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Literary Character as Sign: Destabilization of Meaning
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Abstract

From the Theophrastan characters to those characters in Shakespeare, Fielding, Sterne, Jane Austen, and Dickens, we can detect the awareness of distance between sign and fact. We find characters in these writers corresponding to the original meaning of Greek term, *kharattein*, defined as a mark made by writing or engraving instrument. Harold Fisch notes that Theophrastan characters are built upon the principle of antithesis, almost on the Saussurean concept of linguistic sign as resulting from the system of differences. In the eighteenth-century novel, too, we find evidence of character sketch as creation of a sign; the picaresque characters are built upon the principle of binary opposition, as can be seen in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*. Sterne's characters in *Tristram Shandy* are a direct challenge to the notion of character as a possible, human, three-dimensional entity. Nineteenth-century novel is said to be against the "types" of earlier novels, and creating life-like characters; yet, there too, we can find characters that are created as signs, especially, in the novels of Dickens, Jane Austen, Eliot, and so on. The modern novel radically challenges the nineteenth-century "round," coherent and real life characters by characters that are defined solely by semiotic means. Just as man is a sign producing and sign-using animal, according to Peirce, character in a novel is understood not as an autonomous and individual being, but as an entity whose overall understanding is grasped through its relation to other signs within the system, and whose identity is unstable. With the postmodernist novel, the conception of character undergoes even more a radical change; character is "dismantled" in novels by writers such as Nabokov, Beckettt, Robbbe-Grillet, etc. These writers question the assumption that signs yield definite signifieds, and draw attention to the "polysemic" nature of character just as novel is thought to be "polysemic" (Barthes's term for infinite play of meanings). Fisch's essay, "Character as Linguistic Sign" provides illuminating insights into the notion of character as a linguistic sign. This paper analyses the transformation of our understanding from character as an autonomous, life-like individual to character as a sign without definite signifieds. In other words, the paper looks into the postmodern 'dismantling' of literary character.

Keywords: 'linguistic sign,' 'types,' 'round,' 'polysemic,' 'grammar of characterization,' postmodernism, dismantling.

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Fisch is of the opinion that "character," though used to signify human personality, is still used as a verbal sign in literature. In such usage, there is essentially the notion of "character" as belonging to "*ecriture*," "to a linguistic ordering of reality" (593). He illustrates this in various characters from plays and novels of different periods. In the character of Angelo in Shakespeare's *Julius Ceasar*, he identifies the problem of finding a correlation between the externality of mere inscription ("Angelo") and a reading of the inner self. In the play, there is no way of discovering the inner self of Angelo, and this leads Fisch to conclude that there is no assured relation between sign and inward system of differences operating in characterization in Joseph Halls's (in the tradition of Theophrastus) *Characterisms of Virtues and Vices* (1608). Each character is not only defined by contraries ("the absence of the present, the presence of the absent"), but such contraries also "constitute the mode of interaction between characters"(Fisch 595). Halls's procedure of setting characters in parallel groups (Virtue/Vice, Honest man/Hypocrite, etc) where positive characters are solely defined by their opposites reflects the two divided sets of signs. The writer's intention here, says Fisch, is not to record the human scene, but to give "order and distinctiveness to the scene through human beings, not only to "know" people, but also to classify them according to "a system of signs." Thus Fisch concludes: "Hall and his followers provided their generation . . . Semiological handbooks—guides to the grammar of characterization. . . . Character studies formalized in this way give us a kind of langue, with the concreteness, the adventitiousness *of parole* almost totally absent" (596).

Fisch proceeds to show this tendency among novelists too. According to him the principle of binary opposition is clearly identifiable in the characters of "Trulliber and Adams in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*—opposed and labelled as "Nature and Culture or Faith and Works" (598); and in the black-white contrast of Tom Jones ("picaro on the outside and a pearl within") and Master Blifil ("hypocrite, fair on the outside and corrupt within") in *Tom Jones* (598). Similarly, Fisch observes that Jane Austen, in the characters of Marianne and Elinor Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility* is not evidently seizing their "human essence," but the contrast of *Sense and Sensibility*— "two signs differentiated by a neat phonemic divergence" (598). The most signification illustrations that follow Fisch's argument are found in his discussion of Sterne's use of hobbyhorses and Dicken's use of caricatures. Fisch identifies the hobbyhorses Uncle Toby (fortification) and Walter Shandy (speculative knowledge) are obsessed with in *Tristram Shandy* as "a literary or linguistic tool, a mode of identifying by means of a sign. It has, in short, a semiotic rather than a psychological function" (599). He rightly points out that Sterne, by his theory of "hobbyhorses," reduces "to absurdity the notion of characters as a mode of description capable of truly defining and representing human person" (598-599). Whereas Sterne defines his characters by hobbyhorses, Dickens achieves it by a phrase or a gesture. Fisch recognizes Dickens's mastery of the art of caricature as directly related to semiotics. "The art of caricature" as Fisch observes:

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Does not signify what is already in the world; rather it imposes a mark on the world, and that mark is henceforward going to be indelible. When the caricature artist has picked the sign of the figure he is drawing—a furled umbrella, a beaked nose, a twitch of the mouth—we henceforward see that person as we had not seen him before. *The world does not yield these signs, it is rather the signs which come to designate and define the world* (emphasis added 599)

The words in emphasis highlight an important concept which Barthes put forward in *Mythologies (1957):* what go into the making of a sign are, individual's intention and society's conventions. Accordingly, Fisch notes that after reading Dickens's novels we tend to discover such characters as Mrs. Jellyby, Mr Podsnap, and Mr. Wemmick in the real world. Thus literature, especially language, is not only capable of signifying but is also capable of marking people and things in the world.

With the advent of the modern novel, notes Fisch, there is less confidence in our capacity to "read" the signs correctly in both fictional characters and living persons. The reason for this is found in the fact that the meaning of sign is shifting and unstable. He chooses Nathaniel Hawthorne's two novels—*The House of the Seven Gables* and *The Scarlet Letter* to illustrate the above point. In the former novel, Holgrave is a kind of engraver working in fixed impressions, the old stereotypes of the Puritan period. But he lacks reverence for what is fixed and unsettles everything. Similarly, in the latter novel, the Scarlet Letter (Fisch considers it an embroidered or engraved "character") is initiated as a clear sign for Hester's sinfulness, but it is later imprinted on Dimmesdale's flesh, thus giving rise to multiple interpretations. Fisch explains the reason behind destabilization of single or fixed meaning of signs: "For the signs formerly imposed on the human scene no longer possess the neatness and permanence they once had. There is a result less confidence in the stable identity of those human forms of personality which seemingly inhabit the world. They too have become little more than wandering signifiers (601). Such a view indicates that there are no fixed identities, but "only signs suspended in a void" (601). In other words, it is what postmodernists have called as "the death of the hero" (Cixous 387).

Character who once occupied a privileged position in the novel or the play, as the centre of a stage, is not immortal anymore. Attention in the postmodern era has been drawn towards unmasking the character and studying the language which creates subjectivity, which in turn, is multiple and changeable as well. Closely associated with the idea of character is subjectivity, as understood after Lacan's innovative theory of the split subject. The critique of Saussure linguistic sign as a stable entity changes the conception of character too. Hélène Cixous explores the reasons for the radical changes that have been taken place in understanding character. For a better understanding, her argument can be divided into two parts: "character" as conceived in the traditional criticism, and character as seen now.

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Cixous treats "character" from Lacanian psychoanalytic point of view. She denounces the very conception of "character," declaring it as an adjunct of traditional discussions on literature, and explains how such a conception has taken place. To understand her explanation, it is necessary to know briefly fuor important terms (taken from Lacan) that find prominent place in Cixous's argument: *imaginary, ego, symbolic*, and *subject. Imaginary* refers to an early state in the infant's development, a condition where there is no clear distinction between subject and object, itself and the external world. In this pre-Oedipal state, the child lives in a 'symbiotic 'relation with its mother's body. Within this *imaginary* state of being, the child's first development of an ego, of an integrated self-image occurs which is referred to as "mirror-stage." The child, who is physically uncoordinated, finds in the reflection a satisfying unified image of itself although its relation to this image is still of an *imaginary* kind, a blurring of subject and object—it begins to construct a centre of self. This self-recognition, Lacan insists, is mis-recognition; the subject apprehends itself only by means of a fictional construct whose defining characteristics (coherence and unity) it does not share. The sense of arriving at an 'I' reflected back to us by some object or person in the world. Hence, the *imaginary* for Lacan is precisely this realm of images in which we make identifications, but in the very act of doing so we are led to misperceive and misrecognize ourselves.

The *imaginary* state of being leads to the development of ego. As the child grows up, it will continue to make imaginary identifications with objects, and this is how its ego is built up. Terry Eagleton describes what is ego for Lacan: "the ego is just this narcissistic process whereby we bolster up a fictive sense of unitary selfhood by finding something in the world with which we can identify" (143). In the *imaginary* phase, the self is 'dyadic' in structure (child, and the mother who represents external reality), but soon, it gives way to a 'triadic' one. This happens when the father enters upon and initiates the child into the *symbolic* world of which he is the first representation. By accepting the sexual difference that is signified by father, the subject undergoes the process of socialization. Another important feature of this process is the acquisition of language that further emphasizes the differences—the child unconsciously learns that signs have meaning only by differences with other signs and that signs presupposes the absence of the object they signify. Through this, it learns that its identity as a subject is comprised by its relations of differences and similarity to the other subjects around. This denotes the passage from the imaginary world to what Lacan calls the "symbolic order," which Eagleton describes as "the pre-given social and sexual roles and relations which make up the family and society" (145). The *subject* formed by this process is a 'split' one, as it is divided between conscious existence of ego and the unconscious desire. The child learns that it cannot possess anything fully, cannot have direct access to reality; all that it has is language where one signifier implies another and that another, and so on. Eagleton best describes this state: "The 'metaphorical' world of the mirror has yielded ground to the 'metonymic' world of language. Along this metonymic chain of signifiers, meanings, or signifieds, will be produced; but no object or person can ever be fully 'present' in this chain, because as we have seen with Derrida its effect is to divide and differentiate all identities. (145)

Lacan describes this endless movement from one signifier to another as 'desire,' with the hope to fill the lack (loss of unified identity with the mother's body, the 'real' which lies outside the symbolic order).

Cixous makes use of the above-defined terms of Lacan for her explanation of what is a character. As we know, the imaginary state of being enters the symbolic and becomes not only its material, but is also subordinate to the symbolic. In her view, 'socialization' is attained when the production of the imaginary is controlled, by repressing the unconscious and by relegating the Ego to its "civil" place in the social system. In the semiotic sense, Eagleton describes the unconscious as "a continual movement and activity of signifiers, whose signified are often inaccessible to us because they are *repressed*" (146). Thus the unconscious is always indefinite and continually signifying, without ever arriving at the final meaning. If the same process takes place with regard to conscious life, then human beings cannot function or speak coherently at all. That is why, consciousness or the Ego represses the unconscious, and provisionally associates words to meanings. Consciousness strives to achieve some sense of human beings as reasonably unified, coherent selves, but this process takes place only at *imaginary* level of the ego, because "any attempt to convey a whole, unblemished meaning in speech," says Eagleton, is a pre-Freudian illusion" (147). Cixous expresses a similar view when she tries to define what the concept of character means to her:

> A "character" is always in store for the subject along the chain where everything is coded in advance. . . . Now, if "I"—true subject, subject of the unconscious—am what I can be, "I" am always on the run.
> It is precisely this open, unpredictable, piercing part of the subject, this *infinite* potential to rise up, that the "concept" of "character" excludes in advance. Under the reign of this "concept," the mass of Egos would be reduced to the absolute monarch that "character" *wants* to be . . . that is, if the unconscious could be cancelled out. (384)

Since the unconscious cannot be "cancelled out," "character," for Cixous, can have sense only as a "Figure" that can be used in semiotics: it can function as a social sign in relation to other signs within a text. However, if the text supports the existence of "character," then it is done in accordance with representationalism, which is mainly aimed at communicability. "The marketable form of literature," says Cixous "is closely related to that familiar, decipherable human sign which "character" claims to be …" (385). Here, "character" has referents to which he alludes, and has essential traits, which can assure the readers that he is true and identifiable. In other words, traditional readers look at text and character as iconic representations of reality, a simulacrum where signifiers yield definite signifieds. In Cixous's view, the ideology which underlies such a "fetishization" of "character" is that of an "I" who is believed to be *a whole subject* (that of the "character" as well as that of the author), conscious, knowable [. . .]" (385).

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The ideology to which Cixous points, is accompanied in the name of reality principle, and she traces the reason for such a view in semantic history of the word *character—Kharattein*: "It is first the mark, the drawn, written, preserved sign; then, by which the "character" is assured to be that which has been characterized and refers back to the stamp, to the origin" (386). In its lexical evolution, the word "character" also includes the meaning, the art of the portrait which confers the distinguishing mark and thus differentiates one person from another. It is designed more to function as a decisive element in the social coding, because it characterizes people. In this sense, the personage becomes, "in the final analysis, the role of roles" (386). Readers, when they confront a "character," engage themselves in a speculative operation where Ego's "(re)appropriation" of itself takes place. "Character" occupies a privileged position in literature, and without him/her, no text exists. Hence, Cixous observes, the disappearance of the "character" in the postmodern novel is disturbing to many readers who consider it a murder, a vacuum, and draw back from such a text where they cannot identify with anybody.

Cixous, however, clarifies that the "hero" or "character," "the captor of the imaginary" is not dead, but merely brought out of his illusion, what she terms as "unmasked."Unmasking of the character, as Cixous explains:

> does not mean reavealed! But rather denounced, reduced to his reality as simulacrum, brought back to the mask as mask. He is given up then to the complexity of his subjectivity, to his multiplicity, to his off-center position, to his permanent escapade: like the author, he disappears only to be multiplied, attains the self only to be, in the same instant, differentiated into a trans-subjective effervescence. (387)

The reference to 'trans-subjective effervescence' recalls Benveniste's views on the relationshiop among language, discourse and subjectivity, discussed in the first chapter. Benveniste dismantles the ubiquitous, transcendental "I" of Descartes, by proving that the personal pronouns "I" and "You" emanate meaning periodically in a discourse, and that these signifiers are reversible. Cixous draws attention to the constructed nature of subjectivity when she warns against being trapped, if we do not pay attention to the issues related to subject, and its "subjectification." What we take as the true subject is merely its mask, because "subject" is an effect of the unconscious, the production of which never stops. Thus Cixous describes the unconscious as "unanalysable" and "uncharacterizable" (387). For her, "I" is multiple, diverse and "insubordinable," and therefore, resisting subjugation in the name of "character." In the texts which exemplify these notions, "character" or "personage" is Nobody; even when he is presented as a "character," a part of his subjectivity remains unassigned. In addition to defying codification, Cixous says:

> These texts baffle every attempt at summarization of meaning and limiting, repressive interpretation. The subject flounders here in the exploded multiplicity of its states,

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> shattering the homogeneity of the ego of unawareness, spreading out in every possible direction, into every possible contradiction, trans egoistically. (388)

Thus subjectivity can neither be covered by, not contained in, nor designated by "character." Cixous finds such examples of inadequacy of "character" in novels by writers such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Henry James and even in Shakespeare.

Like Cixous, Erving Goffman sees social interaction in daily life from a "dramaturgical perspective" and expresses similar views regarding character. According to Goffman, we are all performers and audience on the universal stage of society, where the audience recognizes the acting codes enacted by performers. In other words, people are masked and when on some occasions the mask is removed, "the individual who performs the character will be seen for what he largely is, a solitary player involved in a harried concern for his production. Behind many masks many characters, each performer tends to wear a single look, a naked unsocialized look" (207). Fisch, who extrapolates Goffman's views in his essay, "Character as Linguistic Sign" reaches similar conclusion on character as that of Cixous:

> The "characters" of other people that we draw in our minds or that they adopt for out benefit are mere phantoms. . . . We construct characters for other people, we categorize them, attribute properties to them such as anger, greed, amiability, placing them as objects in the world. We also reflect upon our own selves, turning ourselves into objects. But such reflection carries with it the shadow of negation, of nothingness, it has no relation to Being-in-itself, to the plenitude of a subjective existence which cannot be known or described and certainly cannot be rendered on the stage. (602-603).

Both Fisch and Cixous emphasize the impossibility of finding a true connection between persons and their representations, thus paving a new way to look at character, that is, to come to terms with the relationship between the signifier and the signified which is always changing and multiple.

From various theoretical formulations, conceptions, and perspectives discussed above, it is evident that character is not a simple aspect of fiction. Although in most theoretical discussions of literary character, the mimetic or representational dimension is predominant, recent interest in the constructional or semiotic dimension of character provides a different perspective. There is a shift in focus of interest: from an attempt to test the correlation of real life individuals with those in fiction to an attempt to examine the semiotic conventions (textual elements, codes, norms and ideologies) that are operative in the construction or dissolution of a character. Such a shift is not only due to the radical changes in philosophical conception of language and the reality it produces, but also due to the changes in the conception of subject or self. An amalgamation of thoughts from recent investigations in linguistics, psychoanalysis and

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semiotics has heralded a new critical era where many of our traditional ways of studying literature have undergone great transformation.

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