

I 4 Introducing a Character

A few minutes later, Sally herself arrived.

"Am I terribly late, Fritz darling?"

"Only half of an hour, I suppose," Fritz drawled, beaming with proprietary pleasure. "May I introduce Mr Isherwood — Miss Bowles? Mr Isherwood is commonly known as Chris."

"I'm not," I said. "Fritz is about the only person who's ever called me Chris in my life."

Sally laughed. She was dressed in black silk, with a small cape over her shoulders and a little cap like a page-boy's stuck jauntily on one side of her head:

"Do you mind if I use your telephone, sweet?"

"Sure. Go right ahead." Fritz caught my eye. "Come into the other room, Chris. I want to show you something." He was evidently longing to hear my first impressions of Sally, his new acquisition.

"For heaven's sake, don't leave me alone with this man!" she exclaimed. "Or he'll seduce me down the telephone. He's most terribly passionate."

As she dialled the number, I noticed that her finger-nails were painted emerald green, a colour unfortunately chosen, for it called attention to her hands, which were much stained by cigarette-smoking and as dirty as a little girl's. She was dark enough to be Fritz's sister. Her face was long and thin, powdered dead white. She had very large brown eyes which should have been darker, to match her hair and the pencil she used for her eyebrows.

"Hilloo," she cooed, pursing her brilliant cherry lips as though she were going to kiss the mouthpiece: "Ist dass Du, mein Liebling?" Her mouth opened in a fatuously sweet smile. Fritz and I sat watching her, like a performance at the theatre.

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939)

INTRODUCING A CHARACTER

CHARACTER is arguably the most important single component of the novel. Other narrative forms, such as epic, and other media, such as film, can tell a story just as well, but nothing can equal the great tradition of the European novel in the richness, variety and psychological depth of its portrayal of human nature. Yet character is probably the most difficult aspect of the art of fiction to discuss in technical terms. This is partly because there are so many different types of character and so many different ways of representing them: major characters and minor characters, flat characters and round characters, characters rendered from inside their minds, like Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway, and characters viewed from outside by others, like Christopher Isherwood's Sally Bowles.

Originally the subject of one of the lightly fictionalized stories and sketches that make up *Goodbye to Berlin*, Sally Bowles has enjoyed a remarkably long life in the public imagination of our time, thanks to the successful adaptation of Isherwood's text first as a stage play and film (*I Am A Camera*), then as a stage and film musical (*Cabaret*). At first glance, it's hard to understand why she should have achieved this almost mythical status. She is not particularly beautiful, not particularly intelligent, and not particularly gifted as an artiste. She is vain, feckless, and mercenary in her sexual relationships. But she retains an endearing air of innocence and vulnerability in spite of it all, and there is something irresistibly comic about the gap between her pretensions and the facts of her life. Her story gains enormously in interest and significance from being set in Weimar Berlin, just before the Nazi takeover. Dreaming vainly of fame and riches in seedy lodging houses, bouncing from one *louche* protector to another, flattering, exploiting and lying, in the most transparent fashion, she is an emblem of the self-deception and folly of that doomed society.

The simplest way to introduce a character, common in older fiction, is to give a physical description and biographical summary. The portrait of Dorothea Brooke in the first chapter of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is a consummate example of this method:

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely

formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible – or from one of our elder poets – in a paragraph of today's newspaper. She was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever, but with the addition that her sister Celia had more common sense.

And so on, for several pages. It is magnificent, but it belongs to a more patient and leisurely culture than ours. Modern novelists usually prefer to let the facts about a character emerge gradually, diversified, or actually conveyed, by action and speech. In any case, all description in fiction is highly selective; its basic rhetorical technique is synecdoche, the part standing for the whole. Both George Eliot and Christopher Isherwood evoke the physical appearance of their heroines by focusing on the hands and the face, leaving the reader to imagine the rest. An exhaustive description of Dorothea's or Sally Bowles's physical and psychological attributes would take many pages, perhaps an entire book.

Clothes are always a useful index of character, class, life-style, but especially in the case of an exhibitionist like Sally. Her black silk get-up (worn for a casual afternoon visit) signals desire-to-impress, theatricality (the cape), and sexual provocativeness (the page-boy's hat acquires connotations from the many references to sexual ambivalence and deviation, including transvestism, that run through the book). These traits are immediately reinforced by her speech and behaviour – asking to use the telephone in order to impress the two men with her latest erotic conquest – which then gives the narrator the opportunity for a description of Sally's hands and face.

This is what Henry James meant by the "scenic method", what he aimed to achieve when he exhorted himself to "Dramatize! dramatize!" James was thinking of the stage play, but Isherwood belonged to the first generation of novelists to grow up with the cinema, and its influence shows. When the narrator of *Goodbye to Berlin* says "I am a camera," he is thinking of a movie camera. Whereas Dorothea is posed statically, as if sitting for a verbal

portrait, and is actually compared to a figure in a painting, Sally is shown to us *in action*. It is easy to break down this passage into a sequence of cinematic shots: Sally posing in her black silk outfit – a quick exchange of glances between the two men – a close-up of Sally's green fingernails as she dials the number – another close-up of her ill-coordinated, clown-like makeup and affected expression as she greets her lover – and a two-shot of the male spectators, riveted by the sheer ham of the performance.

No doubt this partly explains the ease with which Sally Bowles's story has transferred to the screen. But there are nuances in the passage which are purely literary. Those green fingernails on grubby hands are what I first think of when her name is mentioned. You could show the green nail-polish in a film, but not the narrator's ironic comment, "a colour unfortunately chosen". "Unfortunately chosen" is the story of Sally Bowles's life. And you could show the cigarette stains and the dirt, but only a narrator could observe, "dirty as a little girl's". The childlike quality beneath the surface sophistication is precisely what makes Sally Bowles a memorable character.