



THE ART OF CHARACTERIZATION IN A NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

The present article attempts to critically evaluate the concept and significance of 'the art of characterization' in a work of fiction - particularly a novel. Every novelist has his own way to approach his characters and make them stand. Such an approach, therefore, reveals the author's ideas about human beings, and his attitude towards life. It is by virtue of his acute observation and active involvement in practical life that a novelist picks his pen and draws dots, later joining them into lines paving way to those essential props - 'the characters' - for his fictional world. His view of life is thus bound to emerge through delineation of his characters; their actions; and, of course, the comments put into their mouths. When a novelist, out of his 'prime sensibility', creates characters it obviously requires a pretty good art whereupon he appeals not merely to our curiosity but to our intelligence and imagination as well. It is thus the most sensible task for a novelist, for a character has not only to be just in its demeanour, but also capable of sustaining those requisite changes convincingly. Needless to say that it is by virtue of his prime art that a novelist produces a wonderful range of characters throbbing with unique traits so as to urge and tease its readers long after they had felt and enjoyed their presence. Such an art thus obviously warrants for due craftsmanship on part of a novelist.

KEY WORDS: characterization, art, myth, delineation, intelligence, sensibility, craftsmanship

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INTRODUCTION

A novelist is like an innocent child who arranges his toys at play in a particular manner that suits to his instincts; in the very process, however, he exhibits, though unknowingly, his emotional relation to the world. Since the novelist himself is a human being, there ought to be a good affinity between him and his subject matter which, of course, remains absent in many other forms of art. Just as a child's play expresses his personal myth, the novel expresses personal myth of a novelist; and undoubtedly the modes of such expression would be his world of fictional characters and their actions. Needless to say, drawing conclusions about the life from the characters a novelist has created out of his 'prime sensibility' could very well be a logical and legitimate exercise. It goes without saying that a novelist appeals not merely to our curiosity but to our intelligence and imagination as well whereupon a new emphasis enters his voice: emphasis upon value. This value input could rightly be judged by analyzing the characters the novelist has depicted. Creation of a character thus stays to be the most sensible task for him for it has to stand good for the kind of role - the world cut-out for him; and it must be capable to take all those risks and challenges convincingly and plausibly. The characters of a good artist, once penned-down, thus do never struggle to come up with what is expected of them.

Just like a farmer, depending upon the crop he aspires for, ploughs his field, conditions it – and makes that inevitable decision – decision of 'selecting the right kind of seeds' - sows them at right time; weeds out here and props there till that unusual and strong 'plant' capable of struggling and fighting all those climatic oddities does make its way ahead before culminating into its destined wholesome and strong chunk of plausible flavour; a novelist too, with due precision, sows the seeds in the guise of characters, and nurtures them carefully for those destined roles. These characters, however, do not come to his mind coldly. They may be created in delirious excitement; their nature may be conditioned by what the novelist guesses about other people, and about himself. In other words a novelist is an authentic maker of a working model of life as he sees and feels it. "He is making an imitation of life of man on the earth" observes Walter Allen aptly, and continues: "his conclusions about it (the life) being expressed in the characters he invents, the situation in which he places them, and in the very words he chooses for those purposes" (Allen, 14).

'Words' are indeed the real props of action and reaction that pave way to and handle those upcoming situations necessary for developing a plot. By and large, these are the pragmatic and essential arms a warrior (character) is equipped with in order to handle those uncanny situations; and keep marching consistently. Needless to say, not only these arms ought to be exact in variety, and sufficient in number; their utilization has also to be monitored and supervised meticulously – the very control obviously in the hands of their sole master – 'the



novelist' – though prima facie invisible but a robust remote controller who guides every cue and comma in order to steer them (characters) in the right direction maintaining the right pitch and tenor. EM Forster rightly observes in this connection:

“The novelist makes up a number of word masses roughly describing himself, gives them names and sex, assigns them plausible gestures, and causes them to speak by the use of inverted commas, and perhaps to behave consistently” (Forster, 44).

“These word-masses” asserts the eminent critique “are his characters” (ibid).

Needless to say that a novel is a work of art crafted beautifully wherein action propagates with those essential props – ‘the characters’; and a character in it may be called real when the novelist knows everything about it. He may, however, not choose to tell us all he knows – many a facts, even of the kind that could safely be termed as ‘obvious’, may be kept hidden – the motive peacefully resting with the master’s (novelist’s) mind. “He loads his dice sometimes not knowing what he is up to, but sometimes knowing very well”, observes aptly W Somerset Maugham and continues that “he uses such skills as he has to prevent the reader from finding him out” (Maugham, 175-76) He, however, takes due care to make us feel that though the character has not been explained, it is explicable; and enables us to witness a kind of reality we can perhaps never get in daily life. The seemingly suspension in time-line sequence, or disjoints in the factual details, or certain chinks between characters’ dialogues may often be the part and parcel of a writer’s design by virtue of which he exercises a control over his readers’ concentration. In his book *Points of View* Maugham rightly quotes Henry James in this connection:

“Henry James insisted that the writer of fiction should dramatize. That is a telling, though perhaps not very lucid, way of saying that he must so arrange his facts as to capture and hold his readers attention.” (Maugham, 176)

Furthermore it is obvious that fictional characters are rarely the reflections of living persons; they, however, do possess a good kinship with them. The writer would choose only those traits that strike him, and are duly useful to carry on his business in that fictive world. That means real people do enter the novelist’s imagination wherein they get completely fused and come out as different ones - their canvass being enriched desirably. “The great source of character-creation is, of course, the novelist’s own self” observes aptly Robert Liddell, and continues: “the novelist can place himself in other people, see with their eyes and think with their minds.” (Liddell, 105) Creating the characters and imparting them requisite traits thus remains a tedious task; and the novelist has to do away with it on priority. A single faceted character (the one round a single idea or a quality) may be convenient to create but to enter



into the varying states of his mind is definitely a challenging task that requires due rigor and control on novelist's part. In order to access those hidden corners and explore recesses of his mind as E.M. Forster points out, "the novelist takes his pen in his hand, gets into the abnormal state which it is convenient to call 'inspiration', and tries to create characters." (Forster, 50)

Such a creation, however, is not without leaving certain indelible marks of novelist's own personality. Furthermore the novelist rarely attributes all the desired traits to a single character; he would rather choose various characters to impart these attributes in varying ratio in order to carry on his business. He thus is undoubtedly the only master of the ongoing game (the developing situations) who knows well as to which one of his players (characters) has to bat and which one to ball. In other words he is prudent enough to decide as if a character has to be shy, bold, benevolent or cunning; or for that matter tall, short, robust or ludicrous. Accordingly he carefully touches on their complexion in order to impart the required shade. Well does Dr Umar Farooque observes in this connection that in the very process "he imbues them with his own ingrained colour, gives them a part of his own qualities, to one of his sensitive nature, to another his pragmatism, to somebody else his philosophy and so on." (Farooque, 87) A writer's personality is thus obvious to creep in through his characters' instincts. In other words it may be safely said that a writer can't justifiably create a 'living character' without having substantially imparted it his own personality traits, no matter even if it costs him to be biased. To quote again the eminent novelist and critique W Somerset Maugham:

"What he (the novelist) writes is the expression of his personality and the manifestation of his instincts, his emotions, his intuitions and his experience. The characters he creates and his attitudes towards them are conditioned by his bias. (Maugham, 175)

The characters so created by an artist may be 'individuals' and at the same time 'types' but they undoubtedly bear the unique stamp of the writer. And if their master is successful in fusing the universal with their selves, they become living characters appealing to all ages. Needless to say that success of a novelist lies in creating such characters; and every serious writer ought to be consistently effortful towards it. It, however, goes without saying that a writer's intelligence, his attitude towards the world, and, of course, his level of knowledge, would definitely be imposing a limit on how good or bad he is at the 'art of characterization'. Robert Liddell thus rightly says in this connection:



“He (the novelist) can make characters very much better or worse than himself. In one way his own nature definitely limits his range. He cannot make them much more witty and intelligent than he is.” (Liddell, 105)

Writers, like any other human being, do come and go but it is their art that keeps them alive. Furthermore the characters in a work of art are indispensable; their attributes render them memorable – ‘for time-being’ or ‘forever’. They become definitely immortal if they appeal to all the people of all the ages. That is a good work of art must be capable to appeal every sect of society; and if such an appeal continues to be enjoyed across the land for ages, the work, and, of course its characters, become immortal. That is why King Lear, Portia, Macbeth, Shylock, Harry Baily/ Potter, Helen or Jane Eyre do appeal us even after centuries. Not only such characters do amuse us, we do not fail to often locate many of them in our surroundings; and a few, if not all of them may well be found in our close proximity who could surely be a source of happiness, or sheer sorrows to us. The act of watching certain characters suffering, for instance, or in undue pain or retrieving from sorrows may thus legitimately stay to be a cathartic exercise eventually emerging to purge those emotions hitherto suppressed within our psyche. Their delineation thus demands due sensitivity and intelligence on the part of artist. Well does Schreiber observe in this regard:

“The power to create living characters is the novelist’s indispensable contribution. For not only do we read novels for the pleasure and emotional release of living in the lives of people other than ourselves, and not only does whatever truth the novel may contain come to us embodied in virtue of his imaginative power to create such characters, the novelist himself comes to know the truth about them.” (Schreiber, 127)

EM Forster in his book *Aspects of the Novel* divides characters in two categories: ‘flat characters’ and ‘round characters’. Flat characters, also called ‘humours’ or ‘caricatures’ are constructed round a single idea or quality. They are sometimes termed as ‘types’, and are easily recognized/remembered by the readers long after they have gone through the work. They are easy to create and are very useful to a novelist. As EM Forster says, “they never need re-introducing, never run away, have not to be watched for development, and provide their own atmosphere” (Forster, 66). For creating such characters the novelist has to never enter into their psychoanalysis for they do not change their attributes or develop into someone else. He thus has to simply cater for those “little luminous disks of a pre-arranged size, pushed hither and thither like counters across the void or between the stars” (ibid). In short a flat character is two-dimensional. There is nothing to it except the side, which the novelist shows us; and it is unchangeable. Such characters are the part and parcel of the ‘novels of character’, and are found abundantly in Dickens’ novels.



A round character, on the other hand, changes itself as the novelist wants to see its psyche developing through the plot. It is so that the situations demand his attitude and opinion changing; though convincingly. Such characters are to be carefully nurtured; and certainly there rests something on behalf of the reader to observe about them even though it may not have been shown by the novelist explicitly. Such a character is indeed “capable of surprising in a convincing way, and it is three-dimensional”, says Forster and asserts that “we can walk round it and see for ourselves all that the novelist has not told us.” (Forster, 79) It is pertinent to watch that a character that never surprises is definitely flat; and if it surprises though without convincing, it is a flat character pretending to be round. Moving ahead, a living character does stand in between the flat and the round one. Almost all the characters of W Somerset Maugham, for instance, are flat. Interestingly they are either types or caricatures drawn from life, and a few of them do very well reach the stature of living characters as well for he rarely has left any walk of life from where he hasn't picked them up. EM Forster rightly points out that “he (Maugham) turned his mind to writing novels about the kinds of English society he knew best – doctors, the clergy, the military, the lawyers and formidable women folk” (85). Writers, they say, are the unacknowledged legislatures of the world. Not all of them, however, do shout or cry - or resort to criticize for rectification. Many like Chaucer and Maugham do content themselves to observe the follies and vices prevailing in the society without actually scorning or ridiculing or moralizing; their characters thus speak about what the society is, and not what it is supposed to be. “Our faulty common use of the word ‘character’”, observes aptly WJ Harvey in his famous work *Character and the Novel*, “occurs in a phrase like – what a character he is?” (Harvey, 35) And whenever we conceive an idea of a ‘character’ we naturally nurture in our minds an image that such a person does possess certain faculties higher than the individuals we meet daily – and that is what it comes to be termed as ‘art’. It is interesting to quote Anthony Curtis who opines that:

“when we describe a person in such terms we often have at the back of our minds the notion that life may here be imitating art, and that such a person is larger than life.” (Curtis, 35)

Success of any work of art depends upon as to how, or to what extent it appeals to the people's hearts and minds; and its characters are undoubtedly the only props to propel the action; or in other words, to seek its audience's attention. That is the reason a movie or a show of a particular artist - say a hero or heroine, for instance, is bound to score very high or is definite to hit, for its lead characters do popularly appeal the audience in terms of their action, appearance, voice, dialogue, emotional sustenance, or the kind of attire they wear. Needless to emphasize, characters in a novel are the inevitable props through which the novelist does carry on his business and develops the plot; and the interaction between them



propels the action. In other words it is the action that motivates the characters. They are thus not only to be instituted timely but also to be groomed carefully. Their physical features are delineated with keen perception; and the novelist works hard to bring out their inner-qualities so as to make them just for their allotted roles until what W Somerset Maugham says,

“the neat and graceful clothes they wear, the line on their faces, the thoughts in their minds, the impact they make by those thoughts constitute an attractive personality for them.” (Maugham, 140)

It thus goes without saying that characters are the heart and soul of a fictional work by virtue of which a novelist crafts his plots; and the ‘art of characterization’ a skill prime to his genius. Such an art is undoubtedly the result of an artist’s sustained and rigorous efforts – the ‘sadhana’ practised consistently.

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