THE CHARACTER – MORE THAN JUST A PAPER BEING

Cristina-Daniela Lateș
PhD Student, UMFST „G. E. Palade" of Târgu Mureș

Abstract: One of the most significant components of a story, perhaps the most important in terms of its value in constructing the world of the text, is the character. The character represents, therefore, the means through which readers experience and understand stories. As a narrative structure, the character has traditionally been treated as an embodiment conforming to various stereotyped roles or types. This approach emphasized the textual origin of characters and rejected the idea that they should be treated as equivalents to real people. However, recent research in cognitive narratology has begun to reevaluate characters, analyzing them from a psychological and cognitive perspective, recognizing the complexity of the relationship between character and reader. For Zunshine, theory of mind is not only an essential step in developing our ability to understand fiction, but also the primary reason why we read fiction. By stimulating cognitive systems, such as Theory of Mind, which are necessary for reading, a form of cognitive evolution occurs, as we learn essential cognitive mechanisms for social life. Thus, this approach argues that fictional literary works function as a catalyst for the development of our capacity to understand and interpret the thoughts and intentions of others. Literature serves as a theoretical training ground for the brain's cognitive mechanisms, training them in a way that mirrors real-life interactions. Cognitive theories emphasize the mental processes that influence the perception of characters and empathy with their types, making it possible to understand how characters are constructed in literature. According to these theories, throughout the reading process, readers accumulate various pieces of information about characters and organize and distribute them into specific "mental files" as well as into different categories or "mental models." This cognitive approach asserts that the character is more than a textual product; it must be processed in the same way as a real being, as a person, who, having emotional and experiential baggage, opens the door to the reader's empathy and self-identification within their own existence.

Keywords: character, story, reader, mental file, paper being

One of the most significant components of a narrative, perhaps the most consistent in terms of the value it carries in the construction of the world of the text, is the character. It is thus the means by which readers experience and understand the stories.

The character is a *Ink Man*, in Professor Jonathan Gottschall's metaphor. "In order to find an answer in people's souls, literature must talk about people, create people"[1]. In order for the story to convey a lesson, a new and valuable idea, the character must go through a transformation, and the events in which he takes part, supported by the tension and difficulties of the obstacles he encounters, bring changes in his attitude, mind and soul. In this direction, the reader can imagine how his life could overlap with what happened in the book through the protagonist with whom he identifies and even what would be the alternative scenarios of his life. Graham Swift offers insight into the character's migration from and between the fictional and real worlds: "Fictional characters are just ink scribbles on paper (or chemical stains on a celluloid film). They are ink people. They live in ink houses in ink towns. I work ink jobs. They have ink problems. They sweat ink and cry ink, and when they cut, they bleed ink. And yet ink people effortlessly traverse the porous membrane that

[1] Hertha Perez, *Ipostaze ale personajelor în roman*, Editura Junimea, Iași, 1979, p. 8 (original quote: „Ca să găsească un răspuns în sufletul oamenilor, literatura trebuie să vorbească despre oameni, să creeze oameni").

separates their ink world from our world. They move through our world of flesh and blood and possess real power in it." [2].

Over time, literary characters have been a subject of major interest for critics and exegetes. In this sense, Mario Vargas Llosa emphasizes the profound impact that some literary characters have had on his life, compared to real beings: "A handful of literary characters have marked my life much more strongly than a large part of the flesh and blood beings I have known."[3] Although it is undeniable that the reality of living beings gives them the advantage of being full of life, having as proof a visible and tangible body, to differentiate them from characters, who do not live among us physically, however, this difference is shattered when it comes to becoming both parts of the past - simple memories. From here on, the literary character goes far beyond the human being, tragically condemned to definitive erasure from memory, while the literary character can be continuously brought back to life by opening a book and going through the right pages. In order to study this fascinating phenomenon, over the generations, the status of the character has been a priority concern of literature, but especially the way in which he can leave such vivid and lasting impressions in the readers' consciousness. Although there is perhaps no concrete theory on this subject, there are suggestions from the social-psychological sciences that it would be the pre-existing condition of the reader for the effects and longevity of the character's life in the mind of the receiver.

The status of the character was clearly delimited and differentiated from that of the person with the structuralism that processed these theories, emphasizing categorically that fictional characters differ from real people due to their textual origin. As early as the middle of the twentieth century, some voices appeared who called this theory an anti-humanist orientation[4], because it activates an implicit skepticism about the status of the characters. In response, the researchers insisted on separating the character from the person and considered this approach a naïve one. Thus, the character has remained a narrative structure, treated over time as an embodiment that conforms to various templated roles or typologies.

This approach emphasized the textual origin of the characters and rejected the idea that they should be treated as equivalents of real people. However, recent research in the field of cognitive narration has begun to revalue the characters, analyzing them from a psychological and cognitive perspective, recognizing the complexity of the relationship between the character and the reader. This refers to the fact that the traditional view by which the character was considered a product of the text or a symbol, does not exhaustively capture its complexity and the implications it has in the relationship with the reader.

Uri Margolin's article can represent a historical landmark in the theorization of the literary character. Due to the ideas of the Reader Response Theory School[5] (reader-response criticism), which has historically been limited in time but influential, there is an importance given to the role of the reader in understanding literary characters. He delimits in the article

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[2] Graham Swift *apud*. Jonathan Gottschall, *Animalul povestitor. Cum ne fac poveștile oameni,* traducere din limba engleză de Smaranda Nistor, Editura Vellant, București, 2019, pp. 174-175 (original quote: „Personajele din ficțiune sunt doar mâzgălituri de cerneală pe hârtie (sau pete chimice pe o peliculă de celuloid). Sunt oameni de cerneală. Ei trăiesc în case de cerneală din orașe de cerneală. Muncesc slujbe de cerneală. Au probleme de cerneală. Asudă cerneală și plâng cerneală, iar atunci când se taie, sângerează cerneală. Și totuși oamenii de cerneală traversează fără niciun efort membrana poroasă care desparte lumea lor de cerneală de lumea noastră. Ei se mișcă prin lumea noastră de carne și oase și posedă o reală putere în ea").

[3] Mario Vargas Llosa, *Orgia perpetuă: Flaubert și Doamna Bovary*, Editura Humanitas Fiction, București, 2024, p. 15 (original quote: „O mână de personaje literare mi-au marcat viața mult mai puternic decât o mare parte dintre ființele de carne și oase pe care le-am cunoscut").

[4] Rita Felski, „Identifying with Characters", în *Characters: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies*, Eds. Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi, University of Chicago Press, 2019, pp. 77-126.

[5] Wolfgang, Iser, *Actul lecturii. O teorie a efectului estetic*, Editura Paralela 45, Pitești, 2006.

"Character"[6] three types of characters: the character as a literary figure, i.e. an artistic product or an artifice created by an author for specific purposes; the character as a fictional individual, who is supposed to exist in a possible, fictional context – in other words, the character as an individual in a possible world; and the character as a text- or mental image-based construct in the reader's mind. As for the third type, the character seen as a text-based construct or mental image in the reader's mind, the cognitive-psychological approach considers characters as text-based mental models of possible individuals, constructed in the reader's mind during text processing. More precisely, the characters are conceptualized here as complex mental representations of the reader, represented by constructions, portraits and mental files. As the text is read, guided by the principle of "read for character"[7]), step-by-step collects character-related information, which in turn can serve as the basis for trait assignments.

Once a certain number of properties have been accumulated, they often activate a general structure of knowledge stored in long-term memory, under which these properties can be subsumed, structured, and integrated into a character model or type. These mental processes, categorizing characters, and generating and accumulating details can take place simultaneously. The elaboration in the mind of models or types of characters includes schemes and stereotypes that pertain to both knowledge of the world and the history of literature, that is, knowledge of the structure and evolution of the literary system itself.

Once a harmonization between information and categories is achieved, the reader can integrate all the information available up to that point, completing the mental model, creating expectations and finding explanations for the data already stored, for example, relating an individual's actions to the intentions, beliefs or dispositions naturally associated with this category in which he would fit. At the same time, second-order characterizations can also take place here, in which inferences are based on two or more episodes or temporal landmarks, which can lead to the extraction of a conclusion related to the character, such as the level of consistency or inconsistency of the character, the relationships between his characteristics such as the relationship between his tendency towards reason or emotion.

As the text is read, additional information appears that can influence the established pattern or pattern, or can lead to its modification/adjustment. In isolated cases, the new information comes into direct contrast with the defining features of the created category, causing a disturbance of the scheme, a "decategorization" of the individual, in the sense that what was considered about him is canceled, requiring an orientation towards a new category, towards a new type of person, the previous inferences being invalidated. This can lead to the construction of a new category or the inability to do so, in which case the encounter of a new type of character, hitherto unencountered, that does not fit any stereotype in the reader's existing knowledge base, is recognized. Many innovative writers often try to create exactly this type of character. In addition, since characters exist in different time frames and contexts over a different period of time, one category may be applicable to one phase of a character's trajectory, while another category is required for a later phase. In such cases, one can look for a second-order category to integrate the two phases, such as the rise and fall of a behavior. Finally, an individual can display radically different category traits simultaneously, preventing any general integration or closure into a category.

This direction implies that readers form a "mental model of the character", a kind of "mental file", for each character in a text during the reading process: "Reading for character is triggered or initiated by the reader identifying in the text a referring expression and opening a mental file bearing this name in which all further information about the corresponding

[6] Uri Margolin, „Character", în David Herman, *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, Editura Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 66-79.
[7] *Ibidem.*

individual will be continuously accumulated, structured, and up-dated as one reads on, until the final product or character profile is reached at the end of the reading act" [8].

Based on the premise that the mental processes of reception and comprehension of literature are part of the knowledge that also encompasses the processes of understanding the world, cognitive approaches have begun to investigate the cognitive architecture that underlies the reading process, in order to reveal the fundamental elements of literary understanding and the construction of fictional worlds in the reader's mind. In this context, the characters are no longer seen only as a textual construction, but as the product of a complex process of information processing, at several levels, in which mental data structures are created, successively enriched and/or modified during the reading of a narrative text. Based on this understanding, researchers such as Richard Gerrig and Ralf Schneider have shown interest in mapping the conscious and unconscious mental processes involved in the construction of characters. For example, Ralf Schneider[9] developed a detailed description of the formation of mental character models, drawing on psychological theories about how people tend to categorize other people. The realization of this description was possible by also taking into account the way in which the texts help readers to categorize, individualize or personalize literary characters.

By studying the basic aspects of the formation of mental models of characters, these cognitive approaches have managed to summarize convincing evidence that from the perspective of human perception, literary characters and human beings are processed and understood through similar meaning-making strategies, in this sense, the logical and ontological differences between the two categories being insignificant.

Against the backdrop of Alan Palmer's work, *Fictional Minds* cognitive criticism began to move from a more general investigation of various aspects of character construction to a specific analysis of the mental (re)construction and processing of fictional minds. By reversing the Aristotelian idea that action dominated the character, Palmer places the character at the center of the discussion, around whose inner life the story revolves, fundamentally, both structurally and emotionally. He argued that one of the pleasures of reading novels is the pleasure of being made aware of what a variety of fictional people think, and he associates reading with an act beneficial to everyday life, as it helps to facilitate real-life activities, many of which require the ability to accurately decode the behavior of others. Starting from this observation, he concludes that "narrative fiction is, in essence, the presentation of fictional mental functioning. [...] If I am right, then it follows that the study of the novel is the study of fictional mental functioning and also that the task of theorists is to make explicit the various means by which this phenomenon is studied and analyzed."[10]

Palmer's programmatic statement reflects a general trend in cognitive literature research that focuses on the study of the minds of both readers and characters. Even though his study has provided an important impetus for the development of this trend, a publication at least as influential is *Why we read fiction* by Lisa Zunshine. In this work, the American researcher Lisa Zunshine adapted the concept of "Theory of Mind" to literary studies, developed in social and cognitive psychology, (alternatively also referred to as "mind reading") and designed to explore the fundamental human ability to attribute mental states, beliefs, beliefs or feelings to other people. It emphasizes the idea that humans attribute to themselves, but also to others, a wide and diverse range of mental states, from beliefs and aspirations to disappointments and pains: "People attribute to self and others a host of mental states, ranging from beliefs and aspirations to headaches, disappointments, and fits of anger.

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 76.
[9] Ralf Schneider, „Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character: The Dynamics of Mental-Model Construction." Style, vol. 35, no. 4, 2001, p. 607-640.
[10] Alan Palmer, *Fictional Minds*, Editura University of Nebraska Press, United States of America, 2004, p. 5.

Other creatures undoubtedly have pains, expectations, and emotions. But having a mental state and representing another individual as having such a state are entirely different matters. The latter activity, mentalizing or mindreading, is a second-order activity: It is mind thinking about minds. It is the activity of conceptualizing other creatures (and oneself) as loci of mental life."[11]

Therefore, "mind reading" refers to a common process that is resorted to when attributing a certain mental state to a person, based on their obvious actions. Even though this practice seems simple, researchers have considered it cognitively complex and an important element of social cognition that underlies different types of human interactions. Using this research in the scientific framework, Zunshine helped develop "theory of mind" as a "traveling concept" in several fields of the humanities. (In his book *In Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*[12], Mieke Bal introduces the term "traveling concept" to describe how certain concepts move and evolve between different academic disciplines, gaining new meanings and functionalities in the process. The "Traveler Concept" is a flexible methodological tool that facilitates interdisciplinary analysis. These concepts are not characterized by rigidity, but are malleable and able to adapt to new contexts and fields of study. Thus, they change their meaning as they are applied in different disciplines, allowing the borrowing and adaptation of various theoretical tools). She adopted the concept of mind reading, which is an essential cognitive foundation for navigating the social world, and applied it to reading literature. In other words, it is a concept used for reading and receiving fiction, being a facilitator for discovering the interactions in the narrative universes of literature. What stands out is that reading the narrative would be both impossible and meaningless in the absence of the cognitive ability to identify and track the mental states, beliefs, and emotions of fictional characters. "Theory of Mind is a group of cognitive adaptations that allows us to navigate our social world and that also structures this world. Being an intensely social species, we read fiction because it engages, in various particular and specific ways, our Theory of Mind."[13]

For Zunshine, theory of mind is not only an essential step in forming our ability to understand fiction, but the primary reason why we read fiction. By stimulating cognitive systems, such as the Theory of Mind, which are necessary for reading, a form of cognitive evolution is achieved, since cognitive mechanisms essential for social life are learned. Thus, this approach argues that fictional literary works function as a catalyst for developing our ability to understand and interpret the thoughts and intentions of others. The literature serves as a theoretical training source for the brain's cognitive mechanisms, training them in a way that reflects real-life interactions.

In conclusion, cognitive theories emphasize the mental processes that influence the perception of characters and empathy with their typology, making it possible to understand how characters are constructed in literature. According to these theories, during reading, readers accumulate various data about the characters and organize and distribute them in certain "mental folders" as well as in different categories or "mental models". This cognitive approach asserts that the character is more than a textual product; He must be processed like the real being, like the man, who, having emotional and experiential baggage, offers the opening of empathy and finding the reader in his own existence.

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[11] Alvin I. Goldman, *Simulating Minds: The Philosophy, Psychology, and Neuroscience of Mindreading*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 3.

[12] Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide,*University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2002.

[13] Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, Editura Ohio State University Press, 2006, p. 162.

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