Traditionally, formalists and structuralists alike argued

> that characters are products of plots, that their status is "functional," that they are, in short, participants or *actants* rather than *personnages*, that it is erroneous to consider them as real beings. (Chatman 111, original highlighting)

With the emergence of the modern novel featuring highly individual characters, this theory became much disputed (Chatman 112–113). Unsurprisingly, Barthes himself later discarded his original theory (Hochman 22), and I will do so, too. Literary characters are more than a collection of words – or verbs – but less than the people that surround us.

In *Character in Literature*, Baruch Hochman gives a good introduction to this debate. I wish to use his insights as a guide to steer through the highly contested waters of defining literary characters. This chapter focuses on the theory behind characters, with a generalised view of how readers potentially conceptualise them, how our own ideas shape them, and whether one can 'diagnose' disorders in fictional portrayals. Since it is concerned with general aspects of portraying 'diagnoses' in literature rather than focusing on autism alone, this chapter can be considered a broad theoretical introduction.

Larger and Lesser Than Life

Baruch Hochman conceptualises characters as images the author encoded in a text, later to be decoded by the reader. He further argues that literature encodes characters similar to how the reader perceives people in real life (Hochman 38).

> A … crucial point is that the means of generating images of characters do not in themselves constitute character; they signify it. Character in itself does not exist unless it is retrieved from the text by our consciousness, together with everything else in the text. But it can be

> retrieved, provisionally and for the sake of pleasure or understanding. … Characters do not "live" between the covers of a book; Constantine Levin and Othello are not homunculi contained in the works they figure in. They, like everything else in the text, exist meaningfully only insofar as they come to exist in our consciousness. (Hochman 32)

According to Hochman, fiction creates an 'unreality' (Hochman 25), making characters come alive in the readers' heads. Because they have a concept of what constitutes a person (7), they are able to decode and conceptualise literary characters. Similarly, James Phelan wrote that "the description [of a character] creates its effect by playing off—and with—the way characters are images of possible people" (Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots* 2). I believe, this theory can be extended by assuming that readers apply the same concepts to the 'unreality' of fiction which they use to understand reality in the first place. It is, in essence, based on the Ancient Greek concept of mimesis, where art is always an imitation of nature and thus cannot possibly be understood without considering nature first.

Based on this premise, Hochman suggests that readers attribute psychological functions to literary characters:

> [I]f we read characters, like people, as fields on which values enact themselves in both conscious and unconscious ways, we easily convert "values" into categories such as "motives' [sic] and "impulses" and consider ways in which values are embedded in the deeper structures of motivation as well as the most manifest level of behavior. (Hochman 52)

By attributing motifs and impulses to characters the reader also grants them a consciousness and a will of their own, considering their actions as self-motivated and not merely the pulling of strings by a puppeteer. Here, Hochman assumes that readers rely on their own experience when it comes to explaining behaviour.

> Harvey holds that the process of retrieving character from fiction involves acts of reconstruction on the part of readers (or spectators), and that such reconstruction draws on readers' own experiences not only of people and the language in which we talk about people but of themselves. (Hochman 38–39)

I believe this is also the moment a character becomes real; by paralleling them with living beings and granting them motifs and free will, their behaviour becomes facetted, and their teleology resolves into existence. As a reader, I may still be aware of the character's narratological purpose, but it will only become pronounced once I revoke my willing suspension of disbelief.

The problem is that the exchange of information between text and reader is not straightforward. This phenomenon is what Chatman refers to as the 'aesthetic object', i.e. the form characters and the worlds they inhibit take in the readers' heads independently of the aesthetics of the text (Chatman 27). Harvey puts it more lyrically when he states that

> a fictional character lives in two dimensions of freedom where we live in only one; the character's freedom exists in relation to the author and in relation to the quality of the imagined fictional world. (Harvey 133)

In essence, a character that does come alive in the reader's head is never the same exact image the writer had in mind. This further complicates matters when it comes to retrospectively applied concepts since it widens the leeway of subjective interpretation. Thus, there are two antagonistic forces when statements are made about fictional portrayals. One of them is the everchanging nature of concepts which all of us use to describe and construct reality, while the other is a distortion in communication between writer and reader. Arguably, explicit labels such as 'autistic' will help with the latter, especially since "we reduce characters, as we reduce plots (or sequences of events), to what we take to be their essential meaning or their animating principle" (Hochman 41). In other words, because as readers we are (at times subconsciously) aware of a character's teleological purpose, we attribute some kind of essential

meaning to them. Perhaps the most obvious answer to the question of whether one can 'diagnose' characters, would then be 'No because they are not human.' After all, diagnostic criteria were made for actual human beings on whom one can run tests, do bloodwork, ask questions, etc. In literature, these characters are but words on paper, essentially an incomplete evidence file. Moreover, they are fictional and as such will always be artificial – thus why bother 'diagnosing' something that is not real? And yet they are, in fact, alive in the readers' minds.

Ironically, there is a longstanding debate in literary theory about whether fictional characters are larger or lesser than life. Both sides base their arguments on four commonly cited aspects; a character's unity, their teleology, their purposiveness (determination), and the amount of information the reader receives about them. On one hand, characters seem larger than life when it comes to understanding them and their purpose. E.M. Forster argued that "in the novel we can know people perfectly, and, apart from the general pleasure of reading, we can find here a compensation for their dimness in life" (Forster 46). Hochman, agreeing with Forster, states that because as readers we can know characters perfectly, they are more interesting to us, since we are also aware of their secrets and motifs. Their purpose within the narrative further heightens the fascination since their teleology "charges characters with a vividness and intensity that rarely inform the personalities that we deal with in life" (Hochman 69). In a combination of all three aspects, it is the narrative that simultaneously generates the character's determination and the possibility of teleological interpretation, while the reader is provided with relevant information only (61). Additionally, the relevant information is neatly organised and highly coherent (65). Here, the character's artificiality arises from the fact that the information given is too organised and too coherent (61) since it is commonly understood that no living being has a teleological determination. On this side of the debate, it is also argued that our abilities to interpret actions and recognise motifs tend to be clouded when it comes to real persons. In real life, Hochman suggests, we not only

> tend to be submerged … in data but in experience as well, experience of ourselves, of others, and of the world. Most of us, even when we can gather and process the requisite data about others and arrive at a crystallized and clear consciousness of them, do not do so for long enough to form coherent and stable images of them or coherent accounts of their lives. (Hochman 63)

In other words, according to Hochman humans are too caught up in the moment to consider other people's lives while also lacking the data to interpret them teleologically. Rawdon Wilson even remarked that actual persons "never do [have motifs and values] in any clear sense" (747) and thus remain 'opaque' (747).

Contrary to that, and leaning towards the structuralist side, the very same arguments are used to justify why a character will always remain lesser than a human being. Thus, it can also be said that one will always know people better than characters, since first and foremost, there is a "potentially endless amount of information that we can gather about a person" (Hochman 61), whereas the information given about a certain character will always be limited. It is a main argument when it comes to 'diagnosing' characters that there is only a limited amount of information and the fact that no more can be generated. One can, arguably, question the author on the character, given they are still alive, but in terms of data, as opposed to interpretation, we will never have any more than written evidence. This, then, leads to a second aspect of why one will never know characters as well as people:

> Characters in literature, moreover, often lack even the appearance of unity that people in life ordinarily have. Characters cannot, of course, have real life histories, and they need not have imagined ones either. And they need not be unified. This is not so with people. Within the central philosophic and psychological tradition of the West, we tend to assume that people in life have such histories and that they evolve within them as unified, and possibly unique, beings. (Hochman 60)

Here Hochman argues that a character's unity is *lacking* since as a reader I will never perceive more of them than glimpses with large gaps in between, whereas I can assume that my neighbour next door did continue to exist and lead a life between the two times I greeted them.

Indeed, the teleology of living people lies within their uninterrupted history of being. They exist for the sole purpose of existing and by doing so create their own determination. As a reader, I may not know whether a character was invented to fit the plot or vice versa, but I can say for sure that the history of a living being always presupposes their existence. Thus, characters are simultaneously lesser than life in that they lack unity, but also larger than life for they are teleologically embedded in a narrative that justifies their purpose.

Diagnosing Characters?

The limited data in combination with their heightened teleological determination leads to the phenomenon that we tend to remember a character "long after we have forgotten everything else about the texts that generate them" (Hochman 35). In other words, one retains an image or a concept of a character (35). Ironically, characters may thus become representative of ideas, emotions, or concepts, or what Chatman calls the paradigm of traits.

> … Chatman makes an elaborate case for the affinity between characters in literature and people in life, and for the similarity between the way we retrieve them, conceptualize them, and respond to them. He goes further in this direction, in fact, than I have so far indicated. Chatman holds that retrieval and imaginative reconstruction of character permit and even mandate speculation on the past, present, and future of each character. His grounds for doing so are the "openness," as he terms it, that is made possible by the extrapolation of a paradigm of traits for the character – a paradigm that exists in the spatial dimension that we abstract from the temporal sequence of the action. (Hochman 35–36)