

2C A difficult character

SPEAKING OUTPUT | an informal group discussion

GOAL | talk about a character and speculate on their motivation

MEDIATION SKILL | analysing a fictional character

WARM-UP

1 Work in pairs and discuss the questions.

- 1 Have you ever been part of a book club? Would you want to be?
- 2 Do you have a favourite book?
- 3 Think of a character you remember from a book/film/programme. What makes them memorable?

PREPARE

2 Read the Scenario and answer the questions.

- 1 Who is the message from?
- 2 Why are they writing?

SCENARIO

You are part of a book group in your class. The organiser sends you this message.

I just read this short story and thought that it would be an interesting one for us to talk about in the book group as it relates to what we were talking about in the class last week. I'm not sure what to make of the characters, and whether I like them or not. And I'm not even sure if I am meant to like them. Perhaps we could focus on that in our discussion.

3 Read the short story and answer the questions.

- 1 Who are the characters? How are they related?
- 2 Why are they there?
- 3 How would you describe their relationship with the older woman?

The visit

'Two hours, Paul. Two max OK?'

'OK Wendy, and please just try to be nice.'

'I'm **always** nice. It's her that's not.'

'You know what I mean. She's old now. Just indulge her a little.'

Paul took a deep breath and shouted hello through the open door, to be greeted by the slow determined shuffle of slippers across a stone floor. He arranged his face in what he hoped was a pleasant smile and not a rictus. Wendy tried less hard. Then Grandma was upon them.

'It's Festival Week again, Gran! How are you enjoying it so far?'

'Paul! You've been eating well, I can see, my dear boy. All that restaurant food. You should eat at home more,' chirped Gran, her eyes on Wendy.

Paul knew he couldn't leave any space in the conversation. 'Wendy and I just wanted to wish you the best of the season, Gran.'

'Come in, come in. It's been so long since your last visit. I can't even remember when it was.'

Paul could. It was last Festival Week.

A darkened parlour full of the ornaments accrued over a lifetime, more like a museum than a living room. The atmosphere set to work on Paul and Wendy's spirits.

'We got you some festival buns, Gran.'

'That's very kind! Oh. You bought them?'

'Yes, sorry Gran, I didn't have time to bake them this year.'

'Nor Wendy, it seems ...'

'Paul doesn't let me near the kitch ...'

'I'd always make them for my mum and dad, you know, Paul.'

One year I was so sick with fever that I could barely get out of bed, but I made sure they got their buns, just how they liked them. They so appreciated those buns, you know. And your mother, she would always do her best. But she can't now ...'

Paul tried to ignore that spectre at the feast. Wendy couldn't stop herself now. 'Not many people have time to make them these days.'

Gran smiled and armed her response. 'No, I'm sure you're right, Wendy, they have better things to do with their time.'

4 Work in groups of three. Focus on one character from the short story and make notes about the questions (1–4).

Student A: Make notes about Grandma.

Student B: Make notes about Wendy.

Student C: Make notes about Paul.

- 1 How do they feel?
- 2 How do they respond to the other characters?
- 3 Why are they there, or what do they want?
- 4 What three words would you use to describe them? Use the words in the box or your own ideas.

cruel defensive diplomatic dutiful
generous honest hostile manipulative
narrow-minded patient sensitive
sympathetic thoughtful unkind

Gran bade them sit down and went to make tea to go with their shop-bought buns. Paul's brave attempt at a smile this time was directed at Wendy, whose face was a gathering thunder cloud.

'An hour max, Wendy ...'

'During which, Paul, we'll be reminded of what bad people we are because we don't follow the old ways. This is the last time, Paul.'

The tea arrived in an ornate teapot and was decanted into equally ornate cups, which hadn't been used for a year. The clinks of cups only accentuated the uncomfortable silence.

Paul smiled warmly, casting around for safe conversation. Nothing is safe. 'Any plans for Festival Week, Gran?'

'I'll be doing what I've done every year on Festival Week since I was a young girl, Paul, doing the big clean. Wendy, will you be doing the big clean?'

An ambush. A trap. 'We have a cleaner, **he** comes every week, so we don't need ...'

'My mother and I would do the big clean together.' Gran becomes distant, she's inhabiting the past now. 'We'd scrub, clean and polish, and laugh and laugh till the tears came. Of course, I doubt you can do that with your mother. Your mother is all the way over on the other side of the country, isn't she, Wendy? I'm guessing you don't see her very often.'

Paul laid what he hoped was a reassuring hand on Wendy's shoulder and blundered to her rescue.

'We go as often as we can, Gran.'

'Yes, she's very understanding, isn't she Paul? **And** supportive ...'

'Hmm. We're both doing such long hours at work, you know how it is ...'

Gran didn't know how it was.

A further hour of conversational cat and mouse followed, full of civilised accusations and desperate deflections, and then suddenly Paul and Wendy found themselves deposited outside on the street.

'How much did she give us, Paul?'

'Two thousand.'

'Wow, where does she get all the money from?'

'She doesn't spend much these days, not since Grandpa died. They used to travel, but she won't go anywhere now.'

'Well, that's the car paid for the next two months. Now, who are we seeing tomorrow?'

5 Read the Mediation Skill box. Write three sentences about the characters in the short story.

MEDIATION SKILL

analysing a fictional character



When you're analysing a character in a book, play, programme or film, there are a number of different questions you should think about.

What do they say?

He insists that ...

She objects to the suggestion ...

What do they do? How do they behave?

She comes across as quite cruel.

It's as though he's bitter about something.

How do they relate to the other characters?

There is (conflict/common ground) between them.

They're clearly approaching it from opposite angles.

They don't see eye-to-eye.

They're brought together by a shared goal.

She's very supportive of him.

They're trying to manipulate her.

Why? What do they want?

I'm left with the impression that it's not about the money.

It strikes me that she's quite lonely.

It's important to understand that she is from a different generation.

How do they impact the story/the other characters?

They antagonise the other characters.

A well-written character will have several different sides, depending on who they are with, and whose point of view we see them from. For a character analysis, make notes and consider the context or the situation that the character is in. Also, try to read between the lines to understand their motivation. What are the reasons for their actions?

MEDIATE

6 Work in your same group from Ex 4. Prepare a short character analysis of the character you focused on in Ex 4. Take turns to explain the character, their actions and motivation.

7 Work in pairs. Discuss the questions.

- 1 What traditions in your country might older people follow more than younger people?
- 2 Do you feel that the disconnect between generations shown in the story exists in your country? In what ways?