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The form and function of characterisation in "The Castle of Otranto"
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Essay about the Form and Function of Characterisation in The Castle of Otranto

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An important component of fiction is characterisation. But what does characterisation do for a story? It allows the reader to create a picture of the characters in a story in his mind and to empathise with the protagonist and secondary characters. Moreover characterisation moves the story of a literary text onward because fascinating characters and their actions are interdependent to the whole plot. This essay will look into the structural design of characterisation and how the principle of characterisation is significant in the unfold of the story.

The dramatis personae in *The Castle of Otranto* can be separated into primary characters, secondary characters and minor characters. The main characters occupy Manfred, the illegitimate Prince of Otranto, the villain; Matilda, his daughter; Isabella, the intended wife of his son, Manfred’s foster daughter, and Theodore, first a mysterious stranger and later revealed as the real Prince of Otranto. These characters are the most important characters because they appear frequently in the narrative and their actions and behaviours keep the plot in motion. The important secondary characters include Hippolita, Manfred’s devoted wife; Jerome, the friar and Frederic, the believed to be death Marquis of Vicenza, Isabella’s father. Minor characters, but nevertheless quite interesting and important ones for the outcome of the story, are the servants Diego and Jaquez and last but not least, the chambermaid Bianca. Additional characters like Conrad, the son of Manfred, and Alfonso’s ghost will not be considered in the essay. The first one dies in the beginning and never appears alive but he has to be mentioned because his death triggers the story off. The second one functions as kind of watchdog who reminds and threatens mostly Manfred and the domestics by causing supernatural events in the castle.

In *The Castle of Otranto* every form of characterisation is employed. Throughout the novel the figural technique of characterisation (Pfister 1994: 251-257) predominates which conveys information about the characters through their speech and behaviour. This technique provides the reader a lively and vivid presentation of the characters that helps the reader to imagine them as real persons.

The novel opens with a few explicit-authorial descriptions of the characters. The reader learns that Manfred has two children and about his relationship to them. His son, aged 1

1 According to Pfister (1994: 251 f.).
fifteen, is Manfred’s “darling”, but “a homely youth, sickly and of no promising disposition” (Walpole 1764: 14) and Matilda, his daughter is “a most beautiful virgin aged eighteen” to whom Manfred “never showed any symptoms of affection” (Walpole 1764: 14). This indirect characterisation of Manfred reveals already his unloving and inhuman trait. Hippolita, his wife is “an amiable lady”(Walpole 1764: 14) and “excellent” (Walpole 1764: 33) who “sometimes venture to present the danger of marrying their only son so early […] never received any other answer than reflection on her own sterility, who had given him but one heir” (Walpole 1764: 14) and the fact that he "had contracted a marriage for his son […]“(Walpole 1764: 14) already brings to light his dominant position in the family and in the novel.

Walpole does not describe his characters’ outward appearance and personality but shows them directly in action to speed the plot up (Cf. Napier 1987: 92). Instead, Walpole uses “interpretive names” (Pfister 1994: 263). This implicit-authorial method simplifies the reader’s imagination of the characters’ personality. For example: Matilda is an Old German name and stands for strength, power and fight. On the first sight the meaning does not seem to correspond to the character because Matilda is not a very active character. But on the second sight there are slight parallels. She shows strength and courage by speaking to a supposed ghost, she releases Theodore from prison, provides him armour and tells him where he should escape. She first fights against a marriage with Frederic but finally submits herself with greatness to her fate and to her death and even forgives her father for murdering herself. The name Isabella means beautiful and “devoted to God” in Hebrew. The first meaning is confirmed explicitly by the author “those lovely young women […]” (Walpole 1764: 20) and explicit-figural by Manfred “Conrad was not worthy of your beauty” (Walpole 1764: 20). The second meaning is proved to be true implicitly through her believe that “heaven itself declares against your impious intentions!” (Walpole 1764: 22) and when she “addressed herself to every saint in heaven” (Walpole 1764: 26). Though according to the meaning and the women’s personality it would have been more suitable if Walpole interchanged the names. This is to be confirmed later in the essay when