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EXTRACT USED IN 'REVEALING CHARACTERS'

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Start Writing Fiction

Extract used in ‘Revealing characters’

Josip Novakovich – *Fiction Writer’s Workshop*

Portraying a character

The way you present a character is at least as important as where you get the character. Fleshing out your characters in various ways may take up most of the story. So if you learn how to make your characters act on a stage, in your setting, you’ll certainly be able to write stories. In this section you’ll find a variety of ways to portray a character.

Summary

You can tell us outright what your fictional characters are like and what they do. If you answered the questionnaire at the end of the previous section, you have a rough character summary. Link the character traits that strike you as the most important ones, and you’ll have a complete character summary. Here’s a classic summary from *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes:

This gentleman, in the times when he had nothing to do – as was the case for most of the year – gave himself up to the reading of books of knight errantry; which he loved and enjoyed so much that he almost entirely forgot his hunting, and even the care of his estate.

He so buried himself in his books that he spent the nights reading from twilight till daybreak and the days from dawn till dark; and so from little sleep and much reading, his brain dried up and he lost his wits.

Cervantes goes on with the summary for several pages, but I think this excerpt gives you an idea of how summary works. We find out Don Quixote’s work and leisure habits, hobbies and passions, and the consequences of pursuing these – his obsession with books results in his illness, madness.

The advantage of this method is its simplicity and readability: The writer quickly focuses on the main character’s conflict and supplies the background we need to know. You clearly set up expectations for what follows if you use this method in or near the beginning of your story. Unless you botch the summary, your reader will easily understand what the main character traits and conflicts are about.

The disadvantage to this method is that you are bound to tell rather than show what your character is like – this method makes it hard to see and hear the character. While the summary goes on, no dramatic action, no dialogue, takes place. We are waiting. Still, the character summary is often worth risking; after you orient the reader clearly and quickly, you will not need to stall the dramatic action (in order to supply the background) once it begins to take place.

Here's another example of how summary works, from *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway. See how quickly we learn the character's main concerns:

Robert Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn. He cared nothing for boxing, in fact he disliked it, but he learned it painfully and thoroughly to counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton. There was a certain inner comfort in knowing he could knock down anybody who was snooty to him, although, being very shy and a thoroughly nice boy, he never fought except in the gym.

This is the opening of the novel. There's no scene for us to visualize, but we receive the basic outline of the character's psychology and motivation. Later, we'll hear the character speak, see him act, but for now, we have some guiding ideas about him (and the novel), which will help us understand what follows.

If this approach strikes you as too much 'telling,' try to show all the information in a dramatic scene, and you'll realize that you'll need at least several pages to do it. Since the action Hemingway is concerned with is not in the past but in the dramatic present (which will follow), to go back into the past dramatically would dissipate the novel's focus. The summary gives us the relevant aspects of the past, so we can stick with the dramatic present. While it's not the most graceful method, it's certainly useful.

Repeated action or habit

This is the most common notion of character – the expectation of how a person will behave in a given situation, based on the observation that she has behaved like that many times, that she has the habit. This may be an effective way of describing a person when you don't have the time to go into the scenes to show us how she behaves. Here's an example from 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' by Joyce Carol Oates:

She was fifteen and she had a quick, nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors or checking other people's faces to make sure her own was all right.

Now we know that in many situations the girl behaves this way. It would take an awful lot of time to show this habit dramatically. If the sole point of the scenes were

to show her habit, the scenes would be a strain on the reader. Describing it in a summary will save you time. That's the advantage. The disadvantage is that doing this will delay your entry into your main dramatic scenes, where the story takes place.

Self-portrait

The writer may let the character introduce himself to us. Again, this usually will be a summary of the basic concerns, at least in the beginning. Notice that a self-portrait can be achieved indirectly, as Hemingway's narrator does in the example of character summary from *The Sun Also Rises*. The narrator says, 'Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn.' In this sentence we notice a certain sense of superiority, perhaps arrogance, on the part of the narrator. When he characterizes Robert Cohn as 'very shy and a thoroughly nice boy,' we hear the narrator's voice. Who would speak of a twenty-year old as a 'thoroughly nice boy'? We begin to surmise inferences about the narrator. The narrator's summary gives us an explicit portrait of Robert Cohn and an implied and indirect self-portrait. Good economy.

Here's a direct self-portrait by the narrator of *Notes From Underground* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky:

I am a sick man ... I am a spiteful man. I am an ugly man. I believe my liver is diseased. However, I know nothing at all about my disease, and do not know for certain what ails me. I don't consult a doctor for it, and never have, though I have a respect for medicine and doctors. Besides, I am extremely superstitious, sufficiently so to respect medicine, anyway (I am well-educated enough not to be superstitious, but I am superstitious). No, I refuse to consult a doctor from spite ... My liver is bad, well – let it get worse!

Here, the advantage over the third-person summary is that the way sentences are put together, the way of thought, is our picture of the character just as much as the content of the thoughts. The Underground Man thinks in paradoxes, spitefully, in intentional self-contradictions. He certainly prepares us for the humorous and self-destructive acts to follow, so the disadvantages of this method, that it is not dramatic and that it does not create pictures, are not significant.

Appearance

Image is not everything, but it does account for a lot. Through how a person looks, you may try to infer what the person is like – but appearances may be deceptive. Still, to suggest the person's character, you may select and interpret details, to guide the reader's expectations.

George Eliot uses this approach in the following paragraph from *Middlemarch*:

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible – or from one of our elder poets – in a paragraph of today's newspaper.

Eliot draws a portrait of a Victorian lady who drives the modesty of her dress to such an extreme that we are alerted by it. Immediately after this, Eliot gives us an inkling of how to interpret the appearance. 'She was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever, but with the addition that her sister Celia had more common sense.' Miss Brooke is so ascetic that she creates problems for herself; she imprisons herself in a sterile marriage to a priestly scholar. Her appearance points in the direction of the key conflict of the novel.

Eliot's description works like a painting, in which the surface details suggest character and mood. Sometimes the appearance of a character can indeed attain the quality of a good drawing, a cameo, as in the following example from 'Patriotism,' by the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima:

For the beauty of the bride in her white over-robe no comparisons were adequate. In the eyes, round beneath soft brows, the slender, finely shaped nose, and in the full lips, there was both sensuousness and refinement. One hand, emerging shyly from a sleeve of the over-robe, held a fan, and the tips of the fingers, clustering delicately, were like the bud of a moonflower.

Notice how, in the two above examples, the authors draw the hands more successfully than the faces. While hands are often more difficult than faces to render in paintings, in writing it's the reverse, because writing can capture motion and activity better than painting can. Hands can do more than faces can – unless we are mimes, and even with mimes, hands are at least as active as faces. In describing faces, it's easy to resort to smiles and frowns, and difficult to strike a fresh image. With hands, you can play with a large array of possibilities.

You can characterize someone even by his feet or his walk, as does Thomas Hardy in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*:

His measured, springless walk was the walk of the skilled countryman as distinct from the desultory shambling of the general labourer; while in the turn and plant of each foot there was, further, a dogged and cynical indifference personal to himself.

No matter how you describe a character's appearance, your reader must be able to see it. If you rely on an adjective and give us little besides, you will probably fail to

make us visualize anything. In his novel *The Citadel*, British author A.J. Cronin makes this mistake and gives us an example of what not to do:

Late one October afternoon in the year 1921, a shabby young man gazed with fixed intensity through the window of a third-class compartment in the almost empty train labouring up the Penowell valley from Swansea.

This is the opening line from the novel. It accomplishes a lot in terms of setting, but the adjective *shabby* adds nothing. Judging from our being in a third-class compartment, we would get the notion of shabbiness anyhow, and *shabby* does not in any way give us the look of the man. *The Citadel* is an excellent novel, and it's good to see that not everything needs to be perfect for a novel to succeed. If you don't want to describe appearance, perhaps you can get away with it — but then don't pretend that you are depicting. Scratch out the *shabby*.

Scene

In a scene you set your character in motion. Especially if she's speaking, you can show us the character in action, without needing to summarize and generalize, although you may supplement the scene with a summary.

Christopher Isherwood in 'Sally Bowles' draws a character portrait in a scene with dialogue:

'Am I terribly late, Fritz darling?'

'Only half or an hour, I suppose,' Fritz drawled beaming with proprietary pleasure. 'May I introduce Mr. Isherwood – Miss Bowles? Mr. Isherwood is commonly known as Chris.'

'I'm not,' I said. 'Fritz is about the only person who's ever called me Chris in my life.'

Sally laughed. She was dressed in black silk, with a small cape over her shoulders and a little cap like a page-boy's stuck jauntily on one side of her head:

'Do you mind if I use your telephone, sweet?'

'Sure. Go right ahead.' Fritz caught my eye. 'Come into the other room, Chris.'

'For heaven's sake, don't leave me alone with this man!' she exclaimed. 'Or he'll seduce me down the telephone. He's most terribly passionate.'

As she dialed the number, I noticed that her fingernails were painted emerald green, a colour unfortunately chosen, for it called attention to her hands, which were much stained by cigarette-smoking and as dirty as a little girl's.

Here we meet the character through her voice, appearance, action, as though in a theater, and certainly, she is theatrical. She says, 'He's most terribly passionate.'

This string of three adjectives is a kind of sophisticated excess that achieves a theatrical sound, as though we were listening to an ironic actor. Isherwood guides us to interpret the details, to see the little girl behind the sophisticated guise. The hands are as dirty as a little girl's. Emerald green for fingernail paint seems gaudy and excessive; in her attempt to appear sophisticated, she fails, but achieves a charm, especially through her flirtatious talk: 'He'll seduce me down the telephone.' The advantage of introducing a character in a scene is that we hear the character's voice and diction, and we see the person. So when the narrator analyzes this character, he does not do it abstractly, but in conjunction with what we have seen and experienced. The scene combines appearance, action and dialogue; it's a highly versatile approach. The drawback is that you can't supply the background easily without stalling a scene. Sometimes you can introduce a character through action, so we begin to see her without needing much dialogue, as does Bobbie Ann Mason in 'Shiloh':

Leroy Moffitt's wife, Norma Jean, is working on her pectorals. She lifts three-pound dumbbells to warm up, then progresses to a twenty-pound barbell. Standing with her legs apart, she reminds Leroy of Wonder Woman. 'I'd give anything if I could just get these muscles to where they're real hard,' says Norma Jean. 'Feel this arm. It's not as hard as the other one.'

The advantage of this method is that the reader is immediately with you, visualizing, experiencing a scene. You can show and suggest what you could have told us about – such as that Norma Jean is a fitness nut, a bodybuilder, a self-obsessed person. The scene implies all this information without completely committing such a blatant interpretation, so it's less judgmental than a summary to this effect would be. (This is most lifelike. We watch how people behave, we never see abstract qualities such as self-obsession – we merely see the signs, symptoms, which we interpret.) The author leaves the opportunity of judgment to the reader. Whenever you can, show character traits acted out in scenes. If you are interested in directly judging your characters, of course, rely on summaries and interpretations. (Judgment does have its virtues – it's abstract, possibly philosophical.) The disadvantage to the scenic characterization method is that it's awkward to construct scenes that are outside of the main time frame of the story, unless you do flashbacks and memories. There's a limit to how many flashbacks you can handle without destroying the flow of the story. And there's a limit to how many things you can *show*, anyhow. Thus, although scenes are probably the most attractive method of characterization, you probably need to resort to summaries of relevant character deeds and inclinations outside of the story's time frame.

Combining techniques

Most developed character descriptions combine two or more approaches. During the course of a novel, we see a character in the ways the author chooses for us. That,

too is lifelike – you hardly ever experience all the aspects of a friend right away. It takes time – different situations, communications, perceptions, and thoughts.

In Flannery O'Connor's [story], we see three approaches: habit, summary and appearance.

The alarm on the clock did not work but he was not dependent on any mechanical means to awaken him. Sixty years had not dulled his responses; his physical reactions, like his moral ones, were guided by his will and strong character, and these could be seen plainly in his features. He had a long tube-like face with a long rounded open jaw and a long depressed nose. His eyes were alert but quiet, and in the miraculous moonlight they had a look of composure and of ancient wisdom as if they belonged to one of the great guides of men.

'Strong character' is an abstract summary. 'A long tube-like face' is a caricature, appearance. 'He was not dependent on any mechanical means to awaken him' is a habit summary. These traits give us a quick synopsis of this man, which lead us into a scene, where we observe him in action.

Mr. Head went to the stove and brought the meat to the table in the skillet. 'It's no hurry,' he said. 'You'll get there soon enough and it's no guarantee you'll like it when you do neither.'

Now we hear him talk. Later we'll see him talk and act at greater length, each time getting to know him better. O'Connor's approach is incremental.

Here's a portrait of a paranoid schizophrenic, drawn by summary of habits, appearance and psychology. In 'Ward VI,' Anton Chekhov portrays the character so gently that he undermines our trust in the diagnosis of madness; later in the story we begin to perceive Russian psychiatry as mad, so that the character is quite justified in feeling persecuted.

Ivan Dmitrich Gromov ... is always in a state of agitation and excitement, always under the strain of some vague undefined expectation. The slightest rustle in the entry or shout in the yard is enough to make him raise his head and listen: are they coming for him? Is it him they are looking for?
I like his broad pale face with its high cheekbones ... His grimaces are queer and morbid, but the fine lines drawn on his face by deep and genuine suffering denote sensibility and culture, and there is a warm lucid gleam in his eyes. I like the man himself, always courteous, obliging, and extremely considerate in his treatment of everyone except Nikita. When anyone drops a button or a spoon, he leaps from his bed and picks it up.

I think this is an excellent pattern not only combining summary and scene, but also sympathy. Chekhov treats a type, a paranoid schizophrenic, with enough sympathy

that the type no longer threatens to reduce the human qualities and complexities of Ivan's character. Ivan has become a person for us.

Gustave Flaubert portrays Madame Bovary in a succession of different approaches. Each time we meet her, we see a different aspect of her, in a new light, and in a new approach:

[Brief Silent Scene] She made no comment. But as she sewed she pricked her fingers and then put them into her mouth to suck them ...

[Silent Scene, Habit, Appearance] As the room was chilly, she shivered a little while eating. This caused her full lips to part slightly. She had a habit of biting them when she wasn't talking ...

[Psychological Summary] Accustomed to the calm life, she turned away from it toward excitement. She loved the sea only for its storms, and greenery only when it was scattered among ruins. She needed to derive immediate gratification from things and rejected as useless everything that did not supply this satisfaction. Her temperament was more sentimental than artistic. She sought emotions and not landscapes.

And later, of course, Flaubert stages Madame Bovary, just as Isherwood does Sally Bowles. I recommend this pattern of multiple approaches particularly for your main characters in a novel. If your character is complex enough, you might try all the approaches you can think of to understand who you are creating. Your readers will probably get involved, too, trying to understand with you. The trick is to be genuinely curious about the people populating your fiction.

Novakovich, J. (1995) *Fiction Writer's Workshop*, Cincinnati, Ohio: Story Press, pp.55–66.