**Lecture 2: Character**

Characters are fundamental to fiction, even if they’re animals or aliens, it’s not a story without a feeling being living in a world. We must find them interesting, believable and care about them.

A character can be revealed through dialogue, appearance, action, thought and other character reactions.

I’ll cover dialogue in detail next week.

**Appearance** is important, because we are visual beings who relate to the physical world every moment.

Even when there is a profound conflict between a character’s appearance and who he really is, readers must see the appearance in order to know this. Features, shape, style, clothing, and objects can make statements of internal values that are political, religious, social, intellectual and essential (even though it’s only appearances). The man in a suede jacket is making a very different statement than the one in a dirty sweatshirt. Even if clothing is prescribed by work, that’s important to know, too.

Also think about how your character walks, crosses her legs, flips a pencil, scratches a mosquito bite, sits on the ground, shaves her legs (or doesn’t).

**Action** in fiction is change, not always violence, betrayal, revenge, chase scenes and the like. Human beings face chance and choice or discovery and decision. Some parts of life and fiction are involuntary—we don’t choose to find out our father has a secret second family (for example), but then we have to decide what’s next, how we’ll respond. It might be simple bad luck that we got into a car accident, but then we have to decide whether or not to try to avoid reporting it considering the drugs or mistress or dead body in the car.

This passage from Toni Morrison’s “Recitatif” shows movement, discovery, then decision:

It was August and a bus crowd was just unloading. They would stand around a long while: going to the john, and looking at gifts and junk-for-sale machines, reluctant to sit down so soon. Even to eat. I was trying to fill the coffeepots and get them all situated on the electric burners when I was her. She was sitting in a booth smoking a cigarette with two guys smothered in head and facial hair. Her own hair was so big and wild I could hardly see her face. But the eyes. I would know them anywhere. She had on a powder-blue halter and shorts outfit and earrings the size of bracelets. Talk about lipstick and eyebrow pencil. She made the big girls look like nuns. I couldn’t get off the counter until seven o’clock, but I kept watching the booth in case they got up to leave before that. My replacement was on time for a change, so I counted and stacked my receipts as fast as I could and signed off. I walked over to the booth . . .

Every story develops a pattern of change, in which small and large changes are made through discovery and decision.

**Thought**

We all have a private mental life, things we think about, plan, ponder, remember. A rich characterization includes private worries, philosophical musings and fantasies of revenge or sex or food or shame or personal glory (or whatever).

Like dialogue, thoughts can be offered as summary (He hated the primitive way she ate.) or as the exact words in the brain (Why did she clench her knife in her fist like a gorilla?)

**Interpretation by another character**

Example:

“There is something about Fanny, I have often observed it before,--she likes to go her own way to work; she does not like to be dictated to; she takes her own independent walk whenever she can; she certainly has a little spirit of secrecy, and independence and nonsense, about her, which I would advise her to get the better of.”

As a general reflection on Fanny, Sir Thomas thought nothing could be more unjust, though he had been so lately expressing the same sentiments himself, and he tried to turn the conversation, tried repeatedly before he could succeed.

(Jane Austen, *Mansfield* *Park*)

The first speaker, Mrs. Norris, reveals at least as much about herself as about Fanny (doing two things at once). It’s also very useful for developing tension to see how Fanny is interpreted by others, perhaps falsely. It shows the social expectations of her world and creates the container that shapes her character.