Characterization in Drama

“When the drama attains a characterization which makes the play a revelation of human conduct and a dialogue which characterizes yet pleases for itself, we reach dramatic literature.”

- George Pierce Baker
Characterization Definition

- Characterization is a literary device that is used step by step in literature to highlight and explain the details about a character in a story.
- Characterization as a literary tool was coined in the mid 15th century.
- Aristotle in his Poetics argued that “tragedy is a representation, not of men, but of action and life”.
- Generally speaking, one can distinguish between characterizations made by the author in the play's secondary text (authorial) or by other characters in the play (figural), and whether these characterizations are made directly (explicitly) or indirectly (implicitly).
  - Another distinction can be made between self-characterization and characterization through others.
Types of Characterization

An author can use two approaches to deliver information about a character and build an image of it:

1. **Direct or explicit characterization**
   - This kind of characterization takes a direct approach towards building the character. It uses another character, narrator or the **protagonist** themselves to tell the readers or audience about the subject.

2. **Indirect or implicit characterization**
   - This is a more subtle way of introducing the character to the audience.
   - The audience has to deduce for themselves the characteristics of the character by observing his/her thought process, behavior, speech, way of talking, appearance, and way of communication with other characters and also by discerning the response of other characters.
Explicit Characterization

- An example of an explicit authorial characterization can be found in Luis Valdez’s *Zoot Suit* where the author provides a detailed description of the character George in the secondary text:
  - GEORGE SHEARER enters upstage right and comes down. HE is a middle-aged lawyer, strong and athletic, but with a slightly frazzled look of a people’s lawyer.

(Calderon, *Zoot Suit*, I)
Implicit Characterization

- Since this explicit authorial characterization is obviously not available for viewers in a theatre, George has to be characterized implicitly through the audio-visual channel, i.e., in his interactions with the other characters, the things he talks about, the way he talks, etc.
- One means of indirect characterization is already provided in George’s physical appearance.
  - The fact that he contrasts sharply with the Pachucos (he is strong and athletic [freedom/social class] vs. Henry in jail [defeat/victimization], his middle age [wisdom] vs Henry’s youth [naivety]), and so on. These differences suggests to the audience that he might be different in terms of personality as well.
- The two men’s divergent characters are most visible in the way they interact, however, and in their respective behavior towards each other:
  - GEORGE: There’s always a chance, Smiley. That’s what trials are for.
  - PACHUCO: He didn’t answer your question, ese.
  - HENRY: You still didn’t answer my question, mister. Who’s paying you? And how much?
  - GEORGE: (Getting slightly peeved.) Well, Henry, it’s really none of your damned business. (The BOYS react.) But for whatever it’s worth, I’ll tell you a little story. The first murder case I ever tried, and won, incidentally, was for a Filipino. I was paid exactly three dollars and fifty cents plus a pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes, and a note for a thousand dollars—never redeemed. Does that answer your question?
  - (Valdez, Zoot Suit, I)
Characterization in Drama

- On stage or in front of the camera, the actors usually do not have much time to characterize.
  - This is why the character faces the risk of coming across as underdeveloped.
- In drama, the realists take a different approach by relying on implied characterization. This is pivotal to the theme of their character-driven narrative.
- Classic psychological characterization examples usually build the main character in a more indirect manner.
  - This approach is considered more effective because it slowly discloses the inner turmoil of the character during the play and lets the audience connect better.
  - The actors who act in such roles usually work on them profoundly to get an in-depth idea of the personality of their respective character.
- Often, during plays, no direct statements about the character’s nature are found. This kind of realism needs the actors to build the character from their own perspective initially.
  - This is why realistic characterization is more of a subtle nature, which cannot directly be recognized.
Characterization is an essential component in writing good literature. To put it briefly, it helps us make sense of the behavior of any character in a story by helping us understand their thought processes. A good use of characterization always leads the audience to relate better to the events taking place in the story. Dialogue and action plays a very important role in developing a character because they give us an opportunity to examine the motivations and actions of the characters more deeply.