Characterization T-Chart Exercise

**Logistics:** This exercise works best with mid-length and long works of fiction (i.e., novels and short stories), but I think it can be adapted for poetry and nonfiction as well (for instance, have students make specific claims about poems/nonfiction works, instead of characters). If you are working with a novel, it’s a good idea to do this exercise early on in the reading, so students can see how their initial interpretations have changed.

**Payoff:** Ideally, the exercise should afford students an opportunity to formulate claims and seek out evidence as a group, working together to develop, discuss, and support character claims. Furthermore, the exercise allows students to reflect on how their initial interpretation may change or evolve with continued reading/re-readings. Finally, since this is a group exercise work together and discuss, which is never a bad thing!

**Organization:** Group the students together in groups of four or five, depending on how many students (and characters!) you have to work with. Then, pass out one T chart to each group (attached below)., telling students to choose a scribe or come up with a plan for alternating writing responsibilities. After that, write a list of character names on the board, and ask groups to decide which character they want to analyze. Alternatively, you can just assign each group a character.

**Directions:** After groups are organized and characters are assigned, I give students the directions for filling out the worksheet. On one side of the T-chart, they are asked to brainstorm together to come up with and list as many character traits as they can think of to describe their character. Then, on the corresponding side of the chart, they are asked to find and write down evidence for each character claim they have listed (i.e., specific passages, quotes, etc. that prove that ‘X character is Y.’) This allows group members to build off of each other’s ideas, and to actively seek out and weigh evidence for and against their claims.

**Discussion:** Once all of the groups have completed their T-charts (approximately 20-30 minutes), I have the students come back together as a class to discuss their findings. After each group has shared their findings, I open the discussion to the class to see if anyone can identify other character traits or dispute proposed ones. This usually leads to a lively discussion about characterization and character development.

**Reflect:** As I mentioned above, if you’re working with a longer novel, it’s a good idea to hold onto these worksheets (after you collect them) so that you can bring them back out towards the end of the reading. This way, students can reflect on how their views of these characters have changed and evolved throughout the course of the reading.

Group Names:

Character:

