CHAPTER III

CHARACTER IN FICTION

Character is among the most prominent structural features of the novel. The story is, of course, essential, but it is always about men and women. Besides knowing what happened we wish to know to whom it happened. This is the actor or character of the story. Events and incidents have no significance if they do not weave around human beings. If one says that 'a tree has fallen,' it would hardly be of interest. If we add that a man was injured by the falling of a tree, it at once interests us. We immediately want to know who that man was, how much he was hurt or whether he was taken to
the hospital, or to his home. Thus the involvement of human beings in any incident is the feature which specially attracts our attention.

It has always been a moot point how a novel originates in the author's mind. There is perhaps no hard-and-fast rule about this. Some incidents or the remnants of some event left in the mind fertilized the imagination of Henry James, and he started writing a novel. That is to say, the story or the incidents inspired him to write. Quite contrary to this, "the germ of story, with him (Turgeneff), was never an affair of plot — that was the last thing he thought of: it was the representation of certain persons. The first form in which a tale appeared to him was the figure of an individual, or a collection of individuals, whom he wished to see in action, being sure that such people must do something very special and interesting."1 George Eliot seems to be one of the few novelists who find no rift between characters and plot. On the other hand Virginia Woolf finds plot unnecessary or, rather, even an obstruction to the vision which the novelist wishes to record or convey. According to her, life is
not symmetrically arranged like a conventional plot; and, so a next plot mars the effect of reality. In fact she does not also seem to be interested in character as such; what did interest her was the intensity with which a sensitive mind reacted to things, persons, and, experiences physical and mental. Whatever we may decide about the relative importance of character and plot, it will not be denied that people have to be there in a novel.

These two aspects of the novel — character and story — differentiate the novel into two broad categories. One is the novel of character, and the other the novel of action. Such a classification has obvious limitations, but would serve to distinguish novels according to their relative emphasis on one or the other of these elements. There are novels which stress certain figures more than the theme or the plot. We forget the story, and the characters linger long in the memory. Someone asked Dickens: "What inspired you to write *The Pickwick Papers*?" Dickens replied, "I thought of Mr. Pickwick." Like him, many novelists first conceived the characters. These characters may be altogether imaginary or taken from real life; but some or the other trait of the characters have inspired the novelist to write.
Novelists like Defoe, Charlotte Bronte, Goldsmith, Meredith and Joyce Cary can be grouped in this class. According to Edwin Muir the 'purest example' of this sort of novel is Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. It has "no figure who exists to precipitate the action; no very salient plot; no definite action to which everything contributes; no end towards which all things move. The characters are not conceived as parts of the plot; on the contrary they exist independently, and the action is subservient to them." Edwin Muir is perhaps partially just. Some of *Vanity Fair* 's characters are undoubtedly memorable, but Thackeray's main purpose was to represent the triviality and vanity in almost all of its characters. Defoe's *Moll Flanders* is also one of the novels of this group. The heroine, Moll, stands alone in the whole length of the novel. We know her from every aspect, and the story remains somewhere in the background of our mind. "She fills the book that bears her name or rather stands alone in it, like a tree in a park, so that we can see her from every aspect and are not bothered by rival growths."
In these novels the author is like a portrait painter. His theme is the individual man or woman. The situations are largely general, and have no individual significance. They are designed to introduce more characters, and to tell something more about them. A rigid plot restricts the movement and development of characters; so, the plot needs be 'loose and easy'; otherwise it will not give the character full freedom to grow. David Cecil says: "whereas in the novel of situation, reality is all too often sacrificed to pattern, in the novel of character it is pattern that tends to go to the wall." Here the novelist need not plan the plot from the very beginning. He can go on inventing as he proceeds with the story, as did Swift and Thackeray. The reader is acquainted with them in the beginning and they remain the same throughout. What changes is our knowledge of them. The character being static, the author puts them in the midst of different persons and circumstances to bring out the whole. Forster terms these characters 'flat'. In Charlotte Bronte's Villette the interest in the character mars the unity of the novel. In the first half, the hero is Dr. John and in the second, Paul Emmanuel. Lucy
knows loves both; and is the only link between the
two clearly demarcated parts. The novel is captivating
as her love for each of the two holds the reader's
interest, but the men are related to each other in no
other way. Neither throws light on the other. The
two parts remain separate, and do not make a whole.

In novels as well as in real life we come
across persons who have qualities which resemble those
of real persons. On the basis of this, we group
characters of the novels under certain heads. Critics
have classified characters according to the dominant
traits; combination of different qualities; independent
or 'interlinked with the story; individualised or
typical.

One of the classifications of characters is as
flat and round characters. During the nineteenth century,
the general preference was for round characters. The
'flat' was considered a failure. But no character can
be a failure if it is deliberately fashioned 'flat'.
Edwin Muir asks: "why, indeed should not a character be
flat? The only real answer to this is that the present
taste in criticism prefers round characters. The taste
of the next generation may prefer flat, for all we know."
Whatever be the taste, success or failure is not to be judged by this criterion. "Flat" and "round" characters have their own special functions to perform. These terms merely show the degree of fullness which the novelist imparts to different characters.

The flat character is that in which only one trait is emphasized; all the other qualities are practically neglected. It seems somewhat unnatural that a man has only one quality but it may be good enough for the author's purpose. Whatever he wants to convey through a character is deftly done by this means. No confusion can arise, as we are sure of the character's behaviour. Such flat characters are quite often required in drama, as there is limited time and limited means to show the depth and inner recesses of human mind and behaviour.

Even in fiction every successful comic character is flat. When comic characters tend to become round, they tire the reader. "For when a comic character begins to put on three-dimensionality to abandon his stock phrase, and to say something else—most of all when he appears tired of entertaining us, and seems to want our sympathy—we are generally displeased........" the clown with
a breaking heart is an abomination."\(^6\)

In the seventeenth century, Ben Jonson called these characters 'humours'. How Jonson conceived these characters has been graphically explained in the following lines. "He seize character under one aspect, because he sees it so; neglecting, because he does not see them, the cross play of impulses, the inconsistencies and conflicts, mingled strength and weakness of which they are normally composed\(\ldots\)\(\ldots\) The nuances fell together for him, and the vast complexes of detail which his voracious eye collected, and his unsurpassed memory retained, grouped themselves round a few nuclei of ludicrous character\(\ldots\)\(\ldots\) his personages are real men seen from a particular angle, not moral qualities translated into their human embodiments.\(^7\) This is a clear definition of the flat characters, and of how they function in a play or a novel.

The greatest advantage these characters have is that they can be recognised wherever they appear in the novel. They do not need any re-introduction or illustration of their traits. Once they are created, the author need not watch their progress as there is no
possibility of development. The reader is also at ease; he does not have to be on the alert as he is generally with round characters. The second advantage, as pointed out by Forster, is that these are memorable characters. We remember them when we have forgotten much else of the novel. "They remain in the mind insalubrable for the reason that they were not changed by circumstances, which gives them in retrospect a comforting quality, and preserves them when the book that produced them may decay." The static quality of these characters wards off any possibility of confusion. The reader takes them as the novelist wishes him to do. This does not happen in the case of round characters like Hamlet. Many explanations have been given of his wayward behaviour and none satisfies us completely. No one can be certain as to what Shakespeare had in mind when he conceived Hamlet.

In modern fiction, and that too because of the influence of psychology, there is a fashion among the novelist to put all their characters on the level of life. In such circumstances one can hardly appreciate 'flat' characters. Those who declare their liking for
life-like characters do not and cannot tolerate elaboration of only one trait, since a human being is the combination of diverse traits. The success of the novelist is measured by the ability to create life-like personages. Norman Douglas wrote an open letter to D. H. Lawrence attacking flat characters — "It consists, I should say, in a failure to realise the complexities of the ordinary human mind, it selects for literary purposes two or three facets of a man or woman, generally the most spectacular, and therefore useful ingredients of their character and disregards all the others. Whatever fails to fit in with these specially chosen traits is eliminated — must be eliminated, otherwise the description would not hold water. Such and such are the data; everything incompatible with those data has to go by the board. It follows that the novelist's touch argues, often logically, from a wrong premise; it takes what it likes and leaves the rest. The facts may be correct as far as they go but these are too few of them; what the author says may be true and yet by no means the truth. That is the novelist's touch. It falsifies life." This view appears rather extreme. Round characters are life-like and interest the reader more but this does
not mean that flat characters are altogether untenable. Flat characters represent only one quality but that quality is not false or unreal. We find those traits in real men. A man is not the compound of all the characteristics in equal proportions. Some trait is dominant, and others are dormant. And, if a character is shown having only dominant trait, it does not, in the least, mean that it falsifies life. Forster also holds that such exclusive concentration may be disastrous in a biography, it certainly has a place in the novel: "a novel that is at all complex often requires flat people as well as round, and the outcome of their collisions parallels life more accurately than Mr. Douglas implies." 10 Edwin Muir also finds a method in their flatness. These flat characters are not to be neglected or looked down. These are, certainly, introduced to facilitate the novelist in presenting the novel as close to the life as possible.

With the exception of Pip and David Copperfield, almost all of Dickens's characters are flat. They do give an exaggerated picture but it does not mean that they falsify life. Every character can
be defined fully in a sentence, yet we have a feeling of depth. Thus in the hand of a fine artist, even the flat characters have the capacity to reveal a 'vision of humanity that is not shallow.' H.G.Wells's characters are also flat, but they cannot be summed up in a sentence. We have a feeling that they are more than they are on the surface. It is the treatment which determines the success or failure of a character, not its being flat or round.

After this discussion it must be admitted, however, that flat characters are surface portrayals of persons. As far as comic characters are concerned, this is alright; but, when it comes to tragic or serious characters, this method does not serve the purpose. "It is only round people who are fit to perform tragically for any length of time and can move us to any feelings except humour and appropriateness." 11

Round characters are more interesting and need a deeper understanding of human nature, and greater deftness of presentation. The author is interested in the total personality, and even explores the unconscious. He notices and paints the most minute windings of the heart as well as of the brain. The
reader is always alert to the characters, because through the progress of the story, many latent and unexpected qualities are revealed. The author introduces his characters with some minor details of dress and manner, but the whole of the character comes out gradually as the story unfolds itself. It is not like the flat character whom we know fully well from the very beginning. In the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice* one hardly guesses through Jane Austen's description that Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy will ever be able to understand and like each other. We find a new pleasure each time such characters appear because with every occurrence they disclose more about themselves. Forster defines these characters as 'highly organised' and, with the unfolding of their personality through the plot, we have a feeling of life in them. One thing is noticeable that we do not find this 'organisation' in the modern novels. In our real life we do many irrelevant things which cannot have a logical or coherent explanation. And this formlessness is reflected in some of the modern novelist's character portrayal.
Forster has very clearly differentiated between *homo sapiens* and *homo fictus*. In modern fiction, we find a very strong tendency to bring these two together as we have in James Joyce's works. The details which he gives of his characters have no direct connection with the plot, and no special purpose except to show the full man. What a man thinks in twenty-four hours of a day? Joyce goes on relating without bringing out the relevance to the theme or the plot. This is true of many other twentieth century novelists who avoid the conventional limitations of plot. The selection of events and incidents is made more rigorously for the 'flat' characters than for 'round' ones.

How ever chaotic mass real life may be but when it is described in a novel the novelist is bound to give one or the other shape. He will have to choose some and discard the other things from the life of his characters to bring out his theme according to his plan and plot. If he goes on keeping each and every detail of his characters it gets difficult for the reader to find any coherence and purpose in that work. Robert Liddell traces the reasons for the failure of this sort of
characterisation. He cites the example of Bloom (from James Joyce's Ulysses). The actions and thoughts of Bloom are also selections from twenty-four hours of experience, as it is in any other fictional presentation. Why did he not then select some "interesting and coherent actions and thoughts?" Joyce, however, drops the idea of selection only at those places where nothing significant and important is thought and acted by Bloom. Whatever he selects is not the selection which could have interest the readers. Walter Allen explains this confusion: "On what principle is the selection of thoughts, sense - impressions, and associations that must stand for the whole flow of mental activity to be made?" There is selection, but it is largely the selection of censorship in the Freudian sense, which is very much a negative form of selection: there are whole areas of a woman's experience Miriam (in Pilgrimage by Dorothy Richardson) is never allowed to be conscious of: she might still be living in a nineteenth-century novel, and we are more keenly aware of this because of the stream - of - consciousness technique. Besides, all the characters of a novel cannot be illustrated on such
a scale as that of Bloom. For the minor and comic personalities, the novelist has to take a recourse to 'flat' characterisation.

The subject of Virginia Woolf's novels is how significance should be given to the flux of life? Through the characters she herself wants to find a pattern. She uses the 'stream of consciousness' method to present the flow of feelings and thoughts. Pater seems to represent her view very accurately in the following lines: "every moment some form grows more perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for - for that moment only."16 And the author revels in portraying that moment only. The most important thing we find in Virginia Woolf's characters is that they are abnormally aware of the moment through which they are passing. They are not only aware of their mood, thoughts, feelings and passion but are also semi-conscious of the physical world around them. Her characters co-relate the moments experienced by them with the moments of similar experience in the past, by
the method of association. This gives a complexity to the whole. The method is not, however, free of fault. She is so engrossed with the sensibility of her characters that she often forgets the purpose of the novel. The moments she has selected to reveal and illumine her characters are not the moments of revelation. Allen comments that those are "rather a succession of short, sharp female gasps of ecstasy: an impression intensified by Mrs. Woolf's use of semi-colon when the comma is ordinarily enough."

The flat characters and those who are the outcome of the stream – of – consciousness method can be said to be on two ends. The way in between is the 'round'. Jane Austen's characters are good examples of 'round' characters. She gave her characters all the qualities which go to make them life-like as she disliked caricatures. Her characters have a mind and heart as well; and, with this comes all the criss-crossing of emotions and thoughts. We can say that Percy exhibits pride and Elizabeth Bennet has prejudice against him. But they have other qualities too, and are not mere personifications of pride and prejudice.
The round characters fulfill the demand made upon them by plot. It is through them that story is led forward. Regarding flat, the novelist has to create many characters in order to impart fullness and life to the novel while the round characters unfold life in themselves. The round lead the plot and flat are led by the plot. With the round characters the reader has an awareness of a life that is beyond the novel. The novel is not a biography: it is the elaboration and expansion of some story or theme which includes many characters. The author tells about these characters by setting them in a selected group of persons and situations. We cannot predict how they will behave or react when they are placed among different persons and situations. If Elizabeth Barrett had met some other men than Darby we can only surmise as to what would have been her reaction. On the contrary we are sure of 'flat' characters' responses and behaviour. Complete flatness like that of Jonson's characters is the one extreme and the characters of Joyce and Woolf are at the other. Round characters come in between these two. Whatever be the differentiation between flat and round, a novelist needs both for his novel. Flat
characters are sufficient and even essential for comic purposes. When the novelist requires serious and tragic characters for his story roundness becomes inevitable.

Round characters have many phases to their personality and they do surprise the reader with the novelty of their traits. The variety is there but some permanency and constancy is also essential which can be called the centre of a character. Every action of the character should conform to this centre. If a character is made to change often and again without keeping the tenor it will never convince and can be considered a fault in the art of characterisation. "No doubt each character does best on the whole if he keeps an even tenor, and acts from what one might call the centre of his character." The element of surprise is always there but the new trait which comes on the surface of the character is not totally alien for that particular character. When the new trait is being brought forward the reader's capacity of expectancy should not be over-stretched.
The advocates of round characters often proclaim that they create life-like characters. No character can be life-like; these characters may resemble persons whom we meet everyday, but the novelist cannot impart life to them. In life one does so many things which become impossible for the writer to present in the novel. He has to select some and leave out others on the basis of relevance to his theme. In this they fall short of life. Besides, when we come into contact with people we observe their actions and behaviour. We guess their mental condition through their gestures. If one is clever enough to hide his feelings and remain apathetic, none can know one's inner thoughts. This does not happen with the characters of the novel. A novelist knows all about his characters. He has access to the deepest areas of his mind and heart. He need not notice gestures and action as a dramatist often does. "The hidden life that appears in external signs is hidden no longer, has entered the realm of action. And it is the function of the novelist to reveal the hidden life at its source." 18 A French critic who wrote under the name of Alain has also remarked on this point. He says that man has two sides which can be ascribed
to history and fiction respectively. What is observable in him goes to history and his romantic side includes "the pure passion, that is to say the dreams, joys, sorrows, and self-communings which politeness or shame prevent him from mentioning",¹⁹ and to express this is the business of the novelist. He tells us things about people, of which we are generally not aware, and, often, they themselves are unaware.

Apart from this, characters can also be grouped into type and individual characters. Type characters are those in which qualities are given to the characters which are common to a class or section of people. 'Type' does not mean that they are flat. Flat has only one dominant quality which is exaggerated; but type has all the characteristic qualities which are common to their class. Mrs. Bennet of Pride and Prejudice is a typical match-making mother. In Tom Jones, Blifil is the typical rogue who wants to keep up the pose of respectability. These characters are not flat. They have many other qualities besides match-making and roguery.

'Individual' character is one in which we have some special qualities particular to the individual
rather than to a class. Those traits may vary from person to person. It does not imply that these are abnormal characters or have no constancy. Individual characters can be life-like or otherwise. That depends on the skill of the novelist. This sort of character is considered a success on the part of the author. It reveals the author's understanding of the variety of human nature. Robert Knight says: "In order to make a reader believe .......... the character should be endowed with separate and distinct individualities as men and women are in actual life. No two of us are exactly alike." Thus Knight stresses the need of individualized characters. Individual characters give us an aura of novelty and variety while type characters confirm to the set pattern and thus, in a way tire the reader. Like the first, type characters also have importance, specially in the case of minor characters. When the reader is entangled in the complexities of the individualised main characters, he finds relief in some minor type characters. So, for the management of the novel, both sorts of characterisation are essential.
F.M. Forster has further classified dependent and independent characters. Some characters stand alone and can easily be extracted from the novel. Their personality remains the same even when they are away from the setting of the novel while some characters are inseparable from the work. They cease to exist if they are taken away from the book. They are woven into the fabric of the work. Forster considers Moll Flanders as an example of an independent character. "She fills the book that bears her name, or rather stands alone in it, like a tree in a park, so that we can see her from every aspect and are not bothered by rival growths...... what interested Defoe was the heroine, and the form of his book proceeds naturally out of his character." 21

Jane Austen's characters are different. Their significance and peculiarities come out when they come into contact with each other. They cannot be removed from the place and the scene in which they are set. Tom Jones stands aloof and we know what he is even without coming into contact with Blifil, Molly and Sophie. But Elizabeth Bennet has no significance if she is not with her parents or with Mr. Darcy.
This does not mean that independent characters can easily be separated from the novel; or an author can do with them without talking the help of other characters. Independent means that characters are not so closely aligned or knitted with the personages and setting of the novel like other characters.

We can also classify characters on the basis of their social and economic status. A society generally consists of three classes broadly termed upper, middle and lower. As the novelist takes his characters from life, they are bound to belong to one of these three groups. A novelist like Dickens revels in protagonists from the lower strata of society. Thackeray, Meredith are among those who were efficient in portraying the upper middle class. They took characters also from the nobility. Hardy is more concerned with life and its intricacies than the mere portrayal of social and economic classes. It is only incidentally that social life creeps into his novels. He could not extricate his characters off from the background in which they were born and bred.
Characters can also be classified according to their moral code and the extent to which they follow it. Specially in the Victorian age, the moral aspect was given much importance. The double standard of eighteenth-century morality was being given up. The moral laws grew to be same for men and women, at least, in public. We know it for certain what sort of people they were underneath. The cloak of surface morality was torn by writers like Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope.

"If Victorian morality did not in truth square with the facts of life and the actual state of Victorian morals, it was certainly not for want of zeal and will on the part of Victorians." 22 They have to keep the morality aesthetic in their behaviour in society. To present this picture of society novelists have to take characters of all sorts good as well as bad and the mixture of these two too. Some are shown apathetic or indifferent to morals. This does not always mean that they are immoral; they have no manifest morals. They behave according to set custom and traditions.

These are some of the types of characters which we generally find; but, this is not all.
There may be other ways of classifying them, besides those discussed here. When we proceed to the main part of the thesis, we will meet many characters which cannot be classified under above classes.
References and Notes.

1. James, Henry; *Partial Portraits* (1888), p. 314

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3. Forster, E.M.; *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 79.2


5. Muir, Edwin; loc. cit., p. 25.2


7. Harford and Simpson; *Introduction of Everyman in His Humour*

8. Forster, E.M.; loc. cit., p. 95.2

9. quoted by Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 97.2

10. Forster, E.M.; loc. cit., p. 98.1

11. *ibid.*

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13. Liddell, Robert; loc. cit.


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