

A METHODOICAL APPROACH TO LITERARY CHARACTER ANALYSIS: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS

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Abstract

Literary characters are one of the most important elements of narrative fiction. They are the vehicle through which authors communicate themes, ideologies and representations of human experience. Literary characters have been studied in increasingly sophisticated ways, moving beyond simple typologies to more complex theoretical paradigms that consider characterization, psychological depth, social function, and reader response. The article offers a systematic approach to the analysis of literary characters based on the synthesis of the main theoretical approaches of structuralism, formalism, psychoanalysis, reader-response theory and modern character studies. The study provides a systematic framework for the analysis of literary characters by means of characterization techniques, psychological dimensions, social context, narrative function, and relationships with other characters. The findings indicate that a comprehensive approach to character analysis yields a more nuanced view of literary texts and their cultural importance.

The article contributes to literary methodology by offering a practical model applicable to both literary research and classroom instruction.

Keywords: *literary character, characterization, literary methodology, character analysis, narrative theory, psychoanalytic criticism, reader-response criticism*

Introduction

Characters are important to narrative fiction because they act as intermediaries between the fictional world and the reader’s understanding of the fictional world . Authors use characters to explore human behavior, social values, moral conflicts and psychological complexities. Thus, character analysis is still one of the most important parts of literary studies.

In traditional literary criticism characters were viewed as representatives of human beings and their actions and motivations could be studied just like those of real people. Twentieth-century literary theory, however, challenged this assumption by emphasizing the textual and structural dimensions of characterization (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002). Contemporary research acknowledges literary characters as multifaceted beings that operate on various levels at once, such as narrative devices, psychological figures, and cultural signs (Felski, 2020).

Forster (1927) distinguishes between “flat” and “round” characters, which differ in their complexity and ability to develop. Flat characters are based on a small set of traits, while round characters have psychological depth and grow through the story. This distinction still exerts a powerful influence on character studies today.

Similarly, Chatman (1978) maintains that characters should not be regarded as fictional persons, but as textual constructs whose value is realized in narrative discourse. Their character is shown in their actions, dialogue, and description as well as by their relationships with other characters.

Scholars need a systematic approach to character analysis given the diversity of theoretical perspectives. The aim of the present paper is therefore to develop a systematic approach to the study of literary characters, combining basic theoretical concepts and analytical procedures.

Theoretical Foundations of Character Analysis

Formalist and Structuralist Perspectives

Formalist criticism emphasizes the role of literary elements in creating artistic meaning. From this perspective, characters are examined primarily in terms of their narrative functions rather than their resemblance to real people. Propp (1968), for example, identified recurring character roles such as heroes, villains, helpers, and donors within folktales. His work demonstrated that character functions often contribute more significantly to narrative structure than individual personality traits.

Structuralist theorists further developed this perspective. According to Barthes (1975), characters derive meaning through their positions within systems of narrative relationships. Consequently, character analysis requires attention not only to individual traits but also to broader textual structures.

Psychoanalytic Approaches

Psychoanalytic criticism examines literary characters through theories of the unconscious mind. Freud (1919/2003) argued that literary texts frequently reveal hidden desires, fears, and psychological conflicts. As a result, characters may be interpreted as manifestations of unconscious impulses.

Jung (1969) expanded this approach by introducing concepts such as archetypes and the collective unconscious. According to Jung (1969), literary characters often embody universal psychological patterns, including the hero, the shadow, the mentor, and the trickster. These archetypal roles contribute to a character's symbolic significance.

Moreover, psychoanalytic criticism enables scholars to investigate motivations, internal conflicts, and identity formation within literary narratives.

Reader-Response Perspectives

Reader-response theorists emphasize the active role of readers in constructing character meaning. Fish (1980) argues that literary interpretation emerges through interactions between texts and interpretive communities. Consequently, characters acquire significance not solely through authorial intention but also through readers' responses.

Similarly, Felski (2020) suggests that readers often form emotional attachments to literary characters because they recognize aspects of themselves within fictional representations. Character analysis, therefore, involves understanding both textual construction and reader engagement.

A Methodical Framework for Literary Character Analysis

A systematic approach to character analysis may be organized into five interconnected stages.

Characterization Techniques

The first stage involves examining how a character is presented within the text. According to Rimmon-Kenan (2002), characterization may occur directly through authorial description or indirectly through actions, dialogue, appearance, and interactions with others.

Questions for analysis include:

- How does the author introduce the character?
- What physical and psychological traits are emphasized?
- How do other characters perceive this individual?
- What information is revealed through dialogue and behavior?

These elements establish the foundation for understanding the character's role within the narrative.

Psychological Dimension

The second stage focuses on the character's internal world. Psychoanalytic criticism encourages scholars to investigate motivations, desires, fears, and conflicts (Freud, 1919/2003; Jung, 1969).

Important questions include:

- What motivates the character's actions?
- What internal conflicts influence decision-making?
- Does the character experience psychological transformation?
- What unconscious desires or fears may be inferred?

This level of analysis helps reveal the complexity of character development.

Social and Cultural Context

Characters exist within specific social, historical, and cultural environments. New Historicist critics argue that literary texts both reflect and challenge the values of their societies (Greenblatt, 1988).

Consequently, character analysis should consider:

- Social class and economic status.
- Gender roles and expectations.
- Cultural norms and ideological influences.
- Relationships between individual agency and social structures.

This approach enables scholars to connect individual characters to broader societal concerns.

Narrative Function

Characters also serve specific narrative purposes. Chatman (1978) emphasizes that characters contribute to plot development, thematic expression, and reader engagement.

Analytical questions include:

- What role does the character play in advancing the plot?
- How does the character contribute to major themes?
- Does the character function as a protagonist, antagonist, foil, or mentor?
- How does the character influence other figures within the narrative?

Examining narrative function helps clarify the character's structural significance.

Inter-Character Relationships

Recent scholarship increasingly emphasizes relational approaches to characterization. According to Felski (2020), characters gain meaning through their interactions with others.

Therefore, scholars should investigate:

- Relationships between major and minor characters.
- Power dynamics within interpersonal interactions.
- Similarities and contrasts between character pairs.
- The role of dialogue in shaping character identity.

Through these relationships, authors often explore broader ideological and thematic concerns.

Discussion

It is the combination of different theoretical approaches that leads to a more holistic understanding of literary characters than the use of one method only. Formalist approaches shed light on narrative structure, psychoanalytic theories on psychological complexity, reader-response criticism on audience engagement, and sociocultural approaches on the contextualization of character behavior within larger historical frameworks.

A character like Hamlet, for example, can be interpreted as a tragic hero (the Aristotelian approach), a psychologically disturbed person (the psychoanalytic approach), a creature of Renaissance culture (the historical approach), and a construction of the text (the structuralist approach). Each perspective gives its own insights, and adds to other approaches.

In addition, contemporary literary studies are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that the analysis of characters is enhanced by methodological pluralism. Contemporary scholarship prefers an interdisciplinary approach that considers narrative, psychological, social, and cultural aspects over one that privileges a single theoretical model. Therefore, a methodical framework enables researchers to conduct more balanced and comprehensive analyses while avoiding overly narrow interpretations.

Conclusion

Literary character analysis is an integral part of literary scholarship because characters are the primary carriers of narrative meaning, thematic development, and cultural representation. With the advent of literary theory, the field of character studies has opened up and new ways of studying characterization have emerged, which are structural, psychological, social and reader-based.

In this article we have outlined a methodical framework of five analytical stages: characterization techniques, psychological dimensions, social and cultural context, narrative function and inter-character relationships. The framework draws on insights from formalist, psychoanalytic, structuralist, and reader-response traditions to offer a holistic methodology that can be applied to a wide range of literary texts.

In the end, effective character analysis requires theoretical awareness and methodological flexibility. A systematic approach enables scholars to move beyond surface-level description and achieve a deeper understanding of how literary characters contribute to the artistic, psychological, and cultural significance of literature.

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