

Characterization Master Document

Joseph O'Connor's method of characterization is very unique. Rather than giving detailed character descriptions right when a character is introduced, their traits are given through stylistic flashbacks and sometimes through perceptions shared by other characters. The main storyline becomes more detailed and interconnected through the revealing of past events and relationships between the characters. One example is through the character of Mary Duane. Originally, she is simply introduced to the reader as the nanny for the Kingscourt family, but when the reader gets a glimpse of her past, they learn that she has very strong connections to both David Merridith and Pius Mulvey. These two relationships affect all of Mary's attitudes and relationships on the ship. This seemingly backwards style of characterization advocates a change in the readers perception of each character as the story progresses. When more information is revealed, one can better understand the motivations of the characters rather than start with a foundational description of each that remains relatively stagnant throughout the novel.

Bob Borvan from UNL also pointed out another unique method of characterization. O'Connor/Dixon uses setting description and dialogue structure to color the scene lighter or darker for different characters. For Mulvey, the adjectives are usually harsh, dark words in effort to portray Mulvey's supposed criminal nature. When the readers are first introduced to him in the epilogue, the setting is described with phrases like "knife-gray", "eddies of blackness", and "charcoal clouds. These phrases signal to the reader that this character is very foreboding and mysterious. Borvan argues that the dialogue is often a bit harsher but that that is also characterization in a different sense. Clearly each character is going to have their own voice, but

even the way they speak mechanically and the word choices contributes to characterization of each person.

The multitude of perspectives in this novel is something to marvel at, but it also creates confusion as to where the credit is due for the act of characterization. Ultimately O'Connor is the mastermind, but how much of the stylistic aspects are O'Connor's writing style and how much is Dixon's writing style being portrayed through O'Connor's writing? *Star of the Sea* is a framed narrative, meaning the story is a character telling a story, so it gives the impression of a two-step removal from the actual information being presented. This style raises questions of narrator reliability. Overall, the reader is led to believe that the entire novel is a journalistic non-fiction recollection of Grantly Dixon's experiences in Ireland and the voyage to America. Therefore, one can assume that his personal perception of characters taints what could be the true story. Lindsey Hofer from UNL stated "The way we perceive the characters relates to how Dixon has seen them." His recollection is supposed to be non-fiction, but there is still question of subjectivity and whether his personal perceptions muddle the truth. Even in the letters and diary entries Dixon includes in the novel, there is constantly the question of narrator reliability; whose opinion can we trust? Whose character is consistent in each account?

Gender Characterization

Not only does O'Connor develop characterization for specific individuals, but he also characterizes the separate genders. Throughout the novel we see many of the male characters experience an internal struggle: Pius has this tremendous burden of guilt and shame over his past and his intended future, David struggles with his relationships and the mutual giving and receiving of love, and Dixon wrestles with the worth of his writing. Unlike these male characters, however, the women do not show such internal struggles. Mary Duane moves from one ordeal to

another without looking back. For example, once David tells her he can never see her again, she abandons her feelings for him without a second glimpse. According to Bob Borvan from UNL, “She doesn’t stop, she is very strong.” Laura Merridith, like Mary Duane, shows this same kind of strength, but she focuses on strength by appearances. To those around her, she acts calm and according to her social status even though her familial life contains hardships and discord. Laura and Mary use their strength to move on, and do not struggle with the progression of their actions. This characterization of gender relates to the post-modern idea of questioning of grand narratives. Dixon writes in the predominately male Victorian Era where women do not have many rights compared to the Postmodern Era in which O’Connor creates the book. However, even in this male society, the women show more strength of conviction and solidness than the men.

Name Characterization

O’Connor also uses names as another form of characterization. As we learn in chapter 27, Star of the Sea is another name for the Virgin Mary, so even the main setting contributes to the idea of names. Dixon’s name also holds meaning in his position within the book. According to Ellen Mueller, “Grantley is an Irish name and Dixon is an English name. This resonates well with Dixon trying to share both perspectives of the famine in his writings.” Because Dixon writes as a journalist, he shares both sides of the story, and his name reflects the two-sidedness of journalistic writing. The name of Kingscourt in David’s family also represents their position. “Kingscourt” reflects a powerful and domineering family; however, to the Irish still living under English rule, “King” might suggest an unwanted power that cruelly mistreats its subjects. David then, like the Kingscourt name might suggest, feels unwanted throughout most of his life, and Lord Kingscourt, David’s father, mistreats his tenants after his wife dies. This name indicates all

the mistreatment within the family itself and committed by the family. Other characters, like Pius and Mary, have names that the characters themselves have to work towards in order to “become their name.” The name Pius connotes a devout person, but we know that of the Mulvey brothers, Nicholas became the most pious. Pius Mulvey, then, spends his life trying to work up to his name’s definition. Like Pius, Mary also has to work towards her namesake: Mary the Mother of God. Throughout her life and up until the end of the journey, Mary does not live up to the virgin’s name; she has multiple sexual relationships, and she writes a letter that ultimately condemns Pius. At the end of the journey, however, Mary shows an act of kindness similar to an act of the Virgin Mary. She extends her hand towards her wrongdoer, Pius, and claims him as her only kin, thus saving his life and enacting mercy. O’Connor uses names to enforce how the characters are treated and how characterization involves what a name means for an individual.

Character Summaries

Grantley Dixon:

Grantley Dixon is an American journalist from Louisiana. He writes for the *New York Times*, but didn’t always have this advantageous job. He was a “desperate writer” (Lindsay Hofer) early in the book, and his fiction writing gets rejected by a prestigious editor. He is the writer in the “trio of main characters” (Ella Worth). He has an affair with Laura Merridith and eventually marries her. In the epilogue, it is revealed that Dixon is the true murderer of David Merridith. He is motivated to kill David Merridith because he is jealous that David is married to Laura. His actions are motivated by his desire to be with Laura and wanted success and affirmation as a writer.

Captain Lockwood:

Captain Lockwood is the Quaker captain of the ship. He keeps the logs of the ship and keeps track of the deaths on the ship through the logs. As a result of keeping track of the deaths, he is shown as “emotionally distraught” (Bailey Corcoran). He is soft-spoken and is always shown in a very positive light. He is considered to have the purest opinion and is arguably the only reliable narrator in the novel.

David Merridith:

David Merridith is the son of the elder Lord Kingscourt and Lady Verity. He is referred to as “The Victim” throughout the novel, which indicates that he is the intended murder victim. Towards the beginning of the novel, he is in love with Mary Duane, the daughter of his nanny. After this relationship, he becomes engaged to Amelia Blake. However, he falls in love with Laura Markam while he is engaged. He eventually decides to marry Laura, which leads to him being disowned by his father. Because he is disowned by his father, he experiences a personal identity crisis, and as a result, feels the need to “put on a face” for others. However, he is later granted his father’s title and land. He marries Laura and they have two sons, Jonathan and Robert. Although he is a lord, he is an artist and wants this more than anything in the world. He is the owner and landlord of his family’s land and eventually evicts the tenants of this land, which leads to him being despised by many.

Pius Mulvey:

Pius Mulvey is the supposed murderer of David Merridith. He is a passenger in steerage and wanders the deck of the ship at night. He is referred to as “The Ghost” and “The Monster” throughout the novel. He learned to read at a young age and fell in love with songwriting. He

was in love with Mary Duane and impregnated her. He couldn't afford to support Mary and their unborn child, so he fled. He turns to stealing to get by and is eventually put in jail for seven years for theft. While in prison, he is raped by a guard. He kills the guard and escapes from jail. He also kills his friend William Swales and takes over his Swales' identity. He is blackmailed by the Hibernians to attempt to kill David Merridith. It is eventually revealed that Mulvey is not the murderer of David Merridith.

Morality and Motivation

Throughout the reading of the novel, it has been a struggle deciding which characters are good and which are evil. This directly affects how readers are perceiving characters which means it affects how they are being characterized. The two biggest concepts that affect how readers decided whether a character is good or evil are morality and motivation. Starting with morality, it can be seen that of the characters in the book there are a few that seem to be inherently evil. Pius Mulvey seems to possess an evil quality when readers are looking through the lens of morality. Delving deeper, it can be argued that the motivations of Mulvey override what he displays morally and reveals that he may not be as evil as originally perceived. Ella Worth put it well in a response to evil in the novel by saying "Can you blame them? Are there certain circumstances in life that justify theft, abandonment, and even murderer? The concept of morality is something we struggle to assign to any of these characters." This illustrates the base of the struggle very well and shows that in times of great desperation morals change for those affected. This leads well into the other big theme of motivation. For people who are in great distress there is a certain motivation to survive. The characters of Mulvey and Mary Duane both are motivated by their instincts for survival. These leads Mulvey to kill for himself, steal, and act manipulative in general. Motivations of other characters include: Merridith's need distinguish himself from his

father and to be loved, Dixon's need to give an accurate account of the story and to confess to the murder, and the captain's need to get everyone to New York safely. Overall it can be said that the motivations of the characters in combination with the dire situations that they are put in affect the morality of their characters. That information gives readers a good idea of how to perceive them.