



## PROTAGONIST: A PRIME MOVER OF THE PLOT OF A LITERARY WORK

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### ABSTRACT

*In the canon of literary work, Protagonists play a crucial role. On a practical level, they are identical in literature and life. They perform structural functions in the novel. In fact, the protagonist is the soul of the story. The present paper highlights the significance of the term 'protagonist' and how he works as a prime mover or the driver of the story and forces the action ahead. In a real sense, protagonist is the backbone and irresistible force of the story. He takes the initiative in performing the task which serves as the motivation to change the status quo. It would not an exaggeration if we say that without a protagonist, the story would have no directed drive. The researcher tries to explore the classification of the characters and the origin and role of the protagonists in successfully moving the narrative of the story. The researcher conveys that the protagonist is the central character who strives to achieve a specific goal with a determination that generates the significant action of the novel.*

**Key Words:** Protagonist, prime mover, plot, literary work, origin, classification of characters, role of the protagonists etc.

#### **Introduction:**

Donald Maass rightly asserts about the protagonist in his own words,

*"A protagonist is the subject of the story. He can be a hero, certainly, but not always. Protagonists are ordinary people; they may face extraordinary circumstances in the course of the story."*

(The Fire in Fiction: Passion, purpose and Techniques to make your novel Great, Protagonist and Heroes, 2009:1973) Before going to study about the protagonist in detail, first of all, it is essential for us to know their origin. Every literary concept has its origin; in the same proportion the word protagonist also has its own significance. The term protagonist is derived from the Greek word *Protagonistes* means actor who plays the first part or chief actor. It is derived from the word *protos* meaning first and *agonistes* means actor or competitor. The

protagonist is the central character of a literary, musical, cinematic or theatrical narrative. Ancient Greece drama portrayed three actors in dramatic roles with the lead role enacted by the protagonist. The second role was played by the *deuteragonist* and the other role played by the *tritagonist*. He is the first actor in ancient Greek drama, interacting with the chorus. Later on; the word started being used as a term for the first actor in order of performance. In most cases, hero, main character and the protagonist are the same characters. He is the first actor in Ancient Greek drama who played not only the main role but also other roles when the main character was offstage. He remains engaged in dialogue with the chorus. Audience feels a sense of empathy about the character's objectives and emotions toward the protagonist. It is possible for a story's protagonist to be the clear villain, or antihero of the work. When the work contains subplots, these may have different protagonists from the main plot. In some novels, the protagonists may be impossible to identify, because multiple plots in the novel do not permit clear identification of one as the main plot, for example, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, depicting fifteen major characters involved in or affected by a war.

In a modern sense; the term protagonist has wider scope. Basically, he is the principal reformer, the strong supporter, advocate and champion of a cause of action. The audience is intended to identify with the protagonist. He is the main or central figure who comes into conflict with an opposing major character like antagonist. In fiction, the story of the protagonist can be told from the biographical perspective of a different character, i.e. by the narrator who relates the fate of several protagonists. Protagonists are recognized by different names- They may be termed as *chief character, focal character, main hero, leading key player, leader, advocate or champion of a particular cause or idea*. He is identified by the name- *strong supporter, upholder, proponent, exponent, promoter, standard bearer, torch bearer, prime mover, spokesperson, apostle, booster, expounder, espouser, friend, gossamer, herald, hierophant, high priest, paladin, true believer, tub-thumper, white knight* etc. In a literary work, he is the prime mover of the plot or driver of the story the one who forces the action. He works as player as well as character. He is the chief proponent and principal driver of the effort to achieve the story's goal. The Protagonist represents the drive to try and solve a problem.

Cartron Loius comments about the protagonist,

*“The protagonist is the central character who strives to achieve a specific goal with a determination that generates the significant action of the novel. Usually the plots twists and turns affect the protagonist more than other characters. He is present at all major plot actions from point of attack to climax. His goal is the novel's central motif. The protagonists have a single goal. Finding the protagonists statement of purpose is crucial in the story.”*

(The Director's Vision: Play Direction from Analysis to Production, Waveland Press Inc., 1989, p.64).

Protagonists generally undergo some change that causes a turn of events, which makes a story interesting and helps to deliver a message. Sometimes a moral weakness is highlighted that causes the fall of the protagonist. Sometimes protagonist can be very controversial because of some evil traits. For example, Becky Sharp from William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, who can occasionally be very manipulative in order to achieve her own interests.

### **Theoretical Background of the Protagonists:**

In fiction, the structure of a story represents a comparison to a single human mind dealing with a problem. A story has a central character that acts as the focus of the audience's emotional attachment. Audience experience it in their own lives as it is. It conveys the basic ideas about the theme, plot, acts and scenes, episode, the climax, characterization etc. It addresses all the possible human perspectives on that specific issue. (Dramatica, 2001: 24). Characters are the soul of the novel. They are identical in literature and life. They perform structural functions in the novel. Each character is designed to fulfil specific needs imposed by the novels plot and thought. Novels can take us inside the character's heart and mind right away. Hotchman asserts,

*"What links characters in literature to people in life, as we fabricate them in consciousness, is the integral unity of our conception of people and of how they operate."* (Character in Literature, 1985: 36).

Characters act as the author's contentions in the form of strong disagreement. Aristotle explains *ethos*, the moral element of character, which is exclusive of the personal and inner self of the character or person. He also depicts another aspect of character- *dianoia*, the thought or the intellectual element which consists in the rational conduct through which the *ethos* finds outward expression. Aristotle observes the four things are to be aimed at in the character. He must be ethically good, appropriate, life-like and consistent. Overall Story & Subjective characters move through the story in a passionate and an intellectual sense. An overall story character represents the motivations of pursuit. He is charged with the responsibility of pursuing a solution to the story's objective problem.

### **Classification of Characters:**

The characters are classified as overall character, subjective character, impact character, main character and archetypal character. Overall story characters describe their innate tendency in which no changes can be made. Subjective characters depict their learned behaviour in the course of the story. Impact characters stands in the way of the main

character. He describes the advocate of this alternative path and the manner in which he impacts main character. Main character is not necessarily the protagonist. We see in them characteristics of worry, instinct, experience and doubt. When we stand in the shoes of a character, we get an entirely different perspective. (Dramatica, 2001: 105). Archetypal characters represent a broad similarity or comparison to a human mind which deals with various problems. They are instantly recognizable and simple in nature. They represent all the essential functions of a complete story mind, though they are grouped in simple patterns.

Archetypal characters are further classified as: Protagonist, Antagonist, Reason Character, Emotion Character, Sidekick, Skeptic, Guardian and Contagonist.

**1. A protagonist:** He is the leading character in a novel. He is an advocate or champion of a particular cause or idea. He is narratives central or primary personal figure. He is main character of the story. He can be a villainous character. (Dramatica, 2001: 218).

Michael Tabb narrates the story of protagonists,

*“The protagonist is the character through which the author takes the audience on an exploration of a theme and central question. All characters stem from the theme. The writer tells the story through protagonist’s eyes. Every other character in the story is built and designed to challenge your protagonist in specific and unique ways. The protagonist revolves around the theme of the story and rest of the characters revolves around the protagonist. The protagonist generally undergoes through two journeys-the outer and inner journey. The outer journey is in the form of a physical mission, goal or task and inner journey is in the form of personality or character flaw with which the protagonists start the story.”* (Script Notes: Major Character Types- Protagonist, 2015)

**2. The antagonist:** He opposes the protagonist by getting in the way of the protagonist’s motive or ultimate goal. He does not have to be a villainous character. He virtually personifies social dominance such as the self interested pursuit, wealth, prestige and power. He may be selfish, undisciplined, emotionally unstable and intellectually dull. (Dramatica, 2001: 29). Cartron Loius provides details about the antagonist,

*“The antagonist is the force that prevents the protagonist from reaching goal. The absence of antagonist in the novel indicates no suspense, no excitement, no opportunity to perceive the protagonists personality as he or she responds to obstacles. The antagonist must be as strong as the protagonist. It is important that battling forces will be equal in weight.”*

(The Director’s Vision: Play Direction from Analysis to Production, 1989: 64)

**A villain:** He is a wrongdoer. He may be protagonist or the antagonist. He is immoral while antagonists and protagonists alone can be morally ambiguous. He is not always the same as the antagonist, as some narratives cast the villain in the protagonist role, with the opposing hero as the antagonist.

**A hero:** He is a combination of both main character and protagonist. He is a blended character who moves the plot forward and serves as a substitute for the audience. He has heroic traits and is morally good. He may be the protagonist or the antagonist. Especially he does two jobs- he moves the plot forward and serves as a surrogate for the audience. The hero doesn't have to be noble, courageous or talented. The contrast between hero and villain is powerful only when both characters have strong similarities. Each then presents a slightly different approach to the same dilemma and it is in the similarities that crucial and instructive differences become most clear. **The anti-hero:** He is a protagonist who lacks many heroic traits, but is either morally ambiguous or morally good. He is pessimistic and can play by his own rules, but still get the job done.

**3. The reason character:** Such type of character is very calm, collected, cool, organized and logical type. He makes decisions and takes action wholly on the basis of logic. He seems to lack humanity and has apparently no ability to think from the heart. He often fails to find support for its well laid plans and ends up wasting its effort because it has unknowingly violated the personal concerns of others.

**4. The Emotion character:** This is furious, disorganized and driven by feelings. He is uncontrolled in its actions. He responds with its feelings without thinking, whether it is angry or kind, with disregard for practicality. Functionally he is quick to anger but also prompt to empathize.

**5. The Sidekick:** He is the faithful supporter and always aligned with the protagonist. He makes the story's argument successful by faithful support. He is balanced by the Skeptic.

**6. The Skeptic:** Such type of character is unfaithful supporter. It disbelieves and opposes. He note down the indicators that foreshadow failure. His motto is- "Whatever it is, I am against it." He doubts everything i.e. courses of action, sincerity, truth etc. (Dramatica, 2001: 31).

**7. The Guardian:** This character functions as a teacher or helper who helps the protagonist in its quest and offers a moral standard. He eliminates the obstacles and illumines the path ahead. He assists the protagonist in staying on the proper path to achieve success. He takes efforts to achieve the story goal.

**8. Contagonist:** This archetypal character balances the Guardian. He represents temptation in the story mind to take the wrong course or approach. He places the obstacles in the path of the protagonist and to pull it from success. He deludes, deflects and diverts the protagonist, tempting it to take the wrong course or approach.

### **Role of the Protagonist:**

Stephen Koch asserts the role of the protagonist,

*“The protagonist is the character whose fate matters most to the story. “A protagonist is a very significant tool and key gradient in developing a story. The entire story revolves around him. In the plot, the protagonist may undergo some change, which would be the climax of the story. He shoulders the grave responsibilities on his own. He works as an emotional heart of the story. He helps the audience in connecting with the story. A well constructed protagonist attracts the audience emotionally and lets them relate to the joys and fears of the character in the story.”*

The events occur in a story is always viewed from the perspective of the protagonist. Protagonist drives the plot forward. In a sense, he is the irresistible force. He represents our Initiative, the motivation to change the status quo. He charges forward and tries to convince everyone else to follow. Without a protagonist, the story would have no directed drive. He is the self-starter. Eventually, he or she ignites again and once more resumes the drive toward the goal. He represents the desire to work at resolving the problem. He does not have to be the most powerful personality. Since the drive of the protagonist is measured by the size of the obstacles he or she must overcome, it is usually a good idea to pick the character that can bring to bear the greatest obstacles. He is the character who changes over the course of the story, travelling from one point to another one, either literally or figuratively. He learns and grows as the story progresses. The true archetypal protagonist pursues the solution against the antagonist. For the pursuing protagonist, the goal is to cause something. For the avoiding protagonist, the goal is to prevent something. We seldom see, he represents the archetypal functions alone. He has the goal of stopping the antagonist. His goal is treated as the story's goal, regardless of which kind it is. He is the main character in a given work of literature, drama, or other narrative work. It is a common misconception that the protagonist is always the good guy of a given story. He may be evil character. The events of a narrative circulate around him and the reader shows their sympathy for him. Protagonists tend to undergo some important change emotionally or philosophically during the course of their struggles against antagonists. Directly or indirectly, readers become aware of the main character's emotions and are generally able to empathize with the personal challenges that he faces over the course of the narrative.

In spite of the common use of the word hero, there is no need for a protagonist to actually possess heroic or even good traits. Some protagonists are coward and weak while others are unambiguously evil. Narratives with protagonists of this sort can be interesting because they explore the emotions and motivations of characters with whom a reader might not expect to relate. In narratives with heroic main characters, it is often easy for the reader to perceive the antagonist as a flatly evil character with selfish and horrible intentions. A well-written antihero can evoke empathy from the reader. The main plot concerning the primary conflict of the entire work may have a primary protagonist. Other characters, who may simply be supporting characters in the main plot line, are often protagonists of their own subplots. Using a supporting character as a protagonist in a sub plot allows a writer to develop secondary characters whose emotions, motivations, and other complexities are important parts of the overall narrative. Human protagonists are given inferior treatment. They are always neglected. Cartin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer says about the marginality of protagonists, “*Humans are an integral and equal part of a complex set of relationships. Human protagonists are marginalized*”. (The Nature in Literary and Cultural Studies, 2006: 79)

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