

Advanced
English
Essays
and

高级英文散文
与作文教程

赵朝珠 王振昌 毛卓亮 董启明 编注
李赋宁 主审

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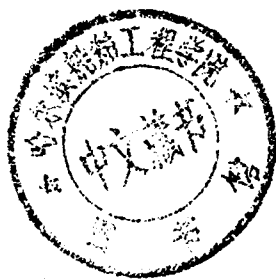
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CONTENTS

Definition of Chapter test	2
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1. The Boston Merchant	7
SAMUEL ELIOT MORISON	
2. Mr. and Mrs. X	16
EDMUND WILSON	
3. John Masefield	27
BEVERLEY NICHOLS	
4. My Average Uncle	36
ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN	
Narration	
5. The Unicorn in the Garden	47
JAMES THURBER	
6. The Last Fiesta	56
LAURIE LEE	
7. Willie Stone	63
R. L. DUFFUS	
8. Short Trip	73
ROBERT LIPSYTE	
Beginnings and Closings	
9. Education as Philosophy	89
BRAND BLANSARD	
10. Johnson	96

CONTENTS

Description of Character	3
1. The Boston Merchant	7
SAMUEL ELIOT MORISON	
2. Mr. and Mrs. X	16
EDMUND WILSON	
3. John Masefield	27
BEVERLEY NICHOLS	
4. My Average Uncle	36
ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN	
Narration	45
5. The Unicorn in the Garden	47
JAMES THURBER	
6. The Last Fiesta	56
LAURIE LEE	
7. Willie Stone.....	63
R. L. DUFFUS	
8. Short Trip	73
ROBERT LIPSYTE	
Beginnings and Closings	82
9. Education as Philosophy	89
BRAND BLANSHARD	
10. Johnson	96
F. L. LUCAS	
11. Street Haunting — A London Adventure	113
VIRGINIA WOOLF	

Style	121
12. The Evolutionary Appetite	133
GEORGE BERNARD SHAW	
13. Courtesy to Readers — Clarity.....	142
F. L. LUCAS	
14. Evangelist	149
JOYCE CARY	

DESCRIPTION OF CHARACTER

Essentially the description of character is no different from the description of things. The same general principles and techniques govern both. Yet, character drawing has special problems of its own. There are different ways of approaching the description of character, and many kinds of characters for the writer to create, each serving different purposes. In the broad we can divide all characters into either types or individuals. Types, or flat characters as they are sometimes called, possess only a single trait. Individuals, or round characters, have a number of traits, a complexity that is closer to real life than the single dimension of the type.

All types fall into one of four classes, depending upon the kind of trait the writer depicts; there are (1) national types—the typical Irishman, Englishman, or Frenchman; (2) the occupational type—the typical cowboy, butler, police inspector, movie actress, disc jockey, barber, or business executive; (3) the social type — the typical bachelor uncle, the distant cousin, the blind date, the hostess, the week-end guest; (4) the personality type—The Tactful Man, The Tactless Man, The Nervous Man, The Steady Man, The Worry-Wart, The Happy-Go-Lucky Man. The types of all four categories have one thing in common—they have only a single characteristic. Actually, they are not real people at all, but only the single characteristic abstracted from an observation of many people. The type is a single trait personified.

In describing a type, therefore, the writer chooses only those details that bear directly upon the one characteristic of nationali-

ty, occupation, social role, or personality. The writer may know a New York taxi driver who spends all his leisure time reading Shakespeare; but in so far as the driver does, he is an individual, not a type. The writer rigorously excludes all details of physical description, clothing, interests, and personality that do not help to define the typical taxi driver.

What is the point behind the description of types? Besides appealing to our delight in the vivid description of the familiar and commonplace, the type may serve either of two purposes.

The less common is to inform. A social historian, for example, may wish to describe the typical medieval peasant, showing how he looked, how he worked, what pleasure he had, if any, and how he felt about his station in life. More often the description of a type intends to instruct the reader in manners or behavior. If we describe The Braggart, we are saying in so many words, "Don't be like this." We may, of course, serve the same purpose in a different, more positive way by describing The Modest Man. Usually the negative, satiric approach is more effective and is more fun both to write and to read.

As the character acquires more than one trait, he becomes an individual. He is more than a walking occupation or trait of personality; he is a New York cab driver *and* a reader of Shakespeare. But the fact that the individual has many dimensions poses a problem. What traits shall the writer include and what traits shall he ignore? The answer depends upon the writer's impression of the individual, for almost all description of round characters is impressionistic. It is well-nigh impossible for any but a highly trained psychologist to write objectively about something so complex as the total personality of a human

being. Character drawing of the individual must be both partial and interpretive. It may be more or less shrewd and accurate, but it remains an impression nevertheless. The impression may be simple or complex, and it may require qualification, but the impression guides the writer's selection of details. Our impression of an individual may range anywhere between love and admiration to hatred and loathing. We may see him as mysterious, a bundle of contradictions, or we may see beneath the variety of his traits a pattern that reveals some truth about human behavior or human values. In any case, we always begin with some reaction to the round character we are describing.

To convey this reaction, we may use many different kinds of details. Among the most useful are details of physical appearance, clothing, and personal belongings. These make the reader see, but they also suggest both the writer's impression and the character's personality. Whether it be sound psychology or not, the reader responds in one way to a tall, thin-lipped, steely-eyed man carrying a tightly furled umbrella, and in a totally different way to a robust, smiling, sloppily-dressed man carrying a fishing rod. In prose, a character's appearance, clothing, and possessions are, by convention, clues to his personality.

In addition to these, a writer may describe the "stage" or the setting within which the character moves about and lives—his room, his home, his place of work. For these, too, are extensions of the character's personality. The shrewd observer can write pages about a man he has never seen—about his income, his social position, his tastes, his interests, even his values—if only he can study for a bit the room or the house in which he lives.

Viewing the individual in a wider perspective, we may des-

cribe his relation to society by making clear what he says and does, what he likes and dislikes, what goals he is seeking, what he values most. We may show him in action, in conflict with others, how they react to him, what they say about him. In short, our portrait may be static or dynamic or in part both.

How much vivid detail the writer will use and what he selects will depend both upon his purpose and the space at his disposal.

A very short description may evoke the writer's impression with only two or three striking details, having the force or suggestiveness of an unfinished pencil sketch. If the writer has the space of a novel, he may use all kinds of details and dramatic situations to create his character over hundreds of pages. Ample space alone will not insure good characterization. It is the telling, the representative detail, the vividness that count. It is more effective to make the reader see a character's modesty in action, for example, than to say merely that he is modest.

Round characters in prose have the purpose of informing, instructing, entertaining, or doing all these at once. The historian who writes the character of a great man may have as his guiding intention to explain the impact of a personality upon the course of history. His character, without being obviously moralistic, may contain a lesson for the reader. Any character that is vivid can scarcely fail to entertain the reader. All of us are interested in people—in their motivations, their eccentricities, in the fascinating variety and complexity that make up the human comedy. For that reason any character of any individual, no matter how great or how obscure, is likely to be a pleasant task for the writer and a pleasure to the reader.

LESSON ONE

The Boston Merchant

SAMUEL ELIOT MORISON

1 The merchant princes clung to the ways and fashions of colonial days, or of 1790 at the latest, unwilling to admit even by the cut of a waistcoat that Robespierre could change their world. At eight or eight-thirty the well-to-do Boston merchant appeared among his family in China silk dressing-gown and cap, as Copley 5 had painted his father. Short family prayers, and a hearty breakfast by a blazing hickory fire. Then the mysteries of the toilet, performed by body servant or, preferably, by a neighborhood Figaro, a San Domingo refugee who discreetly gossips while he performs the rite of shaving. Hair is dressed, tied in a queue, and 10 powdered; unless there is a white wig to be nicely adjusted. A fresh white cravat with long lapels, is folded and skillfully tied. Then for the nether limbs. Linen drawers are tied down, silk stockings pulled up smooth, and gartered against all chance of ungentlemanly wrinkling; buff nankeen breeches arranged neatly 15 over them and silver buckle drawn tight. Low-hung waistcoat and broad-skirted coat of light-colored broadcloth come next. After a few parting suggestions to his lady, Master takes a stout gold-headed Malacca-joint cane, three-cornered hat, scarlet cloak if chilly, and sallies forth on foot, followed by Cicero, the 20 colored butler, with huge market-basket. For it is the simple custom of the day, on one's way to business, to choose the materials for one's dinner, in the neighborhood of Faneuil Hall.

2 Suppose one of those sharp, bright winter days, following a
fresh snowfall that has etched the outlines of new brick shops and 25
black old gabled houses with highlights. Huge "pungs" (ox—or
horse—drawn sledges), the connecting links between ocean com-
merce and New England farms, are drawn up in Dock Square
three deep and piled high with butter, cheeses, fresh and salt
meat, game, winter vegetables, wooden ware, and barrels of cider 30
and perry, from some of which small boys are sucking through a
straw until the owner shouts— "Hey, you've had your
penny—worth!" Through this cheerful activity strolls our mer-
chant, and having chosen his joint and poultry and game and
fixings, sends his servant home, and continues to his 35
counting—room on India Wharf, or near by.

3 If it is winter, there is not much to do; for the larger vessels
are away; but there are always accounts to be made up, tea and
silks to be withdrawn from bond, and plans for next season dis-
cussed with master builders. At eleven, Henry the chief clerk 40
mixes a stiff jorum of Jamaica rum, to get himself and master
through the morning. At half—after twelve or one, the business
day ends, save for the genial institution of 'Change. This is a
meeting of all the merchants, on the sidewalk of State Street if
weather permits, otherwise in tavern or insurance office, to talk 45
shop, ships, and politics for a half—hour or so.

4 By two o'clock the merchant is at home again, and at
two—thirty comes dinner. Perhaps it is a formal feast, in the oval
dining—room, with some fellow—merchants, a state senator or
two, a judge, and their respective ladies; begun by a hot punch 50
handed to the gentlemen in a China loving—cup; continued
through several substantial courses, washed down with sherry,

madeira, and (rarely) champagne; prolonged into candlelight after the ladies retire and the cloth is removed, by port, brandy, political gossip, and damning the Jacobins. If an ordinary family dinner, it is followed by a sleigh-ride, or, in long summer days, a family drive in coach on high English phaeton, behind fat bays, to take tea and fruit at some country seat— with Harry Otis at Oakley, or Kitty Gore at Waltham, or John Lowell at Roxbury, or Ben Bussey at Jamaica Plain. A ball or evening supper party, perhaps; otherwise a cold supper and glass of madeira at home, 'and so to bed.'

(From *The Maritime History of Massachusetts:*
1783–1860)

NOTES TO THE TEXT

1. About the author — Samuel Eliot Morison, American historian, was born in Boston in 1887. Among his books are *The Life and Letters of Harrison Gray Otis*, *Federalist*, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts*, *Builder of the Bay Colony* and *The Growth of the American Republic*. The 16 volumes of his *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* appeared between 1947 and 1962. A selection of Morison's essays *By Land and by Sea* was published in 1953. Although he retired from Harvard in 1955, Morison continued his research and writing. His recent works include *The Oxford History of American People*, *The European Discovery of America*. Morison's literary style is much admired for its clarity and classical simplicity.

2. The merchant princes (1.1) — the distinguished and powerful persons in business
3. ... of 1790 at the latest (1.2) — beginning from sometime around 1790, when the newly independent United States had her own constitution (and the president), completely shaking off the British rule and discarding the ways and fashions of the colonial days.
4. Robespierre [ˈrəʊbzpiɛə; F. ʁəbspjɛr] (1.3) — Maximilien Francois Marie-Isidore de (1758–94), French revolutionist.
A provincial lawyer, he became the leader of the Jacobins during the French revolution and led the Mountain in overthrowing the Girondists (1793).
5. Copley [ˈkɒpli] (1.5) — John Sinleton (1738–1815), American portrait painter, known for his 'Paul Revere' and 'Samuel Adam' and for his huge historical canvases, notably 'The Death of Lord Chatham'
6. hickory (1.7) — a genus of American trees cultivated for their hard wood and for the edible nuts of certain species
7. mysteries of the toilet (1.7) — the process of dressing oneself, formerly, esp. of dressing one's hair. Making one's toilet is usually a matter of privacy. So here we have the mysteries of the toilet.
8. body servant (1.8)—valet of chamber
9. Figaro (1. 9) — A type of cunning dexterity, and intrigue.
The character is in the *Barbier de Seville* and *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1784) by Beaumarchais. A former barber, he becomes a valet in the service of the Count of Almaviva; in both plays he outwits everyone. There are several operas founded on these dramas, as Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro*, Paisiello's *Il*

Barbiere di Siviglia and Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*.

10. San Domingo (1.9)— Santo Domingo, the capital, chief port and economic centre of the Dominican Republic, on the southeast coast, the oldest European town of the Americas, founded in 1496
11. the rite of shaving (1.10) — "Rite" refers to a solemn or religious ceremony performed in an established or prescribed manner, or the words or acts constituting or accompanying it; hence the formal practice of custom of shaving.
12. cravat (1.12) — an elaborate silk necktie worn with formal morning dress
13. broad-skirted coat (1.17) — a coat the lower part of which is hanging like a broad skirt
14. Malacca—joint cane (1.19) — walking stick from the stem of a palm from the district of Malacca in Malaya
15. Faneuil Hall [fænl hɔ:l] (1.23) — a historic public hall and market house built in Boston, by a merchant Peter Faneuil. It is called the "Cradle of American Liberty."
16. highlights (1.26) — the part of surface that catches the most light
17. New England (1.28) — the most northeastern region of the U.S.A., comprising the states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont, so named by John Smith (1580–1631, English adventurer) when he explored it in 1614.
18. ... are drawn up in Dock Square three deep (11.28–29) ... are arranged in Dock Square in formation or order of three rows
19. fixings (1.35) — accessories or trimmings, esp. of a meal, such as ginger, spice, etc.

20. from bond (1.39) — from the storehouse where tea and silks were held down with bands
21. a stiff jorum of Jamaica rum (1.41) — a large drinking bowl of Jamaica intoxicating liquor
22. save for the genial institution of 'Change (1.43) — except for going to the pleasant institution of Exchange
23. China loving-cup (1.51) — a large drinking vessel passed round at a banquet
24. phaeton (1.57) — a light, four-wheeled, open carriage drawn by one horse or two
25. Harry Otis at Oakley (11.58–59), Kitty Gore at Waltham (1.59), John Lowell at Roxbury (1.59), Ben Bussey at Jamaica Plain (1.60) — They were distinguished people in the different places around Boston.
26. 'and so to bed' (1.62) — a regular ending of Samuel Pepys' Diary, suggesting this is the end of the whole day. Samuel Pepys (1633–1703) was an English diarist and naval administrator. As secretary to the admiralty (1673–9, 1684–9), he expanded and reformed the administration of the English navy, and played an important part in the political life of the Restoration. His Diary provides a vivid account of events in the period 1660–9 and is an intimate record of the daily life of the time. He was president of the Royal Society (1684–6) and wrote *Memoirs Relating to the Royal Navy* (1690).

QUESTIONS

READER AND PURPOSE

1. Samuel Eliot Morison describes a type rather than an individ-

ual. Selecting traits and characteristics from many individuals, he creates a common denominator of the Boston merchant in the period from 1790–1812. In selecting details, does Professor Morison place more emphasis upon the merchant's role as businessman or upon his role as social being?

ORGANIZATION

2. This character sketch is neatly organized into four paragraphs. What are the bases of this four-part analysis?
3. What is the topic sentence of paragraph 2? Of paragraph 3?
4. Does paragraph 2 with its description of Dock Square shift emphasis away from the merchant, violating the unity of the character sketch? Explain.

SENTENCES

5. Underline the fragments in this selection. What are the advantages of using stylistic fragments like these? What are the dangers of doing so? Would you expect to find more stylistic fragments in description or in exposition?
6. Describe the structure of the sentence beginning "Perhaps it is a formal feast..." (48–55). Why is this structure especially suited to a topic of this kind?

DICTION

7. Look up: *Robespierre* (3), *Copley* (5), *queue* (10), *nether* (13), *Malacca* (19), *Faneuil Hall* (23), *fixings* (35), *madeira* (53), *Jacobins* (55).
8. Is there any place in this selection where Professor Morison attempts a catalogue comparable to that of Thomas Mann?

Underline words which, like words in the description by Mann, convey sharp perceptual experience.

9. In the diction he chooses and the comments he makes Professor Morison expresses an attitude toward the Boston merchant. He remarks, for instance, the unwillingness of these men "to admit even by the cut of a waistcoat that Robespierre could change their world" (2-3); and he describes their white wigs as "nicely adjusted" (11) and their silk stockings as carefully gartered "against all chance of ungentlemanly wrinkling" (14-15). Underline other words that seem to reveal attitude. What feeling do such words convey about these men and the world they made? (Be careful against oversimplifying.

Professor Morison sees the Boston merchant complexly, as the historian should.) What, in this connection, is the connotation of the verb *sallies* in line 20, an overtone not to be detected in a neutral equivalent like *goes*?

10. This sketch contains many old-fashioned words: *nankee*, *perry*, *joint*, *jorum*, *phaeton*, for example. Be sure you know the meaning of these and similar terms and then consider the validity of the objection that such diction makes reading unnecessarily difficult and that the writer should have avoided words like these or else used modern equivalents (e.g. "big glass" for "jorum").
11. To what literary work is Figaro (9), an allusion? How does the comparison help to create the world of the Boston merchant? The quotation with which this selection ends is also an allusion, a more subtle one. Do you recognize it? If you do, consider why it is appropriate.