



How to Write a Character Analysis

The material below is designed to be read in conjunction with "Writing about Literature" (Kennedy and Gioia 1851-1873) and "Writing about a Story" (Kennedy and Gioia 1874-1891). This is a brief guide to the writing of a character analysis. It includes rules for paper format and a sample analysis of a character from James Thurber's "The Catbird Seat" (Kennedy and Gioia 632-638).

What is a Character Analysis?

Have you ever tried to understand the reasons for another person's action? Did you conclude that your friend became a devotee of *The Grateful Dead* in part as a way to rebel against her Southern Baptist upbringing? Did your father react the way he did about the weakening of Affirmative Action laws because he is old enough to remember the struggle to get the school system desegregated? These people may have acted the way they did because of their backgrounds and experiences, and since you know them well, you may be able to draw some fairly accurate conclusions.

As students of literature, you should be able to draw similar conclusions about the actions of characters by paying close attention to information the author of a short story provides about the background, experiences, and personalities of the characters. "Why does Sammy quit his job at the end of "A&P"? What makes the protagonist of "To Build a Fire" venture out alone in -70° weather when he has been warned not to by an old-timer? What makes the townspeople continue to follow the barbaric ritual in "The Lottery" even though they have forgotten most of its origin? A character analysis can help to answer these questions. The purpose of a character analysis is to examine the make up of a character to better understand his or her motivations and actions. The success of the short story often resides in how well the author develops one, two, or three major characters. These characters exhibit complex personalities and their behaviors are influenced by many factors: **age, sex, race, education, social class, place of origin**--all the things that combine to shape us and our actions. The writer of a character analysis reads the short story for evidence about a character that will assist in a better understanding of the story as a whole. To see how one character analysis works, read the student essay **The Hearer of the Tell-Tale Heart** beginning on page 1880 of Kennedy and Gioia. The writer attempts to understand the narrator of Poe classic horror story by focusing in on not only what he says, but how he says it. The writer carefully selects details and includes passages from the story that reveal that the narrator is insane, although the narrator himself denies this fact.

Getting Started

When you decide to write a character analysis (or have that choice made for you), you will need to do some preliminary thinking and writing. By this time, you will have read many stories with even more characters. Which one should you choose for your analysis? If you are allowed to choose any character from your

readings, select one that you find interesting, one that evokes a strong response from you, either positively or negatively. Major characters are usually the subject for analysis for short stories because they are more developed and central to the plot. However, some minor characters can make effective topics. Just be careful not to select one that appears and disappears briefly with little impact on the story. Even if your choice of stories is limited, you may still be able to select a character that interests you--that is your first responsibility! The subject for the character analysis below is Mr. Martin, the meek clerk turned would-be assassin in James Thurber's "The Catbird Seat." Mr. Martin makes a good topic because he seems to be acting out of character by plotting to kill Mrs. Barrows, the new *special advisor* to the president of F&S. What would drive this pillar of respectability that drinks a glass of milk everyday at precisely five-thirty to decide to kill another human being?

After you decide which character to analyze, go back over the story with a pen in hand. Jot down notes in the margins or on another sheet of paper. Look for key descriptions or bits of dialogue that could be useful in your analysis. Do not just merely highlight passages. When it is time to put your analysis together, you may have forgotten why you underlined it. A few quick marginal notes can save you time deciding why you thought that this was an important passage.

It is now time to do some prewriting. Using the techniques of free writing or brainstorming, jot down your ideas and impressions about the character. Look at age, sex, race, education, and other important information. Try to develop a dominant impression about the character--a major trait that will control the analysis. Look at the following paragraph of free writing generated by the topic of Mr. Martin

Mr. Martin

Mr. Erwin Martin is a file clerk at F&S company. He seems to be a typical clerk--middle-aged, quite, very organized--does not drink or smoke--that is why the fact that he bought a pack of camels is important--he does not smoke! Mr. Martin wants to kill Mrs. Barrows--why? She is obnoxious--with all her blather about "the catbird seat", "tearing up the pea patch", "Are you lifting the ox-cart out of the ditch." But why would he want to kill her? He is a man of routines--does the same things at the office everyday, goes home the same way, has a glass of milk everyday at 5:30. The president of the company has noted that his is a model of sobriety--does not drink or smoke. Why is he talking to a jury? He is having a trial in his head--trying to justify his plans to kill her--he must rationalize that she deserves to die. Her main crime is destroying "the efficiency and system of F&S." What really makes him crack is when she comes into his office and asks "Do you really need all these filing cabinets?" This is an attack on his job--his job is his life--no family--lives alone--no pets--kind of like the reports on TV "he was a quiet guy, never bothered anyone, kept to himself. I can't believe he would do anything like that." He uses his reputation to get back at her. Does not kill her, but makes people think she is crazy. Why doesn't he just go to his boss? Mrs. Barrows (wheelbarrows) seems to have some kind of control over Mr. Fitweiler. Any way, Mr. Martin shows that he is intelligent and resourceful by plotting the murder and then changing his plans at the last moment.

A brainstorming list about Mr. Martin would include many of the following:

Mr. Martin

- quiet
- lives alone
- working for F&S for several years
- doesn't drink or smoke
- head of the filing department
- considered an ideal employee
- man of routines
- feels threatened

The dominant impression developed from the prewriting might look like this: *Mr. Martin is a quiet, meek file clerk, an ideal employee who is driven to plot of murder by an attack on the efficiency of his company and a threat to his own job.* If this looks like a thesis sentence to you--then good. It should. The dominant impression of a character can serve as a thesis. Always work with a thesis in your mind. The purpose of this essay is to defend a thesis. What details from the prewriting and what passages from the story can be used to defend the dominant impression of Mr. Martin?

Elements of a Character Analysis

Once you get to this point, you are ready to write the first draft of your character analysis. Make sure you include the following in your analysis.

1. A title--Title every essay! This is the first thing a reader sees. A good title briefly suggests topic and thesis. Here are some bad titles for our analysis of Mr. Martin:
 - "The Catbird Seat"
 - Mr. Martin
 - Why Mr. Martin Gets fed Up with Mrs. Barrows and Decides to "Rub Her Out" in James Thurber's "The Catbird Seat"

Here are some better titles:

- Mr. Martin: A Mild-mannered Murderer
- The Meek Shall Inherit the Company: An Analysis of Mr. Martin in Thurber's "The Catbird Seat"
- A Trial by Files: Mr. Martin in James Thurber's "The Catbird Seat"

Please **do not underline your own title or put it with in quotation marks**. Do underline titles of plays and novels. Put titles of short stories and poems with in quotation marks.

2. An effective introduction--Include these elements:
 - The title of the short story--do not leave your readers guessing in what story the character resides.
 - The name of the author--this just makes sense and it is required! Never assume the reader will know the author from the title of the story. Along with the title, the author's name should appear early in the analysis, perhaps in the essay title and in the first paragraph.
 - A clear thesis. Try to include a clear thesis statement early in the analysis. The thesis is the controlling argument you will defend in your analysis.
3. Evidence from the story that supports your thesis--written in a clear and organized manner.
4. Important words and passages from the short story appearing with in quotes. Click here to review rules for quoting from literary works.
5. Proper documentation. The essays require no research; however, if you do choose to include outside criticism, please document properly. You will need to include a Works Cited page at the end of the essay. *If you are not using outside criticism, a Works Cited page is not necessary.* See [Guide for Writing Research Papers Based on Modern Language Association \(MLA\) Documentation](#).
6. A good conclusion that reminds the readers of the thesis and makes final observations about the story.

A good character analysis demonstrates the writer's ability to identify the relationship between character and action. It is well organized, thoughtful, and relatively free of grammar, spelling, and mechanical errors. A typical poor analysis is mostly summary of the plot with little insight into the character's motivation. It also shows problems with organization and contains many grammar, spelling, and mechanical errors. Even a perceptive analysis can be greatly harmed by poor organization and careless errors. Please take the time to revise and proofread!

Format

MLA Conventions

The Sample Character Analysis

Please read the essay below as a model for your own character analysis. Look for all the elements of a literary essay listed above.

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A Trial By Files: An Analysis of Erwin Martin in James Thurber's "The Catbird Seat"

Mr. Erwin Martin, James Thurber's file clerk protagonist in "The Catbird Seat," fits the stereotype of his occupation well. As head of the filing department at F&S, he is a well-respected and efficient employee. He is meek, introverted, socially isolated (he does not understand the current sports jargon of his day), and a teetotaler. In other words, he is a typical example of a Thurber protagonist: a submissive male who lets others, especially domineering women, walk all over him. It is just because he is a living stereotype that the story works so well. No one at F&S would ever guess that Mr. Martin has murder in his soul. Shortly after Mrs. Ulgine Barrows comes on board F&S as "a special adviser" to the president, Mr. Martin realizes that the efficiency of his beloved company and his very job are threatened. Mr. Martin plans to save what is most dear to him by carrying out what he feels is a justified execution of Mrs. Barrows.

When we first meet Mr. Martin, we might think he is insane. Who else but an insane man would truly think about killing another human being simply because she is obnoxious? The trial that he conducts in his mind is also bizarre and of questionable sanity. But it is not long before we discover his true motivations. Mrs. Barrows' abrasive manner and inappropriate use of baseball jargon do disturb him greatly. Her erratic behavior and bull-in-a-china-shop approach to business make her a foil to his quiet, no nonsense professionalism. He takes an instant dislike to her, but not enough to kill her. "It had been annoying, it had driven him near to distraction, but he was too solid a man to be moved to murder by anything so childish" (633). Mr. Martin takes pride in the fact that he is a solid man. He remembers with pleasure the compliments that the owners of his company give him on his excellent job performance, "'Man is fallible but Martin isn't'" (632), and his sobriety, "'Our most efficient worker neither drinks nor smokes'" (634). His self-esteem is built around this reputation. It is totally within his character not to outwardly show his displeasure towards his antagonist, "He had maintained always an outward appearance of polite tolerance. 'Why, I even believe you like the woman,' Miss

Paired, his other assistant once said to him" (633). Though inwardly he might wish to kill Mrs. Barrows because she has been grating on his nerves for two years (though he would not admit it to himself), his ego would not allow him to do it. He does have what he feels is a morally justified reason to plan her demise: Mrs. Barrows' attack on the integrity of F&S.

His position at F&S is more than just a job to Mr. Martin and his company is more than a

place of employment. Mr. Martin lives alone. There is no mention of friends or family in the story. We may assume that his job is the most important part of his life. This is where he excels. F&S gives him self-worth. His personality is perfectly suited for his job at a company he has been employed by for twenty-two years. His attachment to F&S goes beyond normal employee loyalty. His thoughts only turn to murder when he perceives Mrs. Barrows blundering attempts to modernize the company a danger to his well ordered world, "She had begun chipping at the cornices of the firm's edifice and now she was swinging at the foundation with a pickax" (634). Mrs. Barrows causes havoc with many of the departments at F&S, firing some employees and causing others to quit. Mr. Martin finally decides she must be killed when she targets the filing department for change. "Do you really need all these filing cabinets?" (634) she asks him. She might as well have asked him if he needed both of his arms. The filing department is Mr. Martin's reason for being, so he would never think of resigning like some of the others. Quitting would not stop her any way. He is determined to prevent her from destroying his department or his company. Since Mr. Fitweiler, the president, continues to condone her actions, murder appears to be the only option.

The meek, little Mr. Martin shows an extreme, though understandable response to a perceived threat on his way of life. He is too much of an introvert to stand up to Mrs. Barrows, and he sees that complaining about her will accomplish nothing. His desire to kill Mrs. Barrows comes down to a survival instinct. He would not have a reason to exist without F&S and Mrs. Barrows is destroying F&S; therefore, Mrs. Barrows is destroying Mr. Martin, unless he can destroy her first. During the trial in his mind, he is able to rationalize her death as justifiable homicide--an execution of a criminal.

Mr. Martin shows just how far even some of the meekest of people can go when they are threatened. Mr. Martin appears to be a very static character who finds he has the capacity for dynamic action. While the precision and planning that went in to the plot are in his character, his ability to improvise a way to destroy Mrs. Barrows' reputation with Mr. Fitweiler when he cannot find a suitable murder weapon at her apartment is surprising. Anthony Kaufman goes as far as to argue "Martin is in a sense admirable; beneath the typical look of studious concentration lurks ... the ruthless desperado" (100-01). He, however, immediately reverts to his old static self when Mrs. Barrows is escorted from Mr. Fitweiler's office kicking and screaming the next day. "When he entered his department he had slowed down to his customary gait and he walked quietly across the room to the W20 file, wearing a look of studious concentration" (638). His newfound dynamic abilities, it seems, appear only to surface in extreme need.