protagonist and ... **is characterized/presented by** ...

Language

The **detailed description / repetition** of ... / **emotive language shows/illustrates** that the character is ...

In ll. 24-25 (“...”), the **author uses/employs enumeration** of ... / **irony to make clear** that ...

The use of the image of ... / a simile / words with negative/positive connotations in l. 30 (“...”) / words such as ... which refer to ... **creates a clear/convincing/negative/positive picture/portrait of** ...

The relationship changes over time as **can be seen in the contrast** between ... and ...

The author **creates a contrast** between ... and ... / **alludes to ... / exaggerates ... to illustrate** ...

3 Sample text: Analyzing a literary character¹

Text: Marjorie Barnard (1943). "The Lottery". In: *The Persimmon Tree and other stories*. Sydney: The Clarendon Publishing Company, 97-105

Task: Analyze how Ted Bilborough is portrayed by the author.

In the short story "The Lottery" the protagonist Ted Bilborough feels disturbed when he finds out that his wife has won a large sum in a lottery and has not told him. The third-person narrator with a limited point of view focuses on Ted's perspective inviting the reader to sympathize with him. It becomes clear only in the end that the narrator's presentation of reality is not reliable.

Ted has been married to Grace for 10 years and they have two children (cf. p. 101, l. 11). They belong to Australia's lower middle class. He is directly characterized by an enumeration of positive traits, e.g. p. 98, ll. 13/14 "always ready for a joke, ... a good husband and father". Though his wages are still reduced in the aftermath of the Great Depression, he manages to pay the bills and is able to put aside a small amount of money for bad times (cf. p. 98, ll. 17-20). Thus, he is credibly presented as a good husband of his time, who is working hard to provide for his family (cf. p. 97, ll. 24/25). He also has "a good wife" (repetition on p. 100, l. 29 and l. 32) who takes care of the household. He is proud of pushing the pram once in a while, though he makes clear that he actually considers his wife to be responsible for the children (cf. p. 98, ll. 14/15). Ted clearly feels superior to her. He believes she should be thankful for being allowed to stay at home, not having to work. His lack of appreciation is revealed on p. 101, ll. 6-10 "All she had to do was to stay at home ... he couldn't see what there was to do".









The protagonist seems to be part of a close-knit community. He is told by his friends that his wife won the lottery. Ted is very annoyed that Grace has neither told him that she had bought a ticket nor that she won. The question of where she got the money for the ticket bothers him as the author illustrates with the repetitions on p. 100, ll. 14/15 and p.101, ll. 15/17. He thinks she used money he gave her for the household and feels betrayed by her (cf. p.100, ll. 14-22). How badly he feels, is illustrated by the choice of numerous words with negative connotations, e.g. "ache" (p. 102, l.7), "dwindling" (p. 104, l. 3), "awkwardly" (p. 104, l. 8). Nevertheless, he seems to enjoy that his friends now look up to him in his new prosperity and he promises to support them financially, which makes him appear generous. But even before his friends learn about the money, they liked him, as the reader is directly told on p.98, ll. 11/12 "Everyone liked Ted in a kind sort of way." Besides he is "cheerful", at least when he is not with his "moody" wife who, in contrast to him, is lacking in cheerfulness (cf. p. 101, ll. 2-4).









He seems to be afraid of confronting his wife, feeling "reluctant" (p. 103, l. 22) and "shy" (p. 103, l. 24), but uses a "big bluff voice" (p. 103, l. 28) when asking her for an explanation. Hearing her say that she bought the lottery ticket with money she got from selling her mother's jewelry and does not intend to share her winnings with him, he is speechless: p. 104, l. 23 "Oh". He cannot believe she will leave him because she finds her life with him so unbearable that the lottery was her "Last Hope" for a better future, as is pointed out at the beginning (p. 97, l 21) and ending (p. 105, ll. 9/10) of the short story. In the final part the author employs direct speech with very short sentences to illustrate how little husband and wife have to say to each other, e.g. p. 104, ll. 25-27 "'It was my money.' 'I didn't say it wasn't.' 'No you didn't'". Thus, she reveals a lack of mutual understanding and makes clear that by focusing on Ted's illusion of a perfect marriage, the narrator has not given the reader a complete picture of the situation.

To conclude, only in the end the reader realizes that Ted's assessment of his family situation was wrong and that his wife does not see their relationship in a positive light. The author uses an unreliable narrator who focuses on the protagonist and does not tell the reader about his wife's situation or feelings to bring about a surprising turn of events. Though the protagonist is not a very complex character, the reader gets a vivid picture of his inner turmoil.

¹ Dieser Schülertext wurde von Fr. Dr. Nöth (Johann-Gottfried-Herder-Gymnasium, Berlin-Lichtenberg) zur Verfügung gestellt. Die Verfasserin hat der Veröffentlichung zugestimmt.

4 Self-assessment grid: Analyzing a literary character

Criteria	Date:				Date:			
								
Introduction								
I have made clear which character I am focusing on and what role the character plays in the excerpt, e.g. protagonist, antagonist, confidant(e)/friend.								
In a general statement I have mentioned what is special about the character.								
Main part								
I have summed up the basic information about the character, e.g.: - name, gender, age, ethnicity, origin, religion - family and social status, profession, general situation.								
I have described the character's outward appearance, e.g. height, figure, striking features.								
I have explained which role the character plays in the excerpt by describing, e.g. her/his - behaviour, way of speaking/thinking, attitudes, values - relationships/conflicts - background, past experiences.								
I have described her/his character traits, e.g. - intellectual capabilities - personal and social competences - interests, ambitions, aims.								
I have analyzed the narrative technique and other means the author uses to portray the character.								
I have said whether the character shows a development in the excerpt I have analyzed (flat/round character).								

								
I have given evidence (quotes and line numbers).								
I have given necessary explanations considering - how the characteristics are related to each other and - to what extent the reader can relate to the character.								
Conclusion								
I have made clear that I am coming to my conclusion.								
I have briefly summed up the main points.								
I have ended with a final statement about what is special about the character and the role she/he plays in the excerpt.								
Final check								
I have made sure that I have included the relevant aspects from my notes.								
I have fulfilled the task by thoroughly analyzing the character and describing her/him in detail.								
In all parts I have focused on the task.								
I have written in a style which is adequate for a text analysis.								
I have structured my text by writing paragraphs.								
I have connected my ideas and sentences logically.								
I have avoided repetitions by using synonyms/ paraphrases.								
I have checked my vocabulary/grammar/spelling using a dictionary.								