

The Devil and Tom Walker

Literary Analysis

Washington Irving reveals the personality traits of his characters through **characterization**. In stories, such as “The Devil and Tom Walker,” the author achieves characterization in two primary ways:

- In **direct characterization**, the narrator describes the character in direct statements.
- In **indirect characterization**, the author reveals personality traits through the words, thoughts, and actions of the characters.

Reading Strategy

The time and place in which a story is written or set is called its **historical period**. Each historical period has a social or cultural attitude created in part by political and religious ideas. These attitudes influence plot, setting, and characters. Authors reveal the **social influences** of a time period by using the following elements:

- descriptive details
- narrator’s comments
- characters’ dialogue

For example, Washington Irving refers to Native Americans as “savages,” a term that most modern people find offensive. Irving used the term that was commonly used in 1720s New England. Use the following chart to track examples of the social and cultural attitudes Irving presents and to judge the effectiveness of the author’s presentation.

1720s New England Attitude	Effectiveness

The Devil and Tom Walker

Washington Irving



Summary Tom Walker meets the Devil (“Old Scratch”) in a swamp. The Devil offers the pirate Captain Kidd’s treasure to Tom on certain conditions. Tom’s wife encourages him to accept, but Tom refuses. She leaves to find the Devil and make her own bargain. After her second try, she doesn’t come back. Later, Tom finds her apron with a heart and liver in it. He assumes that the Devil has killed her. Almost grateful, Tom looks for the Devil again. This time, he makes a deal. Tom will get Captain Kidd’s treasure if he becomes a moneylender. Later, Tom regrets his deal and

starts going to church often. But the Devil returns and sends Tom off on horseback into a storm. Tom never comes back, though his troubled spirit appears on stormy nights.

Note-taking Guide

Use this sequence chart to keep track of events in the story.

Event 1: Tom Walker takes a shortcut through the swamp and finds a skull.
Event 2:
Event 3:
Event 4:
Event 5:
Event 6:
Event 7:
Event 8:
Event 9:
Event 10:

The Devil and Tom Walker

Washington Irving

Outside Boston, Massachusetts, in about 1727, Tom Walker lives near a swampy forest. Captain Kidd supposedly buried his pirate treasure in this forest. Tom and his wife are very stingy—so stingy that they even cheat each other. One day, Tom takes a shortcut through the forest. At an old fort that Native Americans had once used in fighting the colonists, Tom meets a mysterious stranger. The stranger, who carries an ax on his shoulder, is not Native American or African American, but he is still very dark, as if covered in soot.



“What are you doing on my grounds?” said the black man, with a hoarse growling voice.

“Your grounds!” said Tom with a sneer, “no more your grounds than mine; they belong to Deacon Peabody.”

“Deacon Peabody be d____d,” said the stranger, “as I flatter myself¹ he will be, if he does not look more to his own sins and less to those of his neighbors. Look yonder, and see how Deacon Peabody is faring.”²



Tom looks at a tree and sees carved into it the name of Deacon Peabody, a local churchman grown rich through clever land deals. Other trees bear the names of other wealthy members of the community. The trees all have ax marks, and one with the name Crowninshield is completely chopped down.



TAKE NOTES

Literary Analysis

Reread the underlined sentence. What do you learn about the two characters, Tom Walker and his wife? Is the shared personality trait of the two revealed to you through **indirect** or **direct characterization**?

Read Fluently

Read the bracketed passage aloud. Circle the words that show what tones of voice to use.

Reading Check

Irving did not want to spell out “damned,” so he wrote “d____d” instead. According to the stranger, why will the deacon be damned? Circle the reason.

Reading Strategy

Reread the underlined phrase. New England in the 1720s was influenced by the Puritans. What do you know about the Puritans? How does the underlined phrase reflect the social and cultural attitudes of the historical period?

1. as I flatter myself as I am delighted to think.
2. faring (FAYR ing) v. doing.

TAKE NOTES

Stop to Reflect

What do you think will happen to Crowninshield? Why?

Reading Strategy

Circle two nicknames for the Devil. Explain how the nicknames reflect the historical period of the story.

Literary Analysis

Reread the underlined sentence. What general statement can you make about Tom Walker from this sentence? Is this an example of **direct** or **indirect characterization**?

“He’s just ready for burning!” said the black man, with a growl of triumph. “You see I am likely to have a good stock of firewood for winter.”

“But what right have you,” said Tom, “to cut down Deacon Peabody’s timber?”

“The right of a prior claim,” said the other. “This woodland belonged to me long before one of your white-faced race put foot upon the soil.”

“And pray, who are you, if I may be so bold?” said Tom.

“Oh, I go by various names. I am the wild huntsman in some countries; the black miner in others. In this neighborhood I am known by the name of the black woodsman. . . .”

“The upshot of all which is, that, if I mistake not,” said Tom, sturdily, “you are he commonly called Old Scratch.”

“The same, at your service,” replied the black man, with a half-civil nod.



The Devil offers Tom Captain Kidd’s pirate treasure if Tom agrees to his terms. Tom makes no decision. Instead he asks for proof that the Devil is who he says he is. So the Devil presses his finger to Tom’s forehead and then goes off. When Tom gets home, he finds a black thumbprint burned into his forehead. He also learns of the sudden death of Absalom Crowninshield. Convinced he has met the Devil, he tells his wife all about it.



All her avarice was awakened at the mention of hidden gold, and she urged her husband to comply with the black man’s terms and

Vocabulary Development

prior (PRY uhr) *adj.* previous; from before

avarice (AV uh ris) *adj.* greed

comply (kum PLY) *v.* go along with; agree to

secure what would make them wealthy for life. However Tom might have felt disposed to sell himself to the Devil, he was determined not to do so to oblige his wife; so he flatly refused out of the mere spirit of contradiction. Many and bitter were the quarrels they had on the subject. . . .

At length she determined to drive the bargain on her own account, and if she succeeded, to keep all the gain to herself. Being of the same fearless temper as her husband, she set off for the old Indian fort at the close of a summer's day.



To bargain with the Devil, Tom's wife takes the household silverware and other valuables, tying them up in her apron. She is never heard from again. According to one story, Tom goes hunting for her and finds nothing but her apron, with a heart and liver inside! Whatever happened, Tom seems more upset about losing his property than losing his wife. In fact, he decides that the Devil might have done him a favor. Soon he is again bargaining with the Devil to obtain the pirate's treasure.



There was one condition which need not be mentioned, being generally understood in all cases where the Devil grants favors; but there were others about which, though of less importance, he was inflexibly obstinate. He

Literary Analysis 

Reread the bracketed paragraph. Describe the relationship of Tom Walker and his wife. How does Irving reveal the nature of the two characters' relationship? Does Irving use **direct** or **indirect characterization**?

Stop to Reflect 

What do you think will happen to Tom's wife?

Stop to Reflect 

What "one condition which need not be mentioned" is always involved when someone makes a deal with the Devil? Circle the letter of the correct answer below.

- a. person damned in the afterlife
- b. person signs name in blood
- c. person becomes rich
- d. person gets revenge on enemies

Vocabulary Development

secure (se KYOOR) *v.* to make certain about; to guarantee
disposed (dis POHZD) *adj.* inclined; prone to
oblige (u BLYDG) *v.* do what someone else wants; please
inflexibly (in FLEKS uh blee) *adv.* completely unwilling to move or change
obstinate (AWB sti net) *adj.* stubborn

Reading Check 

What does the Devil want done with the money he gives Tom?

- a. spend it all
- b. bury it in the woods
- c. use it for evil purposes
- d. use it to fight slavery

Reading Strategy 

From the details in the bracketed paragraph, what can you infer about the attitude people in Tom's day had toward slavery?

Stop to Reflect 

Do you think Tom will regret his decision? Circle your answer.

yes no

Why, or why not?

insisted that money found through his means should be employed in his service. He proposed, therefore, that Tom should employ it in the black traffic; that is to say, that he should fit out a slave ship. This, however, Tom resolutely refused: he was bad enough in all conscience, but the Devil himself could not tempt him to turn slave-trader.

Finding Tom so squeamish on this point, he did not insist upon it, but proposed, instead, that he should turn usurer.³ . . .

To this no objections were made, for it was just to Tom's taste.

"You shall open a broker's shop⁴ in Boston next month," said the black man.

"I'll do it tomorrow, if you wish," said Tom Walker.

"You shall lend money at two per cent a month."

"Egad, I'll charge four!" replied Tom Walker. . . .

"Done!" said the Devil.

"Done!" said Tom Walker. So they shook hands and struck a bargain.



So Tom becomes a cruel moneylender, charging his highest rates to his most desperate customers. He grows rich and powerful. He builds a large, showy house, though he is too stingy to furnish it well. He buys a fancy carriage but lets the horses nearly starve. Yet as he nears old age, he begins to worry.



Vocabulary Development

resolutely (REZ uh LOOT lee) *adv.* firmly

3. **usurer** (YOO zuhr uhr) *n.* a moneylender who charges high interest rates.

4. **a broker's shop** a moneylending business.

Having secured the good things of this world, he began to feel anxious about those of the next. He thought with regret on the bargain he had made with his black friend, and set his wits to work to cheat him out of the conditions. He became, therefore, all of a sudden, a violent churchgoer. . . . Tom was as rigid in religious as in money matters; he was a stern supervisor and censorer⁵ of his neighbors, and seemed to think every sin entered up to their account became a credit on his own side of the page.



Frightened of the Devil, Tom keeps a small Bible in his coat pocket and a large one on his desk at work. One hot afternoon, while still in his bathrobe, Tom goes down to his office to demand repayment of a loan. The man who has taken the loan is a land jobber, or speculator who tried to make money by buying and selling land. In the past, Tom has acted as if this man were a good friend, but now Tom refuses to give him more time to repay his loan.



“My family will be ruined and brought upon the parish,” said the land jobber.

“Charity begins at home,” replied Tom; “I must take care of myself in these hard times.”

“You have made so much money out of me,” said the speculator.

Tom lost his patience and his piety—“The Devil take me,” said he, “if I have made a farthing!”⁶

Reading Strategy 

How do the bracketed sentences reflect the **social and cultural attitudes** of the historical period?

Literary Analysis 

How does Irving reveal Tom’s character in the second paragraph? Is this **indirect** or **direct characterization**?

Stop to Reflect 

Circle the proverb, or saying, Tom uses to defend his behavior here. What is dishonest about his words of defense?

Vocabulary Development

piety (PY uh tee) *n.* religious devotion

- 5. **censurer** (SEN sher rer) *n.* someone who criticizes the behavior of others.
- 6. **farthing** (FAHR thing) *n.* a small coin of little value.

TAKE NOTES

Reading Check

Who is knocking on Tom's door?

Stop to Reflect

Do you think Tom deserves this doom?

Why, or why not?

Literary Analysis

Circle the sentence in which the **narrator** gives advice directly to some of his readers. What does he want those readers to learn from the story?

Just then there were three loud knocks at the street door. He stepped out to see who was there. A black man was holding a black horse, which neighed and stamped with impatience.

"Tom, you're come for," said the black fellow, gruffly. Tom shrunk back, but too late. He had left his little Bible at the bottom of his coat pocket, and his big Bible on the desk . . . never was a sinner taken more unawares.



The Devil takes Tom up and rides off into a thunderstorm. They are said to have galloped like mad to the swamp by the old fort. Shortly afterward the forest is struck by lightning. The next day Tom's fancy new house catches fire and burns to the ground. Tom himself is never seen again. Those appointed to settle his affairs find nothing but ashes where his business papers should be and chests filled with worthless wood shavings instead of gold.



Such was the end of Tom Walker and his ill-gotten wealth. Let all gripping money brokers lay this story to heart. The truth of it is not to be doubted. The very hole under the oak trees, whence⁷ he dug Kidd's money, is to be seen to this day; and the neighboring swamp and old Indian fort are often haunted in stormy nights by a figure on horseback, in morning gown and white cap, which is doubtless the troubled spirit of the usurer.

Vocabulary Development

gruffly (GRUHF lee) *adv.* abruptly

gripping (GRYP ing) *adj.* complaining

7. **whence** (WENS) *prep.* from where.

The Devil and Tom Walker

1. **Evaluate:** What kind of people do you think Tom Walker and his wife are? Explain.

2. **Literary Analysis:** In this story, Irving reveals personality traits of the characters through **indirect** and **direct characterization**. Complete the following chart with specific details that reveal the characters' personality traits.

Detail	Character	Personality Trait	Indirect or Direct Characterization

3. **Reading Strategy:** Complete the Reading Strategy chart that you began on the Before You Read page. What cultural or social attitude of 1720s New England most influences the story? How does this attitude affect the story's plot and characters?



Writing About the Essential Question

How does literature shape or reflect society? Judging from the events of this story, what do you think Washington Irving might say about the effects of greed on society?

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