

The following is the opening from Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads* monologue entitled 'Soldiering On', written for television. What can you tell about the character from this opening paragraph?

This is a particular time – something has happened.

Food is mentioned straight away – a routine. 'Tea' is old-fashioned?

Idea of 'doing the right thing' and 'keeping up appearances'.

Not young?

Language suggests something difficult had to be done.

Upper-middle class?

Wants to appear strong. Her initial plan is rejected because it is too easy.

For reference again. This is a lot more than sandwiches; this woman is making wishes that require a lot of effort.

It's a funny time, three o'clock, too late for lunch but a bit early for tea. Besides, there were one or two brave souls who'd trekked all the way from Wolverhampton; I couldn't risk giving them tea or we'd have had a mutiny on our hands. And I think people like to be offered something even if they don't actually eat it. One's first instinct was to make a beeline for the freezer and rout out the inevitable quiche, but I thought, '... old girl, that's the coward's way out,' so the upshot was I stopped up till two in the morning trundling out a selection of my old standards ... chicken in a lemon sauce, beef en croûte from the old Colchester days (I thought of Jessie Marwood), and bushels of assorted salads.

- As well as all the suggestions above, think about what you can tell about the character from the language she uses. Who says such words and phrases as, 'brave souls'; 'trekked'; 'a mutiny on our hands'; 'make a beeline'; 'rout out'; 'trundling'; 'my old standards'?
- What sort of person do you think this is?
- What has happened to her?
- What is the event she is referring to?

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Now look at the ending to this same monologue and see if you can draw some conclusions about the character in a similar way to those suggested above. Do you notice any similarities in the ending? Are there any differences? What do you think might have happened between the beginning and end of the monologue?

I sometimes wonder if I killed Ralph. All those death-dealing breakfasts. We haven't had much weather to speak of. Eat less now. A buttered scone goes a long way.

*She picks up a Walkman and headphones.*

This is my new toy. Seen children with them, never appreciated what they were. Asked a young man for a list in the precinct. Revelation. Saved up and bought one. Set the cassettes out of the library. Worth its weight in gold. Marvellous.

*She puts it on and henceforth speaks in bursts and too loudly.*

I wouldn't want you to think this is a tragic story.

*Pause.*

I'm not a tragic woman.

*Pause.*

I'm not that type.

*Fade out to the faint sound of music, possibly Johann Strauss.*

Extracts from 'Soldiering On' in *The Complete Talking Heads* by Alan Bennett. © Alan Bennett, 1988.