How Readers Recognise Concepts in Literature

In 1972 structuralist Propp (*Morphologie des Märchens*) identified different kinds of agents in the folktale, many of which are interchangeable.

> What matters, for example, is that the hero vanquish his enemy, not who the enemy is, or who – a bear, and old woman, a princess – gives him the winged horse, the magic ring, or the enchanted spear. (Hochman 20)

Here, the essence of a character (hero and enemy), as well as their course of action (fight or die) are so clearly identifiable and repetitive that they become interchangeable; they become the embodiment of a concept. Portrayals of single concepts are very limited compared to portrayals in modern novels, which usually feature more complex and individual characters (Hochman 29). While contemporary narratives still engage heroes and villains, they are less interchangeable. Nevertheless, I suggest that humans are prone to simplifying and categorising their reality (see also Chapter 3.1). Based on their real-life experience and knowledge, readers tend to recognise patterns in characters and draw parallels to their own realities, thus even complex portrayals are simplified. Moreover, characters are categorised in relation to other characters or even human beings. For example, a reader who encounters several autism portrayals will compare them to each other. Additionally, these characters likely share aspects that allow readers to recognise patterns based on the concept they have of this diagnosis. Thus, with every portrayal, a reader updates their concept of autism. This can be likened to Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Familienähnlichkeit* (family resemblance)[3], which suggests that at times we do not have a fixed definition of something but rather a working concept that is consistently modified and extended. Wittgenstein famously used 'games' as his example to denote a group of things with overlapping essences.

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3   Whose flaws Maurice Mandelbaum (1965) precisely pointed out.

I also suggest that if a reader attributes the concept 'autism' to other characters that do not feature an explicit diagnosis, it may be assumed that these portrayals have indicative characteristics that correspond with the criteria a reader attaches to their concept. Such 'characteristics' may be based on family resemblance and the reader's working concept of autism, thus characters are associated with autism by close proximity with other characters previously classified. Any resemblance remains open for debate and when some readers find that 'autism' is the best concept to reinterpret the portrayal of Sherlock Holmes, others are bound to disagree. Still, a reader who learns about Holmes's alleged autism has a disposition when it comes to the interpretation. This effect is called the 'primacy effect'. It emphasises the order in which information is given, for most people have a "tendency to persist in the direction wherein they embarked on any activity" (M. Perry 53). For example, "the first character to be introduced by a text [will be set] as the protagonist for as long as it has not been displaced in the center by another character" (53). More often than not, the primacy effect will cause tension at a later stage for new information may not be compatible with set expectations (57). The primacy effect can also be observed in the way readers apply their pre-existing knowledge to the text:

> First, people try to assimilate inconsistent information into the established impression, and second, people tend to focus on consistent information while simultaneously ignoring inconsistent information. Evidence has been found to suggest that both strategies are applied to maintain attitudes, expectations, and stereotypes. (Auracher and Hirose 803)

Thus, a reader who expects Holmes to share the characteristics of an autism portrayal will find evidence for their assumptions. Psychologists call this phenomenon 'confirmation bias':

> Our natural tendency seems to be to look for evidence that is directly supportive of hypotheses we favor and even, in some instances,

of those we are entertaining but about which [sic.] are indifferent. (Nickerson 211)

Moreover, "people do not naturally adopt a falsifying strategy of hypothesis testing" (Nickerson 211). Both, the primacy effect and the confirmation bias are likely to firmly pull the wool over our eyes when it comes to recognising recurring structures in literature, even if the text suggests otherwise.

There is a second aspect that comes into play when literary characters are simplified to become representative of a concept. I have already stated that mimesis is the idea that art imitates nature. It is most likely the process by which autism seeped into fiction, but it nevertheless warped its appearance. Hochman introduced the term 'stylisation' to refer to the artificiality of characters, which the reader simultaneously remains aware of and chooses to ignore (90). Interestingly, the term is nowadays used in game design to denote a certain style of game art as opposed to realism:

> Stylization refers to a visual depiction, which represents an object without a full attempt and accurate representation of an object's realistic appearance. This can include simplifications in shape, lines, color, pattern, surface details, functionality and relationship to other objects in a scene. Which is why stylization is most commonly used to describe an art style that has more cartoony features than a semi-realistic style that usually adheres to realism in details rather than simplifications. (Aava)

Hochman, on the other hand, defines it as follows:

> ... [S]tylization has to do with some model or norm from which stylized characterizations deviate. The norm [...] is clearly resemblance to real people, which means some form of realism or naturalism of representation. After all, when we say that something is stylized, we mean that we can define the original, or the raw material, or the norm that is deformed or reformed in the course of its creation. That something

> must be there before it can be shaped to a greater or lesser degree in
> its presentation. (Hochman 90)

There is an inherent degree of stylisation to all fictional portrayals, but
the theory itself implies two further aspects. Firstly, as a reader, I am
only able to perceive the abstraction when I know the original. Thus, I
must have some concept of autism[4]. Secondly, literary portrayals must
not necessarily be realistic to convey a certain image. Consequently,
autism portrayals must not tally with the way autism presents itself in
humans.

    Fiction will always be stylised to a certain degree, thus Hochman in-
troduced a scale from minimal to maximal stylisation:

> More accurately, minimal stylization involves the depiction of charac-
> ters in more or less normative terms and in terms of the way we natu-
> rally might perceive them if they really existed. (Hochman 93)

According to Hochman, highly stylised characters are also easier to de-
cipher in terms of motifs than minimally stylised ones, since they usu-
ally do not have contradictory traits (128).[5] Finally, there are borderline
cases of highly stylised characters that "nonetheless strike us as possible,
if borderline, representations of "real" people who are dominated by one
particular characteristic" (97).

    The degree of stylisation in a character might be better understood by
James Phelan's theory that "[c]haracter consists of three components –
the mimetic (character as person), the thematic (character as idea), and
the synthetic (character as artificial construct)" (Phelan, *Narrative as*

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4   In fact, I believe, one must have an understanding of normality and deviance, a
    theory I will follow up in Chapter 4.

5   Indeed, this relates to Forster's distinction of 'flat' and 'round' characters. Forster
    is still quoted on character classification because his system is convincingly
    easy – easy to understand and if one does not give it too much thought, one may
    play the classification part by ear. However, there are some flaws to Forster's
    theory, and it consequently needs further discussion (see for example Pickrel/
    Fishelov), which I do not believe to be beneficial to this work.

rhetoric 29). Before I can extend this concept to autism portrayals, I must examine these components further.

First and foremostly, Phelan differentiates dimensions and functions:

> A dimension is any attribute a character may be said to possess when that character is considered in isolation from the work in which he or she appears. A function is a particular application of that attribute made by the text through its developing structure. In other words, dimensions are converted into functions by the progression of the work. Thus, every function depends upon a dimension but not every dimension will necessarily correspond to a function. (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 9)

In essence, then, characters have one or more dimensions which signify a mimetic component (traits), a thematic component (concepts they embody), as well as a synthetic component (their narratological function). Chatman's paradigm of traits merely encompasses the mimetic dimension, whereas Phelan's concept of character also extends to their thematic and synthetic components. This allows me to unite previous considerations into one theory: the teleological determination of a character is their synthetic component, their mimetic component is what allows a reader to imagine them as potential human beings and their thematic component is the embodiment of a concept. For example, the folktale agents Propp identified had pronounced thematic and synthetic components, but little to no mimetic relevance, since all traits of the mimetic dimension are

> used together in creating the illusion of a plausible person and, for works depicting actions, in making particular traits relevant to later actions, including of course the development of new traits. In works where the traits fail to coalesce into the portrait of a possible person, … a particular trait might serve only to identify that character, e.g., the detective who always eats junk food, and the trait might not (though it often will) have any consequences for his later actions—or for our understanding of them. (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 11)

Presumably, then, more traits equal more plausible portrayals, unless, of course, these traits contradict each other. Finally, some traits may supersede human abilities, such as magical or superhuman powers. These are justified by the unreality they are contained within.

Thematic dimensions

> are attributes, taken individually or collectively, and viewed as vehicles to express ideas or as representative of a larger class than the individual character (in the case of satire the attributes will be representative of a person, group, or institution external to the work). (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 12–13)

Phelan remarks that characters with an emphasis on their thematic dimension become "themes with legs" (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 9) as opposed to actual persons. Consequently, these characters are mere personifications of an idea or a concept. In terms of autism portrayals, I assume the following: Due to family resemblance, autism portrayals with an explicitly mentioned diagnosis will likely share characteristics. I should subsequently be able to identify at least some of them. Additionally, the more of these characteristics a character features, the more pronounced their thematic component becomes. I will therefore focus on the similarities of these characters, but their stylised nature allows no inferences about autists in real life.

Finally, the synthetic component of a character is its artificiality (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 2), i.e. the fact that they are fictional characters and not people. The authorial audience will always remain aware of this, contrary to the narrative audience (91). The author may try to keep the synthetic component as minimal as possible, or they might emphasise it for artistic purposes, e.g. drawing attention to it by using aptronyms (70). This again touches upon the fact that fictional autism portrayals are stylised. I further suggest that although a reader's knowledge of autism is gathered under the same concept – if only for the label – they make excuses for literary derivations thereof. In other words, because a reader is aware of the fact that fictional portrayals are synthetic, they factor in a certain degree of stylisation that comes

with the medium. If not, fictional portrayals will create unrealistic expectations.

Concluding this chapter, I can state that characters are artificial because they are both larger and lesser than life. The limited data available is combined with teleological determination, thus making images of characters easier to retain than images of other people. Moreover, because of the limited data, readers tend to attribute more meaning to these characters. Additionally, literary characters tend to have a thematic component which makes them representative of an idea, a concept, or a class of people. Associations with a certain concept (idea, class of people) can be intentionally encoded into the text by the author, to the point where characters are explicitly labelled, or they may be interpretations of a reader. Either way, readers tend to categorise characters according to their meaning, so that by proximity, i.e. 'family resemblance', those characters define and redefine the concept they were deemed representative of. Generally speaking, the reader's understanding of reality affects how they interpret a character. Any interpretation is, however, more indicative of the reader's understanding of a concept at a certain point in time. If such interpretations coincide with those of others, they may even denote the public's understanding of this concept.

Because characters will always remain artificial, it is impossible to 'diagnose' them. Thus, while characters can be representative of the (a) concept of autism, they are not 'autistic'. Moreover, applying a concept to a character will necessarily distort the reader's interpretation. Due to the primacy effect and the confirmation bias, readers might then be liable to discard textual evidence that would disprove their theory. However, if a reader is unable to reconcile a character with the concept they applied, they might consider it an unrealistic portrayal. This will most likely happen if a character was explicitly linked to a concept but subsequently featured different characteristics than they expected them to. If necessary, readers will then discard one concept and apply a different one. As long as a character is not explicitly labelled, e.g. as being representative of autism, interpretations remain subject to debate. Characters are usually representative of several concepts and have therefore more than one meaning, even though their 'textual skeleton' remains the same.