

Technique of Characterization in English Novels

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.....a character is distinguished by the structure and semantic content of the language and thoughts that are assigned to him.

—Roger Fowler¹⁾—

The methods of drawing characters employed by English novelists are varied according to the trend of the times, the social background and the novelists' dispositions. In the nineteenth century, most great novelists applied themselves to creating the characters of their own, and we are likely to identify ourselves with them in a rather sympathetic way. The plots and backgrounds often slip our memory but literary characters remain vividly in our mind.

On the other hand, characters have become less important in the twentieth century novels, particularly in highly experimental novels by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf or Dorothy Richardson. They never portray their characters clearly in life-size as the novelists in the nineteenth century did. There are, of course, such novelists as W. S. Maugham, Graham Greene, H. E. Bates who depict people in a traditional and realistic way. But roughly speaking, the contemporary novelists seem to be much more interested in representing a character's inner state of mind, tracing his thoughts and impressions, however trivial and insignificant they may appear.

Dickens, the most typical novelist of the nineteenth century, portrays characters with strong outlines and colours, sometimes with rhetorical exaggerations. In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge is described as follows:

Oh! But he was tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-

1) Roger Fowler, *Linguistics and the Novel*. Methuen, 1977, p. 37.

contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-day; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.¹⁾

His stinginess and severe character is emphasized by using various methods of rhetorical technique; those rhyming epithets, *squeezing*, *wrenching*, *grasping*, *scraping*, *clutching*, have the sounds of [s] [k] [z] [r] [g] which suggest the name of Scrooge and his avaricious character. The metaphorical uses of *grindstone*, *flint*, *steel*, *oyster* also symbolize his hard, secret and solitary nature. The sentence beginning with 'The cold within him...', on the contrary, is characterized by the active, onomatopoeic verbs, *freeze*, *nip*, *shrive*, *stiffen*, and his coldness is again emphasized by referring to the hottest and merriest days of the year.

A *Christmas Carol* is, needless to say, not a novel and Scrooge is allegorically exaggerated rather than objectively described. In *Oliver Twist*, Sikes the thief is realistically depicted in detail and in life-size:

The man who growld out these words, was a stoutly built fellow of about five-and thirty, in a black velveteen coat, very soiled drab breeches, lace-up half boots, and grey cotten stocking, which inclosed a bulky pair of legs, with large swelling calves;—the kind of legs, which in such costume, always look in an unfinished and incomplete state without a set of fetters to garnish them. He had a brown hat on his head, and a dirty belcher handkerchief round his neck: with the long frayed ends of which he smeared the beer from his face as he spoke. He disclosed, when he had done so, a broad heavy countenance with a beard of three days' growth, and two scowling eyes; one of which displayed various parti-coloured symptoms of having been recently damaged by a blow.²⁾

Dickens minutely describes what Sikes wears, including the colour and texture of cloth, and focuses upon his legs humourously and satirically. Then to his head, neck and eyes, one of which shows the mark of having been knocked. But when he portrays

1) C. Dickens, *Christmas Books*, Everyman's Library, 1950, p. 10.

2) C. Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, Oxford, 1964, p. 86.

a young lady, Miss Rose in this novel, he suddenly becomes sentimental using commonplace and hackneyed phrases to show the idealistic type of a woman. On the whole, it can be said that the characters in Dickens's novels are vividly described when they are comic, and inclined to be dull when they are serious or tragic.

Lafcadio Hearn once criticized Dickens as 'an eccentricity in English Literature' and added, 'A character did not appear to him the marvellously complex thing that it really is; he distinguishes it only by some peculiarity. And this is to say that he saw chiefly the eccentricities of people, and these eccentricities remain in his mind as the only symbols of their existence. I therefore say that such an art is limited.'¹ It is true that Dickens habitually observes a certain peculiarity in a character and exaggerates it so as to produce what we call a caricature, and his characters are nearly all flat, as E.M. Forster says in his *Aspects of the Novel*². They can be summed up in a sentence, and yet there is a wonderful feeling of human warmth and depth. Probably Dickens's imagination and vitality inspire those characters with reality and keep them from becoming the mere type of people.

In case of Jane Austen, we cannot find such minute character portrayal as seen in Dickens. She seems to have no interest in presenting characters vividly and distinctly before our eyes. Even comic characters, say Lady Catherine or Mr. Collins, are sketched briefly without using peculiar epithets:

Lady Catherine was a tall, large woman, with strongly-marked features, which might once have been handsome. Her air was not conciliating, nor was her manner of receiving them, such as to make her visitors forget their inferior rank.³

We can understand what 'strongly-marked features' means, but the description is not concrete enough for us to picture her clearly to ourselves.

The basis of Austen's character presentation is the character sketch, but she knows that everybody is interested in everybody else, and the opening scene of *Pride and Prejudice* is all gossip treated ironically, showing how rumour distorts truth. Mr. Bingley is introduced through Lady Lucas's report to Mrs. Bennet that he was quite

1) Lafcadio Hearn, *Interpretations of Literature* Vol. 1. New York, 1924, p. 237.

2) E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, London, 1953, p. 65.

3) J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. R.W. Chapman, Oxford, 1965, p. 162.

young, wonderfully handsome, extremely agreeable. The intensive adverbs signify that they are used by a woman who likes emotional expressions. At the Assembly, Bingley and others are depicted as follows:

Mr. Bingley was good looking and gentlemanlike; he had a pleasant countenance, and easy, unaffected manner. His sisters were fine women, with an air of decided fashion. His brother-in-law, Mr. Hurst, merely looked the gentleman, but his friend Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine tall person, handsome features, noble mien; and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year. The gentlemen pronounced him to be a fine figure of a man, the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley, and he was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening, till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased; and not all his large estate in Derbyshire could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance, and being unworthy to be compared with his friend.¹⁾

Here again the characters are not depicted concretely; the adjectives, *good-looking, gentleman-like, easy, unaffected, fine, handsome, noble*, imply that they are persons of quality. In other words, Austen seems to disregard their individual peculiarities seen from the external appearance. In the latter half of the passage above, Mr. Darcy suddenly falls in public estimation; his manners causes a disgust among the people. He is modified by the adjectives having negative connotation—proud, forbidding, disagreeable, unworthy. Austen's style is usually plain, intellectual and reserved, without clichés or exaggerations, but here we can perceive such hackneyed phrase as 'turn the tide of his popularity' and other emotional expressions. She changes her attitude, looking at Darcy from the view point of, perhaps, Mrs. Bennet.

The most important method of character revelation employed by Austen is made through the dialogue itself. The opinion expressed by main characters, or the way in which they discuss a topic, are often an index as to their mature personality. Elizabeth Bennet, Austen's most striking heroine, is not given a character sketch at all. We have to form our opinion of her entirely from her speech and the remarks of such people

1) *Ibid.*, p. 10.

as Mr. Darcy, her father, her uncle and aunt. Especially, the dialogue between Elizabeth and Darcy reveals effectively the characteristics of their intelligence. But since my present paper deals chiefly with character portrayal from the external aspects, the dialogue as one of the techniques of characterization will be reserved for another occasion.

As stated in the first place, the methods of drawing people are different according to the novelists, but they are varied even in the same author due to his theme and style.

Jane Eyre is the first-person narrative and all the characters exist as Jane sees them, not as Charlotte Brontë might have done. But *Shirley* is different; there are many full-length portraits of original and complex characters for which there is no parallel in *Jane Eyre*. In the opening section of *Jane Eyre*, the characters are depicted in an immature and emotional way since Jane is a child, and grow more elaborated as the story develops because her capacity for subtle appreciation increases. The first people we meet besides Jane herself are those who live in Gatehead, and among them John Reed is presented as a spoilt boy with 'a dim and bleared eye and flobby cheeks,' who enjoys torturing Jane, 'thrusting out his tongue at me (Jane) as far as he could without damaging its roots.'

Mrs. Reed, too, is drawn as an object of her criticism:

.....she was a woman of robust frame, square-shouldered and strong limbed, not tall, and though stout, not obese; she had a somewhat large face, the under-jaw being much developed and very solid; her brow was low, her chin large and prominent, mouth and nose sufficiently regular; under her light eyebrows glimmered an eye devoid of ruth; her skin was dark and opaque, her hair nearly flaxen; her constitution was sound as a bell—illness never came near her; she was an exact, clever manager, her household and tenantry were thoroughly under her control; her children only, at times, defied her authority, and laughed it to scorn;¹⁾

The description of an elderly lady here reminds us of that of Lady Catherine in *Pride and Prejudice*, but Charlotte Brontë observes the person more minutely—physical features, the details of her face, the colours of her skin and hair. The tone of her description here is strangely cool and quiet, compared with the passionate struggle against Mrs. Reed in chapter 2. Jane has a feeling that she is a 'discord in Gateshead Hall' and she has 'nothing in harmony' with Mrs. Reed and her children. Although no emotional

1) C. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Penguin Books, 1954, p. 37.

adjectives are used here, Jane's hatred toward Mrs. Reed is felt in the detailed description itself.

The portrayal of Brocklehurst is made with a comic metaphor:

The handle turned, the door unclosed, and passing through and curtseying low, I looked up at—a black pillar!—such, at least, appeared to me, at first sight, the straight, narrow sable-clad standing erect on the rug; the grim face at the top was like a carved mask, placed above the shaft by way of capital.¹⁾

As Jane was a small child, Brocklehurst appeared as a black pillar—so straight, tall and narrow, and his face is compared to a carved mask above the shaft.

In drawing the ladies who gathered at the house-party in Thornfield, Jane exaggerates the details of dress and mode of speech with some distortion, especially when describing the Dowager Lady Ingram and her daughters, Blanche and Mary:

Most people would have termed her a splendid woman of her age: and so she was, no doubt, physically speaking; but then there was an expression of almost insupportable haughtiness in her bearing and countenance. She had Roman features and a double chin, disappearing into a throat like a pillar: these features appeared to me not only inflated and darkened, but even furrowed with pride; and the chin was sustained by the same principle, in a position of almost preternatural erectness. She had, likewise, a fierce and hard eye: it reminded me of Mrs. Reed's; she mouthed her words in speaking; her voice was deep, its inflections very pompous, very dogmatical—very intolerable, in short.²⁾

This passage recalls Mr. Brocklehurst (the pillar) and Mrs. Reed (a direct allusion), which exhibit Jane's subconscious feeling of aversion.

In describing Mr. Rochester, Charlotte Brontë uses impressive metaphors:

His form was of the same strong and stalwart contour as ever: his port was still erect, his hair was still raven black:.....But in his countenance I saw a change: that looked desperate and brooding—that reminded me of some wronged and fettered wild beast or bird, dangerous to approach in his sullen woe. The caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished, might look as looked that sightless Samson.³⁾

1) *Ibid.*, p. 33.

2) *Ibid.*, p. 171.

3) *Ibid.*, p. 426.

Rochester is likened to 'the caged eagle' here, and his eyes to 'full falcon eyes flashing' (p. 271). Jane compares herself to 'the stray and stranger bird' (p. 243), which symbolizes her intense affection for him. One of the most notable metaphors is probably the Samson image which first appears in chapter 24 ('I was thinking of Hercules and Samson with their charmers'), reappears when Rochester exclaims 'I long to exert a fraction of Samson's strength' (chapter 27), and finds its true application at Ferndean where he is literary 'a sightless Samson'. He is now blind and maimed but for Jane he is still a romantic figure.

Shirley is Brontë's only mature novel without a first-person narrator. It was written two years after *Jane Eyre*, with the intention of presenting 'something real, cool and solid.....' and 'something unromantic'.

A Yorkshire getleman he was, par excellence, in every point. About fifty-five years old, but looking at first sight still older, for his hair was silver white. His forehead was broad, not high; his face fresh and hale; the harshness of the north was seen in his features, as it was heard in his voice; every trait was thoroughly English, not a Norman line anywhere; it was an inelegant, unclassic, unaristocratic mould of visage. Fine people would perhaps have called it vulgar; sensible people would have termed it characteristic; shrewd people would have delighted in it for the pith, sagacity, intelligence—the rude, yet real originality marked in every lineament, latent in every furrow. But it was an indocile, a scornful, and a sarcastic face; the face of a man difficult to lead, and impossible to drive. His statue was rather tall, and he was well-made and wiry, and had a stately integrity of port; there was not a suspicion of the clown about him anywhere.¹⁾

Charlotte Brontë gives physical description of Mr. Yorke objectively without any psychological attachment. Metaphor is sparingly used; 'the harshness of the north was seen in his features' is the only one used to represent Mr. Yorke's severe and dignified expressions. His visage is drawn from various points of view; the adjectives with negative prefixes represent the author's attitude towards the character, and the subjunctive sentences, in which the conditional clauses are omitted, indicate the hypothetical situations—how the different classes of people observe him.

In Hardy's novels, the characters are so much involved in various snares of the plot or the course of Fate that they often find themselves stuck in the mud. But he is

1) C. Brontë, *Shirley* Everyman's Library, 1955, p. 34.

skilful in drawing those poor people with a sympathetic eye.

In *The Return of the Native*, he describes Thomasin, one of his soft, innocent heroines, as follows:

In her movements, in her gaze, she reminded the beholder of the feathered creatures who lived around her home. All similes and allegories concerning her began and ended with birds. There was as much variety in her motions as in their flight. When she was musing she was a kestrel, which hangs in the air by an invisible motion of its wings. When she was in a high wind her light body was blown against trees and banks like a heron's. When she was frightened she darted noiselessly like a kingfisher. When she was serene she skimmed like a swallow.¹⁾

Her variety of motions are likened to the flights of various birds; kestrel, heron, kingfisher and swallow. These similes are effectively used to suggest her forlorn and helpless situation in the novel.

On the contrary, Eustacia, one of the most complex creatures in Hardy's novels, is depicted rather sensuously:

She was in person full-limbed and somewhat heavy; without ruddiness, as without pallor; and soft to the touch as a cloud. To see her hair was to fancy that a whole winter did not contain darkness enough to form its shadow; it closed over her forehead like nighfall extinguishing the western glow.

Her nerves extended into those tresses, and her temper could always be softened by stroking them down. When her hair was brushed she would instantly sink into stillness and look like the Sphinx.

She had Pagan eyes, full of nocturnal mysteries, and their light, as it came and went, and came again was particularly hampered by their oppressive lids and lashes: and of these the under lid was much fuller it usually is with English women. This enabled her to indulge in reverie without seeming to do so: she might have been believed capable of sleeping without closing them up. Assuming that the souls of men and women were visible essences, you could fancy the colour of Eustacia's soul to be flame-like. The sparks from it that rose into her dark pupils gave the same impression.

The mouth seemed formed less to speak than to quiver, less to quiver than to kiss. Some might have added, less to kiss than to curl.²⁾

1) T. Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, Library Edition, 1952, p. 249.

2) *Ibid.*, p. 75.

We can feel her body with our hands (the simile used here is 'soft to the touch as a cloud'). The darkness of her hair is represented in detail with some exaggeration. Then her Pagan eyes and mouth. She is beautiful and sensuous enough to attract all the men in the neighbourhood, gifted with demoniac powers.

Hardy is essentially a poet and has an eye to describe the romantic atmosphere of natural background, in which a character is harmoniously placed.

Although the methods of characterization are diverse in the nineteenth century, there is some feature in common. The novelists portray characters with as clear an outline as possible so that the readers can appreciate them to the full.

In the twentieth century the methods have become much more varied than before as the novelists' views of life are multifarious and the rise of psychoanalysis has led them to an inquiry into the subconscious flow of mind in each character. It is often said that the novelists of 1920's are not looking through a window at the world, but they are seeing their own faces and the faces of others in the mirror.

Reading Virginia Woolf's novels, we are sometimes at a loss what to think of her characters, who do not engage other characters in dramatic conflict as those in the nineteenth century novels did. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the heroine is vaguely represented by the impressions she gives to other people and by tracing her complicated sense of living from moment to moment. In the following quotation, Clarissa is portrayed through the eyes of her neighbour:

A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her (knowing her as one does know people who live next door to one in Westminster); a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness.¹⁾

We only get the hazy outline of Clarissa—her age, the colour of her hair. What Purvis felt about her is the impression of blue-green jay suggesting her lightness and vivacity.

Peter, her former-lover, perceives her inner peculiarities as follows:

That was the devilish part of her—this coldness, this woodenness, something very profound in her, which he had felt again this morning talking to her; an impenetrability. Yet Heaven knows he loved her. She had some queer power of fiddling on one's nerves, turning one's nerves to fiddle-strings, yes.²⁾

1) V. Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Hogarth Press, 1976, p. 2.

2) *Ibid.*, p. 68.

He can feel in her something very deep which might be called 'impenetrability'. Each person has his own sphere of susceptibility which nobody is allowed to peep into. But there are some characters portrayed to some degrees in a traditional way; Miss Kilman, the governess of Clarissa's daughter Elizabeth, is described as a woman always dressed in a green mackintosh coat which symbolizes her hatred and obstinacy towards the world to which she never opens her mind.

.....Miss Kilman would do anything for the Russians, starved herself for the Austrians, but in private inflicted positive torture so insensitive was she, dressed in a green Mackintosh coat. Year in year out she wore that coat; she perspired...¹⁾

Seeing her and Elizabeth going out, Clarissa feels a strong aversion to her:

The cruellest things in the world, she thought, seeing them clumsy, hot, domineering, hypocritical, eavesdropping, jealous, infinitely cruel and unscrupulous dressed in a mackintosh coat, on the landing; love and religion.²⁾

The enumeration of emotional adjectives not only shows Kilman's character but also suggests Clarissa's inner movement of mind.

Elizabeth Bowen, born twelve years after Woolf, is also an experimenter but she is different from Woolf in many aspects. She has a story to tell in a traditional way. Her interest in experiment shows itself rather in her method of characterization and her dealing with scene and background in the novel.

The Heat of the Day, the story of which might seem almost a melodramatic one, presents us a charming character Stella. But the author does not portray her objectively or realistically; she describes her in such a way as the French Impressionist painters draw people:

She had one of those charming faces which, according to the angle from which you see them, look either melancholy or impertinent. Her eyes were grey; her trick of narrowing them made her seem to reflect, the greater part of the time, in the dusk of her second thoughts. With that mood, that touch of *arrière pensée*, went an uncertain, speaking set of the lips. Her complexion, naturally pale, fine, soft, appeared through a pale, fine, soft bloom of make-up. She was young-looking most because of the impression she gave of still on happy sensuous terms with

1) *Ibid.*, p. 14.

2) *Ibid.*, p. 139.

life; her looks, after initial glance, could grow on you; if you continued to know her, could seem even more to be growing for you.¹⁾

Bowen does not say whether Stella is beautiful or not from the ordinary point of view. She leaves it to the reader to judge for himself, and he is to be captured by the expression of her eyes and mouth though described too vaguely to visualize.

On the other hand, Louie, a street girl is portrayed more concretely:

Her mouth was the only other feature not to dismiss; full, intimate, woundably thin-skinned, tenderly brown pink as the underside of a new mushroom and, like the eyes once more, of a paleness in her sun-coarsened face.²⁾

Her big lips, apart, were pale inside their crusted cosmetic rim.³⁾

Everything ungirt, artless, ardent, urgent about Louie was to the fore: all over herself she gave the impression of twisted stockings.⁴⁾

Her features are vividly portrayed in detail—especially, the tender sensuousness of her mouth is compared to ‘the underside of a new mushroom’, and her slovenly appearance is symbolized by ‘crusted cosmetic rim’. and ‘the impression of twisted stockings.’

More novelists should have been dealt with, of course, to inquire into the keynote of characterization in the English novels, and other methods, such as the dialogue, the inner monologue, the authors’ point of view, etc. ought to be investigated to realize a character as a whole, particularly in the twentieth century novels. These problems will be treated on another occasion.

1) E. Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, Jonathan Cape, 1949, pp. 22-23.

2) *Ibid.*, p. 9.

3) *Ibid.*, p. 227.

4) *Ibid.*