



The Characterizations and Moral development of the Main character in *The Nightingale* Novel

Komang Trie Nanda Pertiwi ^{1*}, I Nyoman Aryawibawa ², Galuh Febri Putra ³
¹⁻³ Universitas Udayana, Indonesia

Alamat: Jalan Nias No.13 Sanglah, Denpasar 80114 Bali

Korespondensi penulis: trienandap@gmail.com *

Abstract. *This study explores the character development of Vianne Mauriac in Kristin Hannah's historical novel The Nightingale, with a particular focus on how her moral progression is revealed through characterization. It aims to examine how direct and indirect characterization contribute to the portrayal of Vianne's evolving moral reasoning under the pressure of wartime experiences. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, the analysis uses Rimmon-Kenan's theory to identify characterization techniques and Kohlberg's stages of moral development to interpret Vianne's ethical transformation. The findings indicate that Vianne shifts from self-preserving and fear-driven decisions to socially conscious choices and ultimately to morally autonomous actions grounded in universal principles. Her characterization, through action, speech, appearance, and environment, functions not only to construct Vianne's identity but also to trace her moral journey. Her development demonstrates how literature, particularly historical fiction, can reflect and explore complex ethical growth. The study contributes to understanding how characterization and moral development work together in shaping a compelling and morally resonant protagonist.*

Keywords: *character development, characterization, historical fiction, moral development*

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature serves as a powerful medium to reflect human experiences, exploring into themes like morality, courage, and personal growth. As Abrams and Harpham (2011) state, literature involves imaginative writing that evokes deep responses and engages with universal ideas. Among its forms, the novel stands out for its narrative depth and capacity to portray human life with complexity (Eagleton, 2005). Through elements like plot, setting, and especially character, novels offer readers a connection to fictional individuals navigating real moral challenges (Klarer, 2004).

Characters are essential to this process. They are shaped through specific emotional, intellectual, and moral traits, often revealed via action and dialogue. Characterization allows readers to trace development and transformation, especially as characters respond to internal conflicts or external pressures (Griffith, 2011). Through this, literature often explores how personal growth and moral decision-making are intertwined, particularly in times of adversity.

Historical fiction, in particular, explores how individuals respond to ethical dilemmas within the context of real events (Reynolds, 2007). It blends fact and imagination to portray the moral complexity of past eras (Lillian et al., 2022). Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale*, set in Nazi-occupied France, is one such novel. It follows two sisters navigating resistance, fear,

and survival under the looming threat of war. While existing studies of *The Nightingale* have primarily explored themes of heroism, sisterhood, or women in wartime, few have examined how Vianne's character is shaped specifically through moral development. In which, how her ethical reasoning evolves across the novel in response to extreme circumstances.

This article fills that gap by focusing on Vianne Mauriac's moral character development as a distinct narrative arc. Initially passive and fearful, Vianne grows into a morally courageous figure who makes increasingly bold choices to protect others. Her evolution is not only a response to external events but also a reflection of deep ethical growth. Using Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's theory of characterization and Lawrence Kohlberg's stages of moral development, this study examines how Vianne's moral reasoning progresses throughout the novel. Rather than focusing on plot or historical setting, the analysis centres on her internal transformation, creating a unique perspective on how character and moral development intertwine in literature. This approach contributes to ongoing literary discussions by showing how fiction represents ethical resilience and personal growth under moral pressure, an issue still relevant in today's world.

2. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

To trace a character's development, it is crucial to understand how the author constructs and reveals that character. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's (2002) theory of characterization offers a clear framework for analysing both direct and indirect methods that shape a character's identity across the narrative.

Characterization

Characterization refers to the techniques authors use to build characters, which can These methods reveal a character's complexity and transformation, making them essential for examining moral and character development (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

1. Direct Characterization

Direct characterization involves the narrator explicitly describing a character's qualities. This straightforward presentation comes from the narrative's most authoritative voice and helps define the character's attributes clearly (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

2. Indirect Characterization

Indirect characterization shows a character's traits through actions, speech, external appearance, and environment.

a) Action

Actions can be either one-time, marking a significant shift, or habitual, indicating stable traits. Rimmon-Kenan (2002) explains three key action types:

- a. Act of commission (what the character does),
- b. Act of omission (what they fail to do), and
- c. Contemplated act (what they consider doing).

These acts reveal motivations, moral tension, and internal growth, forming a core part of character development.

b) Speech

Speech reflects personality and values through both what is said and how it is expressed. Dialogue reveals the character's inner world and helps connect their voice to their development (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

c) External Appearance

Physical descriptions such as clothing, posture, facial features, can imply traits or internal states. These visual cues either speak for themselves or are interpreted through narration (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

d) Environment

A character's surroundings such as, home, social class, family, mirror aspects of their identity. These spaces influence and reflect their values, choices, and development across the story as a character (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002).

Moral Development Stages

Moral development refers to the process through which individuals form and refine their sense of right and wrong, influenced by personal experiences, social interaction, and internal reflection. Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) outlines this development across three levels, each consisting of two stages, which reflect increasingly complex moral reasoning. This framework is particularly relevant for analysing character development in literature, as it captures how individuals respond to moral dilemmas and how their ethical reasoning evolves over time.

1. Preconventional Morality

At the preconventional level, moral judgment is based on external consequences. In Stage 1 (Obedience and Punishment), right and wrong are determined by fear of punishment and obedience to authority. In Stage 2 (Self Interest), morality becomes more self-serving, with actions judged by personal benefit rather than principle.

2. Conventional Morality

The conventional level marks a shift toward social expectations. Stage 3 (Good boy Attitude) emphasizes pleasing others and gaining approval, while Stage 4 (Law and Order) centres on fulfilling duties, following laws, and maintaining social order.

3. Postconventional Morality

Finally, the postconventional level involves autonomous moral reasoning guided by abstract principles. In Stage 5 (Social Contract), morality is based on democratic values and individual rights. Stage 6 (Universal Principles) reflects the highest level, where individuals are guided by self-chosen, universal principles such as justice, equality, and human dignity, even when these conflict with laws or societal norms.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study applies a descriptive qualitative method to examine the moral character development of Vianne Mauriac in *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah. The analysis draws on Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's theory of characterization to explore how Vianne's traits are portrayed through both direct and indirect means, such as her speech, actions, and interactions. Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development is then used as the interpretive lens to understand the progression of Vianne's moral reasoning throughout the narrative. This integrated method allows for a comprehensive analysis of how characterization serves as a vehicle for moral development, revealing the close connection between narrative technique and ethical transformation in historical fiction.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter presents the findings of the study and discusses how Vianne Mauriac's character develops throughout *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah. The analysis is divided into two key aspects: characterization and moral development. The first part explores how Vianne's traits are revealed through both direct and indirect methods based on Rimmon-Kenan's theory, while the second part traces the stages of her moral progression using Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Together, these analyses illustrate how Vianne's personal growth is both shaped by and reflective of the novel's larger themes of war, resistance, and ethical transformation.

Characterization

In this section, the analysis focuses on how Vianne Mauriac's character is constructed and developed through direct and indirect characterization. Drawing on Rimmon-Kenan's

framework, this section examines the ways in which Vianne's traits are revealed through narration, speech, actions, physical appearance, and her surrounding environment, providing a deeper understanding of her gradual transformation throughout the novel.

1. Direct Characterization

Data 1:

“Isabelle was not like her sister, Vianne, who was given to fear and anxiety.”

This line provides an explicit description of Vianne's traits through the narrative's authoritative voice, aligning with Rimmon-Kenan's (2002) concept of direct characterization, where a character's qualities are presented overtly rather than implied.

The phrase “given to fear and anxiety” immediately defines Vianne's early disposition as cautious and emotionally fragile. It positions her in contrast to Isabelle, whose characterization is built around boldness and defiance. Vianne's portrayal as fearful not only highlights her internal state but also reflects her general approach to life: careful, reserved, and reluctant to engage in risk. This direct description sets a foundational image of Vianne as someone who avoids confrontation and seeks stability, which shapes readers' expectations about her role in the narrative.

By clearly presenting these traits at the outset, the novel establishes a character who is initially passive and emotionally restrained. This helps frame the gradual transformation that Vianne undergoes throughout the story, making her early characterization essential to understanding the arc of her development.

2. Indirect Characterization

i. Action

Data 2:

“Vianne stared down at the blank paper on the table; then at the postcards in her hand. If Antoine received one, he might write back. She might know at last if he was alive.”

Although Vianne hesitates, the scene suggests that she eventually writes the postcard. Rimmon-Kenan (2002) categorizes such moments as acts of commission, where a character performs a specific action that reveals their emotional state or internal development.

This particular action, which is writing a letter to a missing husband during wartime, shows Vianne's quiet resilience and longing. Her initial hesitation indicates vulnerability and emotional weight, while her eventual decision to reach out displays a fragile but growing sense of courage. Though minor on the surface, this one-time action subtly marks a step forward in her emotional engagement with the uncertainty of her reality. The passage deepens the reader's

understanding of Vianne as someone who balances fear with hope, reserved, yet capable of decisive action when it matters emotionally. This moment, small as it is, adds complexity to her characterization by revealing how she navigates grief and fear through personal effort.

Data 3

“Whatever else she was or wasn’t, whatever her failings, she intended to be a good woman.”

Although this sentence doesn’t describe a physical act, it represents what Rimmon-Kenan (2002) defines as a contemplated act, a character’s intention or decision before it is realized. Vianne’s resolve to “be a good woman” marks a pivotal inner shift that precedes later actions in the novel.

This moment reveals Vianne’s growing self-awareness. Acknowledging her past limitations and emotional restraint, she sets a conscious goal to act in a way that aligns with her own evolving moral standard. The use of “intended” reflects a clear internal decision, highlighting a turning point in her character.

By showing her thought process rather than immediate behaviour, the narrative allows readers to witness Vianne’s quiet but determined step toward change. This intention hints at the emotional and moral strength she will gradually exhibit as the story unfolds. As a contemplated act, this line deepens her characterization by capturing the moment where her internal will begins to solidify into meaningful direction.

ii. Speech

Data 4

“he could shoot us. Shoot us, and no one would care. You will not provoke this soldier in my home.”

According to Rimmon-Kenan (2002), speech is a powerful tool in characterization, as it conveys both the content and emotional tone of a character’s inner world. In this moment, Vianne’s words express fear, urgency, and a fierce need to maintain control in a threatening situation.

The repetition of “shoot us” emphasizes her awareness of danger and reflects how war has altered her sense of safety. The second part of the quote, “You will not provoke this soldier in my home”, reveals her protective instinct. Though spoken in fear, her tone is firm and commanding, suggesting that beneath her anxiety lies a growing sense of responsibility and quiet authority.

Through this brief but intense speech, the reader sees a version of Vianne who is no longer passive. She may be afraid, but her need to shield her family takes precedence. The language she uses stern, urgent, and emotionally charged, this helps illustrate a shift from

helplessness to guarded resolve. This quote thus offers insight into Vianne's evolving character: someone who, under pressure, begins to assert boundaries and take charge in moments of danger.

Data 5

“We have to trust our government.” “Are you joking, Vianne? The government in Vichy is collaborating with Hitler. How can you not understand this danger? Pétain is wrong. Does one follow a leader blindly?”

According to Rimmon-Kenan (2002), a character's speech reveals their personality, values, and perspective, both through content and tone. Here, Vianne's words reflect a strong reliance on authority and structure. Her belief in the government's guidance, despite growing external threats, portrays her as cautious, rule-abiding, and perhaps somewhat idealistic or in denial.

This statement reveals her need for stability in uncertain times. Rather than questioning power, Vianne clings to the familiar framework of institutional order. Her choice of words, “we have to” also suggests a moral imperative rooted in obedience, rather than critical evaluation.

In contrast with Isabelle's impassioned and rebellious response, Vianne's speech marks her as someone who initially aligns with societal norms and places her faith in established systems. This moment helps shape her characterization as a woman who, at this stage in the novel, prefers security over resistance and avoids confronting harsh truths too quickly.

Data 6

“You should not go,” he said. “I can't let her go alone.”

This line is spoken when Vianne decides to accompany Rachel, her Jewish best friend, to the Free Zone after they are warned about the increasing threat of mass deportation. Though advised not to go, Vianne insists on standing by Rachel, fully aware of the risks involved. As Rimmon-Kenan (2002) emphasizes, speech reflects not only what a character says but also the motivations and values embedded in their language. Here, Vianne's words reflect a growing sense of duty and solidarity that is particularly toward her Jewish friend, Rachel.

The simplicity of the sentence contrasts with the severity of the situation. It suggests a quiet but firm resolve to stand by someone at risk, despite the potential consequences. This moment also reveals the emergence of a more active and compassionate side of Vianne, showing that her fear is increasingly overridden by personal loyalty and moral instinct. Her speech here is not emotional or dramatic, but it is restrained but decisive. This calmness under

pressure signals a developing strength, moving her character away from passivity and toward quiet bravery. Through this single line, readers witness a key turn in her portrayal: from self-preserving to self-sacrificing.

Data 7

“I will get them,” Vianne said, although she had no idea if it was possible. “You know that it is illegal to hide Jews now. The punishment is deportation if you’re lucky, and lately, I believe no one is lucky in France.” Vianne nodded.

This line is spoken during a conversation between Vianne and the Mother Superior, where they decide to shelter Jewish children in the local orphanage—a dangerous act under Nazi rule. According to Rimmon-Kenan (2002), speech not only conveys a character’s thoughts but also reflects their shifting values and internal strength. Vianne’s declaration, though quietly spoken and followed by a subtle gesture, is deeply revealing of her character at this stage in the story.

What makes this line particularly powerful is the contrast between the certainty in her words, “I will get them”, and the narrative note that she “had no idea if it was possible.” This contrast highlights Vianne’s development from caution to courage. Despite the fear, uncertainty, and life-threatening consequences (“the punishment is deportation if you’re lucky”), she commits to a morally urgent decision.

Her speech is calm and restrained, but resolute. There is no dramatization, only quiet bravery, underscored by her silent nod in response to the Mother Superior’s warning. Through this exchange, Vianne’s character emerges as someone who no longer allows fear to guide her. She is willing to act, even without a plan, because doing the right thing has become more important than survival. This moment reflects how Vianne’s speech serves not just to communicate but to solidify her transformation into someone willing to resist oppression in her own way.

iii. External Appearance

Data 7

“Now she was wearing almost every piece of clothing she owned—flannel pants, underwear she’d knitted herself, an old woolen sweater, a neck scarf, and still she shivered when she left the bed. When her feet hit the floor, she winced at the pain from her chilblains. She grabbed a wool skirt and put it on over her pants. She’d lost so much weight this winter that she had to pin the waist in place.”

According to Rimmon-Kenan (2002), a character's physical description and clothing can reveal aspects of their personality, condition, and emotional state. In this scene, Vianne's layered and mismatched clothing, combined with visible signs of physical hardship like weight loss and chilblains, reflects not only the external difficulties of wartime France but also her internal perseverance.

Rather than relying on dialogue or action, this visual portrayal of Vianne's appearance paints a stark picture of someone who is enduring severe hardship with quiet resilience. Her handmade underwear and improvised layers suggest both resourcefulness and deprivation. The need to pin her skirt hints at long-term suffering, yet she continues her daily routine, a sign of silent endurance.

This physical description, though subtle, deepens the reader's understanding of Vianne's character. It shows how far she has come from her earlier image of domestic comfort and order. Her transformation is not only emotional and moral, but also visible in the toll the war has taken on her body and lifestyle—underscoring her strength in surviving conditions that strip away normalcy and dignity.

iv. Environment

Data 8

“Tapestries had once hung from these walls, leftover treasure from the time of kings, when the Loire Valley had been the royal hunting ground, but all that was gone now. Instead there were swastikas and propagandist posters on the walls—Trust in the Reich!—and a huge painting of Hitler”

According to Rimmon-Kenan (2002), environment, both physical and social, plays a key role in shaping and reflecting a character's condition, values, and development. In this passage, the transformation of Vianne's home from a place of history, warmth, and culture into a space overtaken by fascist symbols underscores the drastic shift in her world, which is by extension, in her own psychological landscape.

The contrast between the past and present décor, “tapestries” versus “swastikas” mirrors the loss of personal autonomy and the intrusion of fear into Vianne's daily life. Her once-proud and peaceful home has become a site of surveillance and occupation, stripped of its identity and filled with visual reminders of oppression.

While the description does not mention Vianne directly, the setting reflects her inner turmoil and the helplessness she faces. Her continued presence in such a space, forced to live under these symbols, communicates the quiet endurance and psychological burden she carries.

The environment becomes a subtle but powerful extension of her characterization: someone navigating the tension between memory, loss, and reluctant adaptation in an occupied home.

Moral Development Stages

1. Preconventional Morality

At the preconventional level, moral reasoning is primarily guided by external consequences, either the fear of punishment or the pursuit of personal benefit. In the early part of the novel, Vianne exhibits behavior aligned with both Stage 1 and Stage 2 of Kohlberg's theory.

In Stage 1, Vianne's moral reasoning is shaped by the desire to avoid danger and punishment. In **Data 4**, Vianne firmly instructs Isabelle not to provoke a Nazi soldier inside their home, emphasizing the potential for violent retaliation. Her reasoning in this moment is grounded in the fear of punishment and fatal consequences—not in any larger ethical stance. This response reflects Stage 1 of Kohlberg's framework, where right and wrong are defined by the immediate risk of harm. Vianne's reaction, shaped by the need to protect herself and her family from violence, illustrates how her morality at this point is driven by external threats rather than internal principles.

In Stage 2, Vianne's decision to write to her missing husband is not immediately emotional or idealistic, but it is rooted in a quiet hope for personal reassurance. **Data 2** captures Vianne's hesitant deliberation over whether to send a postcard to her missing husband. Her contemplation reveals a self-focused reasoning pattern: she wants to reach out not purely from emotional impulse but because she hopes for a reassuring response, a confirmation of his survival. This motivation fits Stage 2, where moral decisions are made based on personal gain or emotional reward. While the act is rooted in vulnerability, it remains within the bounds of self-interest and emotional relief rather than altruistic concern.

2. Conventional Morality

At the conventional level, moral reasoning is shaped by social expectations, a desire to maintain relationships, and a commitment to preserving societal order. In the middle part of the novel, Vianne begins to display behavior consistent with Stage 3 and Stage 4 of Kohlberg's theory, reflecting her transition from self-focused reasoning to a concern for how she is perceived and how her actions align with broader rules and norms.

In Stage 3, Vianne's decision-making is influenced by a growing desire to be seen as morally upright by others. In **Data 3**, Vianne reflects on her personal shortcomings but expresses a firm intention to "be a good woman." This statement reveals an internalized ideal shaped by societal values and the expectations of those around her. Her focus is no longer

purely on outcomes or personal need, but on fulfilling the role of a morally acceptable figure within her social context. This aligns with Stage 3, where moral decisions are influenced by the desire to be perceived as good, especially by close relations. Her moral compass is increasingly shaped by how others see her and by her wish to meet communal standards of decency and care.

Data 5 further illustrates her moral stance at Stage 4, as she defends the authority of the Vichy government despite growing evidence of its collaboration with Nazi Germany. Her declaration that people must trust the government shows her reliance on established systems and societal order. At this stage, right and wrong are measured by adherence to law and authority, not by evaluating those systems critically. Vianne's belief in structured leadership, despite its flaws, reflects her attempt to maintain stability and social cohesion in a world unraveling around her.

3. Postconventional Morality

Vianne's final stage of moral growth occurs when her actions begin to reflect ethical reasoning that transcends societal norms and personal consequence. At this Postconventional Level, which includes Stage 5 and Stage 6, Vianne makes decisions rooted in justice, empathy, and self-governed principles, even when such choices defy authority and endanger her life.

In **Data 6**, Vianne insists on accompanying her friend Rachel despite warnings not to go. Her justification, simply that she cannot let Rachel go alone, signals a shift from obligation to deeply held personal values. While the law or logic may advise her to stay behind, Vianne chooses solidarity over safety. This reflects Stage 5, where the moral compass begins to prioritize universal rights and human dignity above rigid adherence to rules. Her action reflects a conscious choice to uphold a sense of justice, even when it conflicts with institutional directives.

By **Data 7**, her development reaches Stage 6, as she volunteers to help rescue Jewish children knowing it is illegal and life-threatening. Her agreement is not based on compliance, approval, or reward, it stems from an internalized belief in doing what is right, regardless of consequence. Despite the warning of deportation and the near certainty of danger, Vianne responds with calm acceptance. Her nod signifies silent conviction. This marks her moral reasoning as fully self-authored, based on universal principles such as the sanctity of life and the duty to protect the innocent.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Vianne Mauriac's character in *The Nightingale* undergoes a significant transformation that reflects a clear trajectory of moral development, revealed through both direct and indirect characterization. By applying Rimmon-Kenan's theory of characterization and Kohlberg's stages of moral development, the analysis demonstrates how Vianne evolves from a passive, fear-driven woman to someone capable of making principled and morally courageous decisions under extreme conditions. Her character development not only supports the novel's themes of resistance and resilience but also emphasizes how moral reasoning can shift as individuals confront ethical dilemmas during times of crisis. While this study focuses solely on one character, the findings highlight the narrative potential of historical fiction to explore moral complexity through character growth. However, the scope is limited to textual analysis without broader empirical support, and generalizations should be made cautiously. Future studies may benefit from comparing multiple characters within the same work or examining similar moral trajectories across different novels or genres. Additionally, incorporating reader-response perspectives or interdisciplinary approaches could enrich the understanding of how moral development in fiction resonates with real-world values and behavior.

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