

GCSE English Language

Course plan

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English Language Skills

There are 16 optional topics to help with basic skills like spelling, grammar and punctuation. There are also topics on using a dictionary or thesaurus, taking notes, writing an essay plan, etc. This is included as part of your course.

Sample of the GCSE English Language Course from Section 1

Topic 4

Looking at characters

Introduction

This topic will develop the work you have done in previous topics by looking at the ways in which writers can present and develop the characters they create. Following on from Topic 1, you will look at what writers tell us about their characters and also at the language choices they make in conveying character (Topics 2 and 3).



You will probably need 2.5 hours to complete this topic.

Objectives

When you have completed this topic you should be able to:

- describe how writers create and present the characters in their fiction
- outline some of the language techniques writers use to shape the reader's response to their characters.

Presenting character

Characters are a key element in a piece of prose fiction. Writers use a variety of techniques to create and present them. When we read fictional stories we often create our own mental picture of the characters as if they are real people, but it is important that we don't lose sight of the fact that characters are the creations of the writer: they do not exist outside the text. Here are some ways that

writers – including you, when you come to Section B of the exam – can present their characters:

- **Description.** Writers can tell you what the characters look like, how they are dressed, how they walk, their physical characteristics, etc.
- **Name.** Writers may name a character to reveal something about them. Charles Dickens did this a lot in his novels. In *Hard Times*, for example, Mr Gradgrind is a stern, humourless character who makes his children – and others – learn by rote and deprives them of enjoyable leisure activities. Names can also make an ironic statement about a character. ‘Hale’, for example, suggests wellbeing as in the expression ‘hale and hearty’, yet the protagonist of *Brighton Rock* appears to be anything but that.
- **Speech.** Writers often use speech to reveal important information about characters. We need to look not only at *what* the characters say but also at *how* they say it. What other characters say about a particular character can also be important.
- **Actions and behaviour.** How characters behave can help to build up a picture of them.
- **Thoughts and feelings.** Writers sometimes tell you what characters are thinking or feeling.
- **Imagery and symbols.** Writers sometimes link characters to particular symbols or use particular images to describe them.

When you analyse how characters are presented, look at:

- what they do
- how they behave and react to situations
- what they say and how they say it
- what other characters say about them
- how they react or relate to other characters
- the ways the writer uses language to present them.

Read this extract from the opening of *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck.

The first man was small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features. Every part of him was defined: small, strong hands, slender arms, a thin and bony nose. Behind him walked his opposite, a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders; and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely.

The first man stopped short in the clearing, and the follower nearly ran over him. He took off his hat and wiped the sweat-band with his forefinger and

snapped the moisture off. His huge companion dropped his blankets and flung himself down and drank from the surface of the green pool; drank with long gulps, snorting into the water like a horse. The small man stepped nervously beside him.

'Lennie!' he said sharply. 'Lennie, for God' sakes don't drink so much.' Lennie continued to snort into the pool. The small man leaned over and shook him by the shoulder. 'Lennie. You gonna be sick like you was last night.'

Lennie dipped his whole head under, hat and all, and then he sat up on the bank and his hat dripped down on his blue coat and ran down his back. 'Tha's good,' he said. 'You drink some, George. You take a good big drink.' He smiled happily.

George unslung his bundle and dropped it gently on the bank. 'I ain't sure it's good water,' he said. 'Looks kinda scummy.'

Lennie dabbled his big paw in the water and wiggled his fingers so the water arose in little splashes; rings widened across the pool to the other side and came back again. Lennie watched them go. 'Look, George. Look what I done.'

From: *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck:

Activity 1

(Allow 10 minutes)

List four things that this extract tells us about either Lennie or George.

Remember, you will have about five minutes to answer this type of question (Question 1) in the exam.

You may have found that you had to read carefully to establish that the 'first man' – the small one – is George. The second, larger man is Lennie.

Some points you could have noted about George:

- small, dark, sharp-featured
- strong
- walks ahead of his companion
- wears a hat
- carries a bundle
- cautious about drinking pool water
- seems to be the leader.

Some points you could have noted about Lennie:

- large, shapeless, bear-like

- follows George
- carries blankets
- wears a blue coat and a hat
- lacks caution
- is happy
- was sick last night.

Activity 2

(Allow 10 minutes)

How does Steinbeck use language to create an impression of George and Lennie? In particular, how does he emphasise the differences between the two characters?

Remember to support your opinions with quotations from the text.

Your response may be similar to this:

- George is described as 'small and quick', which tells us his size and how he moves. However, the word 'quick' could also suggest that he is mentally alert, quick-witted. His 'restless eyes' and the adjective 'sharp' used to describe his facial features supports this impression and creates a sense that he is constantly aware of what is going on around him. There is an almost rat-like feel about him (by contrast with Lennie's representation as a large, lumbering animal). Steinbeck's use of 'strong features' could also suggest strength of character. The description of George's physical build suggested by his 'strong hands, slender arms' and 'thin bony nose' give us a clear picture of his appearance.
- His caution about drinking from the pool confirms his awareness of the world around him, and of its possible dangers. His warning to Lennie, 'I ain't sure it's good water...Looks kinda scummy' shows that he tries to look after Lennie.
- In contrast, Steinbeck creates in Lennie a character who is completely different from George in almost every way. Lennie is described as a 'huge man' and his face 'shapeless' with 'large pale eyes' – very different from George's 'restless eyes'. The description of Lennie's face perhaps also suggests something child-like and innocent, a character unaware of the real world around him. The writer creates an impression of him as animal-like. He is powerful but lumbering as he 'walked heavily, dragging

his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws'. His arms do not swing like people's usually do when walking but instead 'hung loosely'.

Study hint

The description 'walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws' is an example of a simile that doesn't use 'like' or 'as' but is more subtle; 'the way a' replaces the more usual link words. Remember that if the comparison is made explicit in some way, it is a simile; a metaphor is an implicit comparison

- Lennie's lack of awareness of what is going on around him is further exemplified when George stops and 'the follower nearly ran over him'. Lennie 'flung himself down and drank from the surface' of the green pool without thinking. Steinbeck uses animal imagery again in a simile which describes Lennie drinking 'with long gulps, snorting into the water like a horse'.
- George is obviously aware of the potential danger. From his comment we learn that Lennie had been sick before from drinking bad water. Lennie takes no notice, and again is compared with an animal as he dabbles 'his big paw' in the water and, in a very child-like way, wiggles his fingers so the water rises in little splashes.
- This impression of Lennie being like a young child is further confirmed in his call to George expressing his excitement at the spreading ripples he has made in the water: 'Look. George. Look wha' I done.'

Steinbeck creates an impression of his characters largely through a combination of a description of their physical characteristics and how they behave. There is just a small amount of speech or **dialogue**.

Now read the next extract. The extract concerns two brothers (Jud is the older of the two) who have to share a bed in their small house. Think about how the writer uses dialogue to create a sense of the characters and their relationship.

Billy turned over. Jud followed him and cough-coughed into his neck. Billy pulled the blankets up round his ears and wiped his neck with them. Most of the bed was now empty, and the unoccupied space quickly cooled. Silence. Then the alarm rang. The noise brought Billy upright, feeling for it in the darkness, eyes shut tight. Jud groaned and hunched back across the cold sheet. He reached down the side of the bed and knocked the clock over, grabbed for it, and knocked it farther away.

'Come here, you bloody thing!'

He stretched down and grabbed it with both hands. The glass lay curved in one palm, while the fingers of his other hand fumbled amongst the knobs and levers at the back. He found the lever and the noise stopped. Then he coiled back into bed and left the clock lying on its back.

'The bloody thing.'

He stayed in his own half of the bed, groaning and turning over every few minutes, Billy lay with his back to him, listening. Then he turned his cheek slightly from the pillow.

'Jud?'

'What?'

'Tha'd better get up.'

No answer.

'Alarm's gone off tha knows.'

'Think I don't know?'

He pulled the blankets tighter and drilled his head into the pillow. They both lay still.

'Jud?'

'What?'

'Tha'll be late.'

'O, shut it.'

'Clock's not fast tha knows.'

'I said SHUT IT.'

He swung his fist under the blankets and thumped Billy in the kidneys.

'Gi' o'er! That hurts!'

'Well shut it then.'

'I'll tell my mam on thi.'

Jud swung again. Billy scuffled away into the cold at the edge of the bed, sobbing. Jud got out, sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, then stood up and felt his way across the room to the light switch. Billy worked his way back to the centre and disappeared under the blankets.

'Set t'alarm for me, Jud. For seven.'

'Set it thi sen.'

'Go on, thar up.'

Jud parted Billy's sweater and shirt, and used the sweater for a vest. Billy snuggled down in Jud's place, making the springs creak. Jud looked at the humped blankets, then walked across and pulled them back, stripping the bed completely.

'Hands off cocks; on socks.'

For an instant Billy lay curled up, his hands wafered between his thighs. Then he sat up and crawled to the bottom of the bed to retrieve the blankets.

'You rotten sod, just because tha's to get up.'

'Another few weeks lad, an' tha'll be getting up wi' me.'

From: *A Kestrel for a Knave* by Barry Hines

Activity 3

(Allow 20 minutes)

How does Hines use language in the dialogue between them to create a sense of the characters?

Here are some ideas you might have noted:

- Jud's frustration at the alarm is emphasised through his repeated use of **demotic language** (swearing), and the clearly pointless activity of speaking to the alarm as if it will respond ('come here, you bloody thing!').
- The quick-fire use of short sentence fragments emphasises the familiarity between the brothers and also its tensions.
- Hines uses **eye dialect**. This is non-standard spelling to represent regional accents' non-standard pronunciations, as in *Wuthering Heights*, for example. The strong Yorkshire accent is conveyed particularly through the use of 'tha' instead of 'you', the phrase 'thi sen' (meaning 'yourself'), and the abbreviation of 'the'. It is also conveyed through the question tag 'tha knows'.
- The regular use of all these terms also suggests the brothers' working-class background.
- The question tag helps to convey the sensitivity of what is happening here: Billy doesn't want his brother to be late for work, so is showing concern for him, but knows that he is likely to put himself in the firing line of his brother's anger by doing so.

Using characters' thoughts

In many ways 'thought' can be considered a kind of 'inner speech' happening in the mind of the character. A character's thoughts can present information to the reader in exactly the same way as direct speech. Many writers use this form, giving information about what their characters are thinking at points in their narratives. Sometimes thoughts are presented in a reported form, for example:

Cameron was a strange man, Debbie thought, as she drove back to the police station.

Sometimes a writer will use a direct speech form to present a character's thoughts, for example:

'Cameron is a strange man,' thought Debbie as she drove back to the police station.

Some writers use the internal **monologue**, in which a single character speaks their thoughts to the reader. Alan Bennett is well known for this kind of writing through his *Talking Heads* series of monologues. Here is an extract from one of them, in which an elderly woman, Doris, has had a fall in her home and is waiting for someone to come and help her. Her thoughts are expressed through her words:

We were always on our own, me and Wilfred. We weren't gregarious. We just weren't the gregarious type. He thought I was, but I wasn't.

Mix. I don't want to mix. Comes to the finish and they suddenly think you want to mix.

I don't want to be stuck with a lot of old lasses. And they all smell of pee. And daft half of them, banging tambourines. You go daft there, there's nowhere else for you to go but daft. Wearing somebody else's frock. They even mix up your teeth. I am H.A.P.P.Y. I am not H.A.P.P.Y. I am un-H.A.P.P.Y. Or I would be.

From: 'A Cream Cracker Under the Settee' in *Talking Heads* by Alan Bennett

Some writers use this kind of internal dialogue extensively. A particular form of it is sometimes known as **stream of consciousness** writing, in which the character's thoughts are poured out in a constant stream, often without punctuation, just as if the thoughts were flowing from the character's mind. It is a form used by many writers: two of the most famous are Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

Here is an example of 'stream of consciousness' writing. The following passage is from 'Stone Trees' a short story written by Jane Gardam. It describes the thoughts and experiences of a bereaved woman as she goes to visit friends on the Isle of Wight after the death of her husband.

The boat crosses. Has crossed. Already. Criss-cross deck. Criss-cross water. Splashy sea and look –! Lovely clouds flying (now that you are dead) and here's the pier. A long, long pier into the sea and gulls shouting and children yelling here and there and here's my ticket and there they stand. All in a row – Tom, Anna, the two children solemn. And smiles now – Tom and Anna. Tom and Anna look too large to be quite true. Too good. Anna who never did anything wrong. Arms stretch too far forward for a simple day.

They stretch because they want. They would not stretch to me if you were obvious and not just dead. Then it would have been, hullo, easy crossing? Good. Wonderful day. Let's get back and down on the beach. Great to see you both.

So now that you are dead –

We paced last week. Three.

Tom. Anna. I.

And other black figures wood-faced outside the crematorium in blazing sun, examining shiny black-edged tickets on blazing bouquets. 'How good of Marjorie – fancy old Marjorie. I didn't even know she –' There was that woman who ran out of the so-called service with handkerchief at her eyes. But who was there except you my darling and I and the Robertsons and the shiny cards and did they do it then? Were they doing it then as we read the flowers? Do they do it at once or stack it up with other coffins and was it still inside waiting as I paced with portly Tom? Christian Tom – Tom we laughed at so often and oh my darling now that you are dead –

From: 'Stone Trees' in *Pangs of Love* by Jane Gardam

Activity 4

(Allow 25 minutes)

Re-read the extract, then answer the following questions.

- 1 Comment on Gardam's use of language in this extract.
- 2 How has Gardam structured this text to interest you as a reader?

Your responses may include the following:

- 1 The way Gardam uses language in the extract is very different from how it might be used in a conventional description of the scene. She presents the writer's thoughts through a series of images, often disconnected from one another and often written in sentence fragments. For example, 'The boat crosses' in the present tense, immediately changes to past tense 'Has crossed.' This is followed by the single word 'Already.' This gives us a sense of the mental state of the woman who has made the crossing in a dazed state, not fully aware of what is happening. This is because, in her grief, her thought processes are not working normally. She remembers fragments; this is suggested by the author picking up on the word 'crossed' and connecting it to 'criss-cross deck', perhaps suggesting that she is pacing backwards and forwards across the deck of the boat during the crossing. This is then run together with the image of the boat crossing the water. Similarly, her arrival is presented through snapshot images and sound – the gulls, the pier, the children, showing her ticket and her friends waiting for her. The speech that occurs between them is similarly presented as a series of

fragments. The sense of intense grief running through the extract is accentuated by the repetition of 'now that you are dead'. The overall effect is a presentation of the thoughts of the bereaved character through a series of fragmented images. Gardam has used language to create a convincing and moving portrayal of a woman deeply affected by the death of her husband and her perception of the world through senses that are distorted and dazed by grief.

- 2 The extract is effectively in two sections: a fragmented description of the voyage and memories of the funeral. 'So now that you are dead –' sounds as if it is going to lead to more thoughts about the present. Instead there is an abrupt change to the past with 'We paced last week. Three. / Tom. Anna. I.' The solitary 'three' emphasises that a family of four has become three. The full stops between the names suggest that, although there together, the three family members are for the moment each isolated in their own grief. Gardam creates further interest in the description of the funeral with the question '... and did they do it then? Were they doing it then as we read the flowers?' This brings the reader up short as we wonder what she means. For a moment it seems possible that she is referring to sex, but then it becomes clear that the speaker is pondering when the coffin enters the incinerator. Finally, the references to 'portly Tom[?] Christian Tom' change the mood again. Here the speaker sounds slightly unkind and arguably this detracts from the sympathy the reader might otherwise feel.

Exam hint

We consider the structural elements of a text in Section 2.

Self check

(Allow 30 minutes)

Re-read the extract from Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads*, then answer the following questions.

- 1 What does this short extract tell you about the character of Doris? Think particularly about Bennett's choice of language and the sentence forms used in the extract.
- 2 What do you notice about the overall structure of this short extract?

You will find feedback to self checks at the end of the section.

Summary

You should now have an understanding of how writers can create and present the characters in literary fiction and appreciate some of the language techniques they use to shape readers' responses to their characters.

Key terms

demotic language: swearing

dialogue: the words spoken between characters

eye dialect: use of non-standard spelling to represent regional accents' non-standard pronunciations

monologue: an extended speech or thoughts of one character

stream of consciousness: where the writer expresses the character's thoughts in a continuous flow as they experience them

References

Bennett, A (1988) 'A Cream Cracker under the Settee' from *Talking Heads*, BBC

Gardam, J (1983) 'Stone Trees' from *Pangs of Love*

Hines, B (1968) *A Kestrel for a Knave*, Penguin

Steinbeck, J (1937) *Of Mice and Men*, Penguin

What next?

We hope this sample has helped you to decide whether this course is right for you.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us using the details below.

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