

Historical Studies in Character Development:

Literary Conceptions of Character from Antiquity
through the Middle Ages to Modernity

From External to Internal Determinants of Character

- Character and the Formal Requirements of Narrative Function
- Generic Conventions and the Production of Different Character Types
- Representative Character Types by Genre
- Literary Techniques For Enhancing Character Development

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Character and the requirements of narrative function

- Characters, in both Open and Closed Forms of Narrative, may be conceived initially as Open Slots, Empty Shells, Functional Place-Holders, not Fully Formed Persons with their own Individual Characteristics and Psychological Dimensions
- Characters serve as Vehicles for the Action of the Story
- In Pre-Modern Narrative Forms especially, Characters Remain Flat and Fully Exteriorized
- Roles already Pre-Determined by Considerations External to the Characters themselves

Characters serve as Vehicles for the Action of the Story

- Active, in Pursuing Goals & Objectives
- Passive, in Being Acted Upon by Others
- Centers for the Narrative Conflict

In Pre-Modern Narrative Forms especially, Characters Remain Flat and Fully Exteriorized

- All Surface
- No Depth
- No Interiority
- No Subjectivity

•A Fully Integrated View of Society allows Characters to be seen only in terms of their Public Participation in Collective Pursuits that Everyone may Identify with Equally

•Qualities and Experiences that Distinguish Individuals from the Rest of the Group are of little Narrative Interest

•The Segregation of Society into Different Classes and Categories Allows Characters to Differentiate Themselves and to Move into Different Social Spaces where They Change 'Persona'
Accordingly

Character and the requirements of narrative function

- Roles already Pre-Determined by Considerations External to the Characters themselves
 - Characters' Situation, Status, and Positional Relation to Other Characters
 - Specific Functions Required of Characters by the Formal Conventions of the Narrative
 - Different Narrative Genres Have Different Narrative Functions to Perform and thus Generate Different Types of Characters

The Formation of Character Types Based on Narrative Functions:
Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*.

- The Formal Structure of Folktales, though primitive, is Instructive because of the Common Elements shared with Related Genres
- Tales can be Broken Down into Discrete Episodes by Function
- The Trajectory of the Narrative Axis is Always Constant

The Formal Structure of Folktales, though primitive, is Instructive because of the Common Elements shared with Related Genres

- Greek Novels, Chivalric Romances, Picaresques
- Quest Narratives, Fantasy Novels, Science Fiction, Detective Fiction
- Action/Adventure Stories and Games

Character and the requirements of narrative function

The Formation of Character Types Based on Narrative Functions:
Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*.

Tales can be Broken Down into Discrete Episodes by Function

- The Same Constituent Functions Recur Regularly in All Tales
- The Number of Different Functions is Limited
- The Sequence in which Functions can occur is Invariable
- The Same Functions, however, can be Repeated with Variations within the Same Tale and Recombined in a Potentially Infinite Series
- Different Functions have Specific Character Types Associated with them

The Trajectory of the Narrative Axis is Always Constant.

- The Closed Formal Structure of the Narrative Always Aims toward a Specific Destination that Limits the Range of Functions to be Performed and the Available Repertory of Characters to Perform them
- Hero must depart from Home Base and Return at the End
- Departure motivated (1) by Loss or (2) due to some Lack or Insufficiency
- Return is only possible after (1) Restitution is Made or (2) the Lack has been Liquidated
- Any Number of Intervening Contests with the Same Structural Function may Occur

Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*
Narrative Functions

Description of particular, sometimes emphasized, prosperity

I. Absentation of Supporting Characters

II. Interdiction

III. Violation of Interdiction

IV. Reconnaissance of Information by Villain

V. Delivery of Information to Villain

VI. Trickery by Villain

VII. Complicity of Hero in Being Tricked

VIII. Villainy or Lack, Insufficiency Made Known

IX. Dispatch of Hero

X. Counteraction by Hero

XI. Departure of Hero

Narrative Moves and Characters Generated

Initial Situation

[*Protagonist* Introduced, May Become a *Seeker* or *Victimized Hero*]

Preparatory Section

[*Supporting Characters* Removed]

[*Knowledgeable Authority Figure* Introduced to Prohibit or Command]

[*Villain* Introduced]

Complication

[*Destination Character* Identified]

[*Auxiliary Characters* Assisted by Hero May Be Introduced]

XII. Testing of Hero by Donor

XIII. Ordeal Passed by Hero

XIV. Provision of Magical Agent or Helper

XV: Delivery of Hero to Object of Quest

XVI: Struggle Between Hero and Villain

XVII: Branding of Hero

XVIII: Victory of Hero Over Villain

XIX: Liquidation of Lack, Insufficiency

XX. Return of Hero

XXI - XXVI: Additional Complications, Often Repeating Initial Complications in Reverse

XXVII - XXXI: Final Resolutions: Transfiguration of Hero, Punishment of Villain, Wedding

Narrative Moves and Characters Generated

Development

[*Donor Character* Encountered]

[*Magical Helper / Familiar* Enlisted]

Resolution

Conclusion

Secondary Complications

[*Secondary Villains and Helpers; False Heroes*]

Terminal Moves

Character and the requirements of narrative function

The Formal Properties of Characters are dictated by the Conventional Functions they perform

- Heroes are Generated to Endure Trials (to determine their Strength, Worth, Intelligence) and are Already Equipped with the Requisite Skills
- Villains are Generated to “Disturb the Peace of a Happy Family, to Cause some Form of Misfortune, Damage, or Harm”
- Destination Characters are Introduced in Order to be Rescued by Heroes
- Donor Characters and Magical Helpers are Generated to test Heroes and Provide Assistance in Quests
- Secondary Characters may be Generated to Mirror Existing Functions

Character and the requirements of narrative function

Characters Remain Constant with Respect to Function

- Heroes may be Active (*Seekers*) or Passive (*Victims*) without Altering the Necessary Trajectory of Narrative Functions, Just the Sphere of Action
- The Particular Attributes of Individual Characters are Purely Incidental and Remain Inconsequential to the Story
- Characters Remain Undeveloped in that They Never Undergo Personal Transformations as a Result of the Action and They Never Experience Internal Change

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Historical Overview of Characters within different Genres:

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel*.

- The Historical Emergence of New Genres of Storytelling Produces New Functions for Characters to Perform, New Configurations among Characters, and New Possibilities for Characters to Develop in Different Ways
- Established Formal Structures eventually Become Outmoded and are Abandoned in favor of Newer, More Relevant Genres
 - Historically, Newer Genres have Tended to Place Increasing Emphasis on Realism, Individuality, Fullness and Complexity in Character
- Characters gradually lose their Connectedness to the Rest of the Community and Take on Isolated Functions of their own

Historical Overview of Characters within different Genres:
Mikhail Bakhtin, *Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel*.

- Characters can finally be Differentiated according to the Quality of their own Individual Experiences
- Quality of Experience is Measured by the Perceived Impact upon Character of the Temporal and Spatial Distribution of Narrative Events
- Narrative Events become Consequential and Cumulative in the Ongoing Development of Characters
- Characters can undergo Substantive Changes within Themselves
 - the Determinants of Character move from External to Internal Conditions as Characters Begin to Retain Impressions of Previous Events
- The Temporal and Spatial Mechanisms through which Events Get Processed Differ from Genre to Genre and Affect both the Types of Characters that are Produced and the Eventual Shapes that Characters Take
- Summary of Bakhtin's Findings on the Experiential Parameters of Character Formation
 - Variations in the Temporal Dimensions of Narrative
 - Variations in the Spatial Dimensions of Narrative

Variations in the Temporal Dimensions of Narrative

Characters' Experience of Time can be Altered:

- Narrative Flow
 - Advancement or Retardation of Plot Functions
 - Destination as Series of Functions to be Executed by Character
 - Destination as Gradual Transformations in Personal Character
- Coherence
 - Fragmentary Incidents or Continuous Unfolding
 - Accidental Occurrences or Coordinated Actions
 - Adventure Time or Real Time
- Duration
 - Dilation or Contraction of Narration
 - Varying Degrees of Narrative Emphasis for Subjective Development
- Contingency
 - Events as Digressive or Developmental in relation to Character
- Temporal Orientation
 - Vertical or Horizontal Axis
 - Eternalized or Transitory Contextualizations

- Space Takes on the Attributes of Human Social Relationships
 - Abstracted Space: Undifferentiated except for the Relative Proximity or Distance between Characters
 - Symbolic Space: Where Archetypal Figures are Encountered
 - Woodlands, Cities, Homes, Dungeons, the Open Road, Otherworlds
 - Open Spaces: Where Characters Assume their Public Roles
 - Closed Spaces: Where Characters meet Privately & Intimately
 - Transitional Spaces: Where Unexpected Encounters take place on the way to Characters' ultimate Destinations
 - Socialized Spaces: Differentiated by the Types of Characters that might Occupy or Inhabit them
 - Alien Territories or Familiar Landscapes
 - Domestic Situations or Communal Locations
 - Spaces Associated with Professional or Social Classes
- Characters Change their Identities as they Move between Differently Valorized Spaces

Character Types Generated by Varying Temporal & Spatial Dimensions

Less Developed Characters

Temporal Dimension

- Functional Time
- Fragmentary Episodes
- Adventure Time
- Contracted Narration
- Digression
- Horizontal Orientation

Spatial Dimension

- Abstracted Space
- Symbolic Space
- Alien Territories
- Open Space, Transitional Space
- Public Space
- Communal Locations

More Developed Characters

- Transformational Time
- Continuous Unfolding
- Real Time
- Dilated Narration
- Development
- Vertical Orientation

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- Concrete Locations
 - Ordinary, Everyday Places
 - Familiar Landscapes
 - Closed Spaces, Interiors
 - Private Space
 - Domestic Situations
 - Spaces Segregated by Class

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Exemplary Passages Demonstrating Range of Character
Possibilities across Different Genres

- Epic
- Tragedy
- Comedy
- Hagiography
- Chivalric Romance
- Novel of Development : *Bildungsroman*

Epic

Homer, *Iliad*, Book IX, tr. Richard Lattimore. [8th Century BCE]

For my mother Thetis the goddess of the silver feet tells me
I carry two sorts of destiny toward the day of my death. Either,
if I stay here and fight beside the city of the Trojans,
my return home is gone, but my glory shall be everlasting;
but if I return home to the beloved land of my fathers,
the excellence of my glory is gone, but there will be a long life
left for me, and my end in death will not come to me quickly.

Epic

- Socially Homogeneous Environment
- Holistic and Unified Worldview Based on Common Enterprise
- Located in Public Space of Public Actions
- Characters have Simple Motivations Determined by Roles
 - Honor
 - Glory
 - Retribution
 - Justice
- Heroes Remain Idealized and Generalized Types
- Character Conflicts are Positional not Personal
 - Individual Characters make Critical Choices Between Action and Inaction that will Ultimately Affect the Outcome of Events
 - But these Decisions are Equally Common to all other Characters in the Same Situation, not just Select Individuals
- The Concept of Fate Pre-Determines both the Outcome of Events and the Functions that Characters Perform

Tragedy

Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, tr. David Grene.

[442 BCE]

OEDIPUS: I pity you, children. You have come full of longing,
but I have known the story before you told it
all too well. I know you are all sick,
yet there is not one of you, sick though you are,
that is as sick as I myself.
Your several sorrows each have single scope
and touch but one of you. My spirit groans
for city and myself and you at once.

Tragedy

Similarities to Epic Conventions

- *Still Located in Public Space of Public Actions*
 - *Characters have Simple Motivations Determined by Roles*
 - *Character Conflicts are Positional, not Personal*
 - *The Concept of Fate Predetermines the Outcome of Events
Despite the Actions that Characters Take*
-

Distinctive Departures from Epic Conventions

- Fates are Fully Individualized, not Commonly Shared
- The Violent and Painful Downfall of an Exalted Figurehead is Designed to Evoke Pity in Spectators
- Recognition of a Character's True Identity, rather than his or her Assumed Identity, is Fundamental to the Tragic Plot
- Character is still Relational, but a Theatricalized Sense of Identity -- as a Distinct Socialized Role to be Performed -- now Emerges

Comedy

Terence, *The Eunuch*, Act II. [161 BCE]

PARMENIO: We're doing something we could get flogged for!

CHAEREA: What is there to get flogged for, if I am just getting myself dragged off to a whorehouse and all its punishments, all those dreadful girls who have always been despising us and our youth and are constantly tormenting us in every possible way? Why, now I am only paying them back and deceiving them for how we have always been deceived by them. Wouldn't you be all for it if the same thing were being done to my father and he was being fooled by my tricks? Whatever they find out, they will be sure to blame us for, but everyone else is going to think it a job well done.

Comedy

- Socially Heterogeneous Environments, Dependent on Disparities between Different Classes
- Located in Private and Domestic Spaces
- Plots are Driven by Personal Self-Interest
- Protagonists usually Drawn from the Underprivileged Classes, especially Slaves and Disadvantaged Younger Sons
- Rogue Protagonists Seek to Gain Advantage over More Powerful Characters (particularly Heads of Households) by Resorting to their Wits and Employing Deceit, Trickery, and Disguise
- Disguise Allows Characters to Assume a Theatricalized Identity, to Create a Different Surface Appearance that they can Manipulate at will
- An Initial Division Emerges between the Exterior and the Interior of Characters
- In the End, Characters are always Restored to their Original Status
- Personal Fortunes Depend on Chance, Not Fate

Hagiography

The Acts of Paul and Thecla, IX.6-9. [2nd Century CE]

Afterwards they brought out many other wild beasts; but Thecla stood with her hands stretched towards heaven, and prayed; and when she had done praying, she turned about, and saw a pit of water, and said, Now it is a proper time for me to be baptized. Accordingly she threw herself into the water, and said, In thy name, O my Lord Jesus Christ, I am this last day baptized. The women and the people seeing this, cried out, and said, Do not throw yourself into the water. And the governor himself cried out, to think that the sea-calves were like to devour so much beauty. Notwithstanding all this, Thecla threw herself into the water, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. But the sea-calves when they saw the lighting and fire, were killed, and swam dead upon the surface of the water, and a cloud of fire surrounded Thecla, so that as the beasts could not come near her, so the people could not see her nakedness.

Hagiography

- Hagiographical Works (Saints' Lives) typically Follow the Patterns of the Greek Novel as Discussed by Bakhtin, but with a Few Notable Exceptions
- Narratives of Travel, Where Protagonists go out Alone on a Journey, Leaving behind their Families and their Former Identities, but they do Not Return to where they started from
- Narratives of Conversion and Personal Transformation, frequently Figured in Ritual Images of Death and Rebirth, to Indicate the Abandonment of an Old Self and the Adoption of a New Self, the Abrupt Transition from One Steady State to Another Steady State that is Totally Different
- This New Self Usually comes into Opposition with the Rest of Society, particularly Powerful Figureheads, as the Familiar becomes Alien, as the Private becomes Public
- The Interior is Exteriorized through Confessions of Faith
- Adventures are Episodic and Fragmentary, focusing on the Exceptional, the Wondrous, the Miraculous, and Usually Ending in an Extraordinarily Memorable Death Scene

Chivalric Romance

Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligès*, tr. Burton Raffel. [1177]

The king's boat, as he made the crossing, carried a single young man, Alexander, and only a single girl, the queen's companion, Soredamour, who had always laughed at love. No one had ever heard her speak of a man worth loving, whether for beauty, bravery, courage, rank, or any ability. The girl was so gracious and lovely that, if only she'd wanted them, she certainly should have been taking lessons from Love. But it wasn't a subject she wanted to study. This state of affairs saddened Love, who began to seriously consider revenge for the overweening pride she stubbornly displayed. Love's aim was perfect: his arrow struck her right in the heart. Her face changed color, her breath caught, and, despite herself, she loved. She could not keep her eyes from Alexander, though she knew she had to be careful of my lord Gawain, her brother. How dearly she paid and did penance for her pride and disdain! Love drew her a bath so burning hot that her heart sweated and boiled. Alexander was fine; Alexander was bad; she loved him, she didn't; she accused her eyes of treason, saying 'Sight, you've betrayed me, escorting enemy invaders to my heart. You used to be loyal, but now what I see hurts me. Hurts me? No, it helps me – but if something hurts me, and I go on looking, who controls my eyes? Not me, I've lost my strength – and how little I'm worth, unable to tell my eyes where to look, and when – for they look all the time ..."

Chivalric Romance

- Personal Transformations Effected from Outside
 - Symbolic, Mythological Role of the God of Love
- External Conflicts Internalized
 - through Images of Assault and Invasion
 - through Figures of the Body Divided against Itself
- Divisions within Character no longer just between Interior and Exterior Identities but within Inner Self
- Inner Conflict Increases Character Complexity
- Different Sides of Conflict Indicate Tensions
 - Between Public and Private Interests
 - Between Family and Personal Obligations
 - Between Past and Future Identity
- Inner Life of Characters brought to the Surface through the Theatrical Device of Soliloquy, Interior Dialogue
- Rest of the Narrative Shares Qualities with Epic and Greek Novel

The Novel of Development: *Bildungsroman*

Jane Austen, *Pride & Prejudice*, vol. II, chap. 13. [1813]

‘How despicably have I acted!’ she cried. – ‘I, who have prided myself on my discernment! – I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless and blameable distrust. – How humiliating is this discovery! – Yet, how just a humiliation! – Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. – Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself.’

The Novel of Development: *Bildungsroman*

- The Goal of Personal Advancement Cannot be Attained without Characters Experiencing Personal Transformations through ongoing Learning Processes
- Social Mobility of Characters between Heterogeneous Locations Requires Personal Distancing from Family, Familiar Situations, and Previous Identifications
- Characters Become Self-Made and Internally Motivated, as they become Isolated from their Traditional Communities
- Narrative Events have a Cumulative Effect on Characters
- Perspective, Which Limits Characters' Immediate Awareness and Understanding at any Given Point in the Narrative, Restricts the Delivery of Information and Creates Suspense
- Changes in Perspective Result in Substantive Changes in Character
- Interior Spaces and Everyday Events Create a More Private and Intimate Sense of Self

Historical Studies in Character Development:

Modern Readers have been Trained to Respond Emotionally to More Highly Developed Characters

More Developed Literary Techniques and Devices

- Character Determined by External Functions
 - Abstract, Undifferentiated, Open, Public Spaces
 - Fragmentary, Disjunctive, Digressive Time
 - Contracted, Condensed, Compressed Narration
 - Inconsequential, Reversible Events
-
- Characters Isolated from Communities
 - Movement between Heterogeneous Environments
 - Interior, Closed, Private Space of Everyday Existence
 - Cumulative and Consequential Impact of Time
 - Narrative Dilation
 - Personal Transformations
 - Assumed Identities
 - Division Between Inner and Outer Self
 - Inner Conflicts
 - Soliloquizing, Monologues, Internal Dialogues
 - Alterations in Perspective