



Revealing Characters through Action and Dialogue in Susan Hill's A Kind Man and A Question of Identity

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Susan Hill's craft of character creation through action and dialogue in *A Kind Man* and *A Question of Identity*. In *A Kind Man*, Hill presents characters whose moral dispositions are revealed through their interactions, responses to grief, and community reactions within an ordinary social microcosm, evoking a parable-like realism and ethically charged narrative. In *A Question of Identity*, Hill's detective Simon Serrailler and other figures emerge through procedural dialogue and behavioural subtleties, where character identity is continually negotiated in the face of crime and social disruption. Through textual analysis, this study highlights how Hill's characters become intelligible not through introspective exposition but through their speech acts and observable behaviour. The article draws on narrative theories and previous critical scholarship to argue that Hill's characterisation foregrounds social interaction and ethical positioning, making action and dialogue principal tools in her prose craft.

KEYWORDS: Susan Hill; characterisation; action; dialogue; narrative technique; *A Kind Man*; *A Question of Identity*.

INTRODUCTION

Susan Hill is recognised for her writing versatility, spanning crime fiction to literary parable. In *A Kind Man*, Hill tells a deceptively simple yet profound story centred on Tommy Carr, a man whose defining quality is kindness, as revealed through behaviour and social encounters rather than internal monologue. The narrative's emphasis on everyday actions situates character firmly in observable experience.

By contrast, *A Question of Identity* is rooted in the procedural intricacies of crime fiction, featuring DCI Simon Serrailler investigating a series of ritualistic murders. Despite belonging to a different genre, this novel equally relies on characters' words, choices, and interactions to construct identity: the detective, suspects, victims, and family members are differentiated by how they act and speak within the unfolding mystery.

Drawing on narrative scholarship (e.g., Hofer 1993; Jackson 1982) and contemporary approaches to character in fiction, this article investigates how action and dialogue serve as primary instruments of characterisation in both works, demonstrating Hill's consistent poetics of character across genres. (Tokhirova 2024)

Key Findings

1. Character Revealed through Action in *A Kind Man*

In *A Kind Man*, Hill constructs character identity almost exclusively through observable behaviour, particularly in the ways Tommy and Eve respond to significant life events. The novel does not depend on interior monologue but rather on the unfolding of actions within their

social environment — their kindness to others, reactions to tragedy, and moral responses to community perceptions.

Hill's narrative treats kindness not as an abstract trait but as enacted behaviour that others witness, discuss, and react to, creating socially embedded characterisation. The community's evolving perceptions of Tommy following his recovery and mysterious healing demonstrate how actions shape identity within a social matrix rather than via explicit psychological exposition.

This observation aligns with Tokhirova's view that literary characters become accessible through their relational behaviour rather than internal psychology.

2. Dialogue and Identity in A Question of Identity

A Question of Identity foregrounds dialogue as a narrative mechanism through which character emerges. In crime fiction, dialogue naturally serves multiple purposes: it moves the investigation forward, reveals procedural dynamics, and distinguishes personality through speech patterns, conversational content, and relation to context.

Simon Serrailler's interactions with colleagues and family — detailed through dialogue — highlight his professional dedication and personal complexity. Characters such as Rachel, Cat, and others are similarly constructed through what they say and how they say it, rather than through authorial commentary on their inner thoughts. This dialogue-driven characterisation positions the reader as an active interpreter of identity within the story's social world.

3. Comparative Narrative Techniques

While the genres differ — A Kind Man is parable-like literary fiction, and A Question of Identity is crime fiction — both novels rely on externalised characterisation. This similarity suggests a coherent stylistic strategy in Hill's prose: characters are primarily known through actions and spoken exchanges, inviting readers to interpret identity through narrative dynamics rather than psychological exposition.

This aligns with established critical perspectives of Hill's method, which emphasise the disclosed lives of her characters through their narrative presence rather than through deep interiority (Hofer 1993; Jackson 1982).

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that in Susan Hill's A Kind Man and A Question of Identity, action and dialogue form the core mechanisms of character construction. Rather than relying on psychological introspection, Hill's characters are revealed through observable behaviour and verbal interaction, consistent with a narrative strategy that privileges social engagement over internal exposition. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Hill's craft and supports broader literary arguments about the role of narrative technique in character creation.

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