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The Conception of Literary Character in Formalism and Structuralism
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Abstract

The mimetic quality of language, that is, language is capable of representing the external reality of the world was the dominant philosophy prevalent until the second decade of the twentieth century. Since the time of Plato and Aristotle, theory of art was expounded as mimesis (imitation of life). The rise of the novel in the early eighteenth century was still based on the mimetic theory, with its picaresque characters bearing close semblance with people in real life. Victorian theorists of fiction regarded novel as serious narrative and insisted upon the aesthetics of verisimilitude. They distinguished between romance (light entertainment) and novel (true to life). They expected plot to be coherent and characters to be equally consistent and psychologically rich. With the advent of New Criticism, the mimetic considerations or fidelity to life in the realm of art were disregarded. A remarkable transition occurred when the Russian formalists and the structuralist linguists challenged the mimetic tradition of literary language, founding their argument on a revolutionized philosophical thought pattern—that language was not mimetic but a system of signs. This revolutionary conception of language changed not only our idea of literature, but also had serious implications for the novel and the character. Characters in many modern writers such as Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Anthony Trollope, Nathalie Sarraute, and RobbeGrillet cannot be treated according to nineteenth-century models. They demand a new theoretical formulation for their intelligibility. A discussion of formalist and structuralist approach to character will reveal a radical formulation of character in these theories. Thus, the present paper focuses on some of the important debates on literary character within formalism and structuralism.

Keywords: mimesis, verisimilitude, Russian formalists, structuralist linguists, New Criticism, system of signs.

The traditional model of nineteenth-century novels with their individuated characters fails before the complex protagonists of modern fiction or the picaresque heroes of eighteenth century novels. Interestingly, Jonathan Culler observes, "the effect of these modern texts with their relatively anonymous heroes depends on the traditional expectations concerning character which the novel exposes and undermines" (231). In most of these texts, characters begin with solid presence, but as the novel progresses, they begin to dissolve: individuality is

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rejected. This is the historical distinction structuralism makes in order to change the notion of rich and life-like characters. Structuralism challenges the reliance on the traditional notions of "truthfulness and empirical distinctiveness," which the novel is supposed to possess. It calls for the recognition of "artifice in the construction of characters" (Culler 232). It is worth noting the statement that Culler quotes from Martin Price's essay, "The Other Self": "The character we admire as the result of loving attention is something constructed by conventions as arbitrary as any other, and we can only hope to recover an art by recognizing it as art" (Culler 232). In this respect, structuralism intends to go beyond the notion of verisimilitude, and concentrate on the production of characters.

Structuralists have followed the lead taken by Vladimir Propp's theory of the roles of functions that characters assume in fiction and have tried to develop and refine it. Propp aims at developing a 'poetics' of Russian folklore in particular, and fiction in general. The basis for his study is the belief that all folktales are structurally identical when they are approached from the point of view of their composition rather than their characters. Propp's concern is with the norms by which narrative structures work, and within these structures, he is not interested in characters and their identities bur in their actions. He defines these as 'functions' and defines them from the standpoint of their significance for the course of the action. The tales can be analysed according to various functions of their characters. Propp lists thirty-one functions that appear in the structure of the folktale and emphasizes that they are constant, regardless of how and by whom they are fulfilled. Similarly, structuralists define character as a participant with an intention to disdain from defining character in terms of psychological essence (as a being). Culler refers to this as moving too readily from one extreme to another, because the roles that structuralism proposes are reductive and are directly dependent on plot. In his opinion, there remains "an immense residue," the organization of which should be analysed by the structuralists rather than to be ignored.

Proppdistributes the thirty-one functions among seven 'spheres of action' corresponding to their 'respective performers' in the folktale: the villain, the helper, the donor, the sought-for-person and her father, the dispatcher, the hero and the false hero. A single character may be involved in more than one sphere and several characters may be involved in the same sphere of action. Propp does not claim that these roles are universal, but A.J. Greimas undertakes to provide a set of universal roles (actants). Greimas produces actantial model (based on sentence structure), which forms the basis of any semantic 'spectacle; (sentence or story). Signification, in Greimas's view, occurs only when it is grasped as a actantial structure. He reduces seven 'spheres of action' of Propp into three 'actantial categories,' that is, three sets of binary oppositions, into which all the actants can be fitted in, and which will generate all the actors of the story: 1) Subject versus Object (sujetversus objet); 2) Sender versus Receiver (destinateurversus destinataire); and 3) Helper and Opponent (adjuvant versus opposant). Greimas's model consists of these categories at

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representing some sort of 'phonemic' level of analysis, thus, proposing the required 'syntactic' level of analysis—that is, an account of the ways in which these elements may be joined together to form narratives. Greimas's 'grammar'of the narrative is complete when both the levels are achieved. Culler represents the syntactic and thematic relation of the above actants in the following manner:

Destinateur   objet   destinataire
Adjuvant   sujetopposant
He shows Propp's roles in the same form to obtain the following diagram:
Dispatcher   Sought-for-person   Hero
Donor and   Hero   Villain and
Helper   False Hero

(Culler 233)

The actantial model focusses on the object which is desired and pursued by the subject and is placed between the sender and the receiver. Helper and Opponent are treated as projections of the subject himself.

Culler raises some objections to Greimas's model and points out certain shortcomings, which are worth noting. In his view, although all narratives involve a character seeking something and encountering internal or external help and opposition, the relationship between a sender a receiver cannot be justified to be of the same nature. Also, he notes that none of Propp's seven roles corresponds to that of the receiver; Greimas forces himself to argue that the peculiar feature of the folktale is that hero is both subject and receiver. This contradicts the claim that the dispatcher is the sender, because he generally does not give the hero anything; it is, in fact, the role of the helper or of the sought-for-person's father who in some cases may grant the hero the object of his quest. Thus Culler opines, "Anyone using the model to study a variety of stories will need to exercise considerable ingenuity in discovering appropriate senders and receivers" (234). Greimas makes another claim that his model will enable one to establish a typology of stories by grouping together those stories in which the same two roles are fused in a single character. He gives examples of subject and receiver fused together in folktales. Culler, however, notes that this claim will not take us very far; fusion of subject and receiver will be true most of the tales and novels, thus prompting us to class them together and distinguish them from any story where the hero is not the receiver. The final objection that Culler raises against Greimas is that his model does not show much evidence as to how it would work in practice. He formulates a principle to identify where exactly the problem lies in applying this model. When uncertainty about actants of each role in a particular novel represents a thematic problem or decision, then the model correctly locates it and thus becomes an appropriate tool; on the other hand, if theme is relatively clear

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but difficult to state in terms of the model, then these difficulties count against the model. Culler illustrates this with an example from Madam Bovary: Subject—Emma, Object—Happiness, Sender—Romantic literature, Receiver—Emma, Helper—Leon, Rodolphe, Opponent—Charles, Yonville, Rodolphe. The difficulty in deciding whether Rodolphe (and even Leon) is only a helper or an opponent is not related to thematic problem in the novel. In simple terms, it can be stated that Emma tries to find happiness with each of them and fails, but this is difficult to state in terms of Greimas's model. In conclusion, we can agree with Culler's observation: "In reading a novel we do, presumably, make use of some general hypotheses concerning possible roles. . . . But if the claim is that we attempt subconsciously to fill these six roles, apportioning characters among them, one can only regret that no evidence has been adduced to show that this is the case" (235).

Like Greimas, TzvetanTodorov is concerned with a universal 'grammar' of narrative. Character figures as one of the units (treated as "parts of speech"), which makes up propositions and sequences, which in turn are the two fundamental units of structure. Characters are seen as nouns, their attributes as adjectives and their actions as verbs. In Grammaire du Décaméron (1969) each character is defined by its combination with either an attribute or a verb. Terence Hawkes points out that all attributes are reduced to three 'ajectival'categories; states, interior properties and exterior conditions. All actions are reducible to three 'verbs'; 'to modify a situation'; 'to transgress'; and to 'punish' (97). Thus there will be a variety of defining a character as it combines with these subcategories. Todorov argues, "the grammatical subject is always without internal properties; these can come only from its momentary conjunction with a predicate" (qtd. in Culler 235). In other words, characters are subjects of group of predicates that the reader adds up during the process of reading. Both the models of Greimas and Todorov prompt Culler to raise an important question: "Do we, in reading, simply add together the actions and attributes of an individual character, drawing from them a conception of personality and role, or are we guided in this process by formal expectations about the roles that need to be filled?" (235). True to his structuralist orientation, Culler prefers the later possibility in his question, and selects Northrop Frye's categories in Anatomy of Criticism (1957) as the most suitable ones.

Frye's categories—Comedy, Romance, Tragedy, Irony and Satire are worked out with respect to the four generic mythoi of spring, summer, autumn and winter. Frye argues that lifelike characters in literature "owe their consistency to the appropriateness of the stock type which belongs to their dramatic function. That stock type is not the character but it is necessary to the character as a skeleton is to the actor who plays it" (Frye 172). In other words, when Frye speaks of typical characters, he is not trying to reduce life-like characters to stock types, but uses them as the means to recognize the function of various characters within a particular narrative structure. He identifies four types of comic characters: The alazon or impostor, the eironor self-deprecator, the bomolochoior the buffoons, and agroikosor the

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churlish, literary rustic. The contrast between the eironand the alazonforms the basis of comic action, and that between the buffoon and the churl polarizes the comic mood. For each of these categories Frye identifies various stock figures, of which cultural codes contain models: for the alazongroup there is the senexiratusor heavy father, the miles gloriosus or braggart, the fop or coxcomb, the pedant. The characterization of romance, according to Frye, follows its general dialectic structure (good/bad, black/white, etc), and characters tend to be either for or against the quest, which is the form of romance. Thus "every typical character in romance tends to have his moral opposite confronting him like black and white pieces in a chess game" (195). Frye identifies four poles of characterization in a similar fashion to that of comedy. The struggle between the hero and his enemy corresponds to the comic contest of eironand alazon. The nature-spirits (such as nymphs, half-wild creatures, etc) of romance find parallel to the buffoon or master of ceremonies in comedy; they function to intensify and provide a focus for the romantic mood. The last type, which can correspond to the agroikosin comedy—the refuser of festivity or rustic clown—is left for future attempts. Similarly, in tragedy the tragic hero belongs to the alazongroup, for eiron, there may be a variety of agents, from wrathful gods to hypocritical villains, or it may be an invisible force known only by its effects, the tragic contrast (in the sense of increasing or focussing the tragic mood) to the buffoon is found in the suppliant, and lastly, a tragic counterpart of the comic refuser of festivity may be the plain dealer (in the form of a faithful friend of the hero or the chorus figure) who refuses the tragic movement towards catastrophe.

Frye's claim, as Culler points out, is not that each character in a play or novel will precisely fit into one of the above categories, but rather than that these models guide the perception and creation of character, enabling us to compose the comic, romantic or tragic situations and attribute to each character an intelligible role.

Unlike Frye who provides basic role for characters, Roland Barthes provides an account of the process of constructing a character with the help of textual elements and the codes operating through the text. Character figures in his discussion of the semic code in S/Z (1970). During the activity of reading, readers combine various details and interpret them to form characters. Barthes shows how it is possible to select from each sentence or passage the elements appropriate to construct character. The cultural codes manifest in the text helps us derive the connotations from these elements that will in turn involve naming connotations. Naming is crucial to the process of reading; as Barthes says: "To say that Sarrasine is 'alternatively active and passive' is to commit the reader to finding in his character something 'which does not take,' to commit him to naming this something. Thus begins a process of naming: to read is to struggle to name; it is to make sentences of the text undergo a semantic transformation" (98-9).

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The process of naming is like sliding from one name to another as the reading continues and as new semantic features are revealed. Character is formed when one succeeds in naming a series of semes that are capable of establishing a pattern. For example, Sarrasine becomes a combination of turbulence, artistic ability, independence, violence, excess, femininity, etc. Thus the proper name given to a character becomes the sum of various series of semes. Thus the proper name given to a character becomes the sum of various series of semes. In Barthes's words: The proper name permits the character to exist outside of semantic features, whose sum nevertheless wholly constitutes him" (197).

Connotation forms an important element within Barthes's semiotics. He identifies it as an agency of ideology, because what is involved in deriving connotations out of denotations is our previous knowledge of codes and norms prevalent in the society. As Culler observes:

The process of selecting and organizing semesis governed by an ideology of character, implicit models of psychological coherence which indicate what sorts of things are possible as character traits, how these traits can coexist and form wholes, or at least which traits coexist without difficulty and which are necessary opposed in ways that produce tension and ambiguity (237).

Although these notions are often drawn from non-literary experience, Culler warns us that we should not forget the extent to which they are literary conventions. Different models of characters (in the sense of broader cultural models), as shown in Frye's categories, are literary constructs, which assist the readers in selecting semantic features to add to a proper name. The operation of semic code is dependent upon the literary stereotypes that provide its elementary modes of coherence, but the code itself remains open-ended. Barthes stresses the fact that seme is only an avenue of meaning, it is not possible to decipher what lies at the end. The models proposed by Propp, Greeimas, Todorov and Frye are reductive, since character, for them, is merely one of the constituents of the grammar of plot. They are more interested in deriving the grammar of plot rather than explaining the process through which characters produce meaning in a text. One more approach that seems to bridge the gap between the representational and textural approaches by imbibing the salient features of both structuralism and formalism. This approach, often classified under textural criticism, is semiotic approach. Although structuralism is built on the concepts of semiotics, it pays more attention to structure and tends to view character as performing certain identifiable roles. Semiotics, on the other hand, focuses on the character itself, as a linguistic sign, and studies its mode of production and ways of signification. A detailed analysis of the semiotic approach to literary character is beyond the scope of this paper, as it involves a discussion of major developments in the conception of character in post-structuralism and postmodernism.

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