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Essay #2: Character Analysis for The Portable Phonograph

Walter Van Tilburg Clark's short story, *The Portable Phonograph*, is a tale about the last survivors in the world after the total destruction of a war. The author gives clues and hints of this throughout the beginning by writing in a narrative voice and describing the scene in dark war-like terms. The characters are then introduced as a group of men huddled around a fire. The older of the men, Doctor Jenkins, is the leader and his character is full of personality that can be analyzed by the reader. He is the owner of the shelter that they meet in. This paper will point out the different aspects of the old man in this story and state conclusions that can be drawn from them.

The men in this story are obviously amused by the slightest little things. They occupy themselves through book readings from a collection that one man has. Each of the men has their contribution to the group and together they endure a time of devastation by entertaining each other. The older man has a record player that he brings out once a week for the listening pleasure of the group. He is very proud of this treasure. It has sustained through these hard times just as he has and he limits his use of it to make it last. He owns only three steel needles and he gets one out to use because on this particular occasion, there is a musician visitor with them. The other men act as excited as children. They listen to the record and then leave the doctor's house.

Doctor Jenkins is nervous and suspicious at the end of the story when the other men leave. "With nervous hands he lowered the piece of canvas which served as his door, and pegged it at the bottom. Then quickly quietly, looking at the piece of canvas frequently, he slipped the records in the case..." (Clark, page 241). He feels that "everything he has" is at risk with the greed that a time like this could produce in the other men. He is secure and comfortable with the things that he has and he doesn't trust the others. He then hides his treasures away in a safe place after they leave. As he gets into his bed he feels the "comfortable piece of lead pipe" with his hand. The doctor has no problem resorting to violence and that actually makes him feel more comfortable.

The greed that the doctor sees in the others is a reflection of the feelings and thoughts that he himself has. His views are distorted through his thick shell and he sees himself in the men. He invites them back every week, it seems, so it is quite possible that his possessions do not make him as happy as the company he receives every week.

The contrast between the happiness that the men get from his musical device and the lack of fulfillment this provides for him is interesting. In the world that this story describes, the reader expects the doctor to be happy with all that he has. As the story unfolds, you gain an understanding of the feelings behind his possessions.

Doctor Jenkins is a normal character. His feelings are presented in a real manner. The reader can conclude that his personality is not unlike anyone else. What he sees is influenced by the way he is and how he feels. He views things in a way that ultimately makes his feelings of suspicion and greed stronger. Therefore never breaking the cycle of how he judges those around him.

