Flat Character

DEFINITION

What is a flat character? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> A character is said to be "flat" if it is one-dimensional or lacking in complexity. Typically, flat characters can be easily and accurately described using a single word (like "bully") or one short sentence (like "A naive and idealistic schoolteacher with a fragile heart of gold"). The important thing about flat characters is that they never transcend or break with the formula that defines them.

Some additional key details about flat characters:

- The opposite of a flat character is a round character, or a complex and lifelike character with a multi-faceted personality and background.

- Minor characters are often flat characters simply because they aren't as important to the story as the main characters (so readers don't need to know a lot about them). But any character in a story can be flat, including main characters.

- Just because a character is flat doesn't necessarily mean that they are dull or poorly-written. It just means that they are one-dimensional.

Flat Character Pronunciaton

Here's how to pronounce flat character: **flat kar**-ik-ter

The Origin Story of Flat Characters

The word "flat" was first used to describe fictional characters by E.M. Forster in his 1927 book *The Aspects of the Novel.* In his original definition of the term, Forster focused on the idea that flat characters are defined by a single idea or quality (like "overbearing mother" or "villain") from which they fail to deviate in any meaningful way. In other words, Forster wrote, flat characters lack the ability to surprise readers, or to do so in a convincing manner. Because a lack of complexity is the hallmark of a flat character, it's common for readers to have very little information about a flat character's background or the motivations behind their actions.

Flat Characters Aren't Always Badly Done

While Forster believed that most novels need at least one complex and fully-realized character in order to elicit a reader's sympathy and engagement, he also believed that there were many good reasons to include flat characters in a story. In particular, he noted the value of a flat character's *memorability* and *intelligibility* to readers. Put differently: although readers don't tend to *relate* to flat characters very easily because they're not lifelike or complex, readers do *understand* flat characters very easily, because they usually follow familiar formulas. For this reason, Forster wrote, flat characters "are best when they are comic," whereas "a serious or tragic flat character is apt to be a bore."

Forster uses the example of Mrs. Micawber from Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* to illustrate how a flat character can serve an important function in a story without making the entire story seem to be "flat," unconvincing, or lacking in complexity:

> Mrs. Micawber comes from a well-to-do family that disapproves of her husband, who is kindhearted but financially unstable. She constantly avers that she will "never leave Micawber!" She is a flat character because she is only defined by her devotion to her husband, but she still plays an important role in a narrative that focuses on the plight of the working class.

Today, people sometimes mistakenly believe the the term "flat character" is only ever used to critique a character who they think is poorly-written. While it certainly *is* a problem to have a character come across as flat if they were intended to be round, the term "flat character" is not necessarily a criticism, as the example of Mrs. Micawber shows.

Flat Character vs. Round Character

In order to get a strong understanding of what makes a character flat, it's helpful to study the term's opposite: the round character. Rather than being one-dimensional like a flat character, a round character is multi-dimensional. Here's the most important information about round characters:

- A character is said to be "round" if they are lifelike or complex. Round characters typically have fully fleshed-out and multi-faceted personalities, backgrounds, desires, and motivations.

- It would be difficult to describe a round character using a couple of adjective or a single sentence. Like real people, they tend to have complicated lives and histories, and sometimes their desires can even feel contradictory.

- Just because a character is round doesn't necessarily mean that they are interesting, likable, or well-written. It just means that they are multi-dimensional.

- Protagonists are often round characters simply because readers know a lot about them, but any character in a story can be round.

In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the narrator and protagonist, Scout, is a round character. The reader is able to understand how Scout thinks (she's confident and intelligent) and what she feels (she worries about the morality of mankind), which can be attributed to her backstory (her father, Atticus, is respected for his wisdom, which

he imparts to his daughter). Scout is a complicated and unusual girl, whose personality cannot accurately be conveyed in one sentence or phrase. It takes an entire novel to begin to understand her.

Flat Character vs. Static Character

It's a common mistake to use the term "static character" as a synonym for "flat character," but these terms actually refer to different aspects of the character and should not be confused. Here's a run-down of the basic difference:

- **"Static" refers to whether a character changes**: A static character is one that does *not* undergo substantial changes in terms of their beliefs and personality as a result of plot developments in a story. *Both* flat *and* round characters can be static.
- **"Flat" refers to a character's complexity**: A flat character can be described as one-dimensional and can be summarized in one short sentence or phrase, often using common character types. Flat characters might possess one or two strong characteristics, but they will still fall short of the complexity that defines a round character. Stating that a character is flat has nothing to do with whether or not they have changed over the course of the story.

While flat characters generally *are* also static, this is not always true. A flat character might change over the course of the story in some way and therefore qualify as a "dynamic character" (for instance, the "bully" may discover Buddhism and change his ways) but this doesn't necessarily make the character any more complex or lifelike—they might just shift from one sort of flat to another sort of flat.

[✳] EXAMPLES

Flat characters are common throughout literature, particularly among the more minor characters. Here are a number of examples.

Flat Character in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the protagonist, Huck, finds himself in a moral dilemma. After he has run away from the home of Widow Douglas and her sister, Miss Watson, Huck runs into Jim, whom he knew as Widow Douglas and Miss Watson's slave. Jim has also escaped. Huck initially has misgivings, since he was taught that it's a crime to help a runaway slave, but he also empathizes with Jim and develops an emotional connection to him, which makes him question what he has been taught. Huck and Jim are the focus of the novel, and are both round characters, as they both face internal and external conflicts which reveal their complex personalities and backstories in detail.

Miss Watson and Widow Douglas, on the other hand, can be described much more simply: they are strict women. Widow Douglas believes it's her Christian duty to reform Huck, and Miss Watson is a tough, old spinster—and that's about all there is to say about the two

women. They never become more complicated, or do anything to disrupt this conception of them. Moreover, the reader is not given any clues as to how the women became who they are or why they act the way they do. Rather, they serve as a simple foil to Huck's more open-minded, humanist attitude toward Jim. In other words, their primary function is to help create the various situations that reveal the complexity of the main characters.

Flat Character in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

The story of *Dracula* is about a wealthy nobleman named Count Dracula who is in fact a diabolical vampire. When a solicitor named Jonathan Harker visits Dracula's castle, he is struck by Dracula's gracious manners, but soon comes to realize that he is being held prisoner. Harker observes many strange behaviors in the castle: Dracula scales the wall like a lizard and, Harker believes, can turn into a bat. As the story progresses, Harker's fiancé and her friend become involved as Dracula "infects" both of them by sucking their blood and infecting them so that they become vampires. The plot is complex, but Dracula's character and motivations are *not* complex: all he wants to do is suck blood, and convert others into bloodsucking vampires. Because he is motivated by such simple desires, which are never complicated by new background information or any of the many conflicts that arise, Dracula is a flat character.

Flat Character in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Janie's life story is the primary focus of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie is a fair-skinned black woman who has returned to Eatonville, Florida, after having left with a man she fell in love with, Tea Cake. She meets her old friend, Pheoby Watson, who stood up for Janie when others in the town gossiped about her love life, and Janie begins to tell Pheoby what her life was like before departing and what became of her once she left—and this story comprises most of the novel. Janie's life has been shaped by the pervasive racism and sexism she has encountered, and the bulk of her story centers on men she has loved and trusted who abused her.

Pheoby's presence in the story is crucial, because she serves as an audience for Janie's retelling of her life story, which she otherwise might not have told. Furthermore, the format of this book (Janie as narrator and protagonist) mirrors one of the book's main themes (Janie's ability to find her own voice at the end of the story). In other words, Hurston seeks to show how Janie has suffered, but has also become empowered. Pheoby is critical to this story and its central themes, yet readers know almost nothing about her. Phoebe is an honest woman who trusts her friend, but that's about all that Hurston reveals, which makes Phoebe a flat character. Pheoby's role in the story is to help advance the plot, and to allow readers to focus on Janie's story.

WHY WRITERS USE IT

There are several reasons why a writer might choose to include a flat character in their story. Here are a few of the most common ones:

- Flat characters can be necessary to move a story along. Having too much information about minor characters can detract attention from the protagonist and the story's primary themes and conflicts.
- In stories that are allegorical or instructive, flat characters might be used as a part of symbolism. In other words, a writer might use a flat character like a "bully" as a stand-in for the idea of negativity or violence more generally—which wouldn't be possible if the bully felt too nuanced and real as a character.
- Flat characters are particularly common in genre fiction (such as science fiction, horror, and crime), where character development isn't emphasized and stories are generally very plot-driven. These stories are populated with flat characters so the reader can focus on the plot rather than character development.
- A flat character can be used to parody cultural stereotypes, and thus their flatness and the audience's ability to clearly recognize what cultural group they represent, can be used for comedy or political commentary.

While flat characters are often important parts of stories, it is also important to note that authors can also inadvertently create flat characters who feel too simple for the roles they are given in the story.

In this circumstance, when a character is flat but the story seems to demand that they be more than flat, then the creation of the flat character was a mistake on the part of the author rather than a purposeful choice.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **Dictionary Definition for Flat Character:** A basic definition of the term.
- **The Wikipedia Page for Character:** This is an entry on characters more generally, but one very brief section in it compares round and flat characters.
- **Flat and round Character on YouTube:** This short video compares round and flat characters.

HOW TO CITE

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