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from *The Supporting Cast: A Study  
of Flat and Minor Characters*

*Chapter One*

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Anatomy of Flat and Minor Characters

1. Introduction

When critical studies focus on character, they tend, naturally enough, to concentrate on the writer's chief creations. Aristotle's rules for tragedy involve the fall of great men; an entire field of criticism is given over to the analysis of such trajectories.<sup>1</sup> Just as a plot is composed of myriad minor incidents, most stories of any substantial length involve not just several major characters but also a whole supporting cast. These minor characters have their uses: they take down the pistol from over the mantel; they become a confidant for the protagonist; they sell the heroine a bunch of posies; they populate the streets of the city on an afternoon when the hero is walking those selfsame streets; they may turn into symbols for the overarching theme. In short, they carry out much of the mechanics of the fiction, so that understanding how an author deploys minor characters helps one understand how the work is put together.

Minor characters, if fashioned right, also have a singular aspect: their remarkable persistence in the reader's memory. Years after time has effaced most of the plot details and everything but the protagonist's first name, the reader may still recall the shady odd-job man who crept into the novel on page 28 and exited mysteriously after only a page or two. Examples from literature abound: Conrad's perfectly accoutered accountant in the middle of the jungle, Joyce's man in the brown macintosh, or Waugh's Mr. Todd, who insists on being read the works of Dickens till the end of time. Dickens

1. A. C. Bradley's great concern over Othello and Lear shows how caught up one can get in major fictional constructs. This study, on the other hand, takes L. C. Knights's question "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" seriously.

himself was a master at creating walking quiddities, from Fagin and his crew in *Oliver Twist* to Krook and his cat in *Bleak House*.

Dickens's novels, of course, raise a problem that Forster addressed in his *Aspects of the Novel*. Under the section "People," Forster classifies characters as either flat or round. Clayton Hamilton in *The Art of Fiction* (116) divides characters into static and kinetic, while more recent critics such as Baruch Hochman in *Character in Literature* (89) have provided a series of scales: transparency-opacity, literalness-symbolism, and so on. Still, Forster's terms remain convenient to work with, and his discussion goes beyond mere taxonomy. Forster also provides what few analysts are capable of: a working writer's focus on technique, assaying what is effective and what isn't, and why.

The essence of a flat character, for instance, is in its limitations: a flat character may be summed up in an epithet (Forster uses the example of Mrs. Micawber, who repeats, "I will never desert Mr. Micawber," as her character-note). Moreover, a flat character is predictable: transfer this character to a new situation, and she will act as before. The problem with Dickens, as Forster admits, is that his characters are flat, yet they possess a vitality that would seem to belie such a classification. Forster takes refuge in an image: "Probably the immense vitality of Dickens causes his characters to vibrate a little" (71), so that, though flat, even static, they appear to move. They achieve life by association. In other words, they gain vitality through the author's spirited descriptions rather than through complexity of character.

The issue of flat characters, in fact, is more complex than it might appear. Flat characters not only have their appropriate functions—as stock figures, humorous butts, pawns in the game of the novel—but also fit in where no round character would. They may even appear full of life, though such life represents a circumscribed view. A figure like Falstaff, as round as the world physically and symbolically, is a flat character insofar as he represents the traditional comic view of the urgings of the flesh. The point is that flat characters tend toward the allegorical and thus express equivalencies, whereas more problematic creations partake more of the confusion of reality and hence are symbolic.

This distinction between allegory and symbol stems from the Coleridgean equation of symbolism with a sort of unconscious synecdochic process wherein the object and its gamut of suggestive possibilities become fused in the mind. Allegory, on the other hand, remains a discrete representational mode. Granted that allegory can be fiendishly complex, the point remains that allegory, as Angus Fletcher notes, is "at war with mimesis" (151) and, as

such, casts up different possibilities for characterization. Another way to put this is that flat characters tend toward the stylized and predictable, perhaps more aligned with theme than with plot.

Most significant, as Forster notes, flat characters are easily recognized and easily remembered afterward (68–69). Forster offers no support for these traits other than their self-evidence. When one considers the space accorded most flat characters, their persistence in memory seems remarkable—and perhaps deserving of fuller explanation.

"Characters," says William H. Gass in *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, "are mostly empty canvas." Gass illustrates this point with an example from James's *The Awkward Age*, wherein the character Mr. Cashmore is described as having a long lower lip and the reader must visualize the rest of the face (Gass 38, 45). Such extrapolation, though to some extent practiced by the reader on any character, comes about here through the sheer insufficiency of the portrait. This insufficiency has a paradoxical effect: the less shown on the page, the more imaginative work the reader must do, writing in between the lines of the text. This effort expended connects the reader firmly with the story, specifically that part in which a flat or minor character appears. This model of reader engagement with minor characters corresponds to the process Wolfgang Iser proposes in *The Act of Reading*—that is, the entire text is a series of gaps that the reader fills in. What Iser terms "the imaginary correction of deficient realities" (119) is the reader's attempt to eke out the text into a self-sustaining world. Seymour Chatman in *Story and Discourse* makes a similar point: "The audience's capacity to supply plausible details is virtually limitless, as is a geometer's to conceive of an infinity of fractional spaces between two points" (29). In the hypothetical meeting-ground between the reader and the text, minor characters simply require more of the reader than full portraits do.

A distinction must be drawn here between flat and minor characters, especially as it relates to the reader's response and contributions to the text. Minor characters in their paucity of detail invite the reader's elaboration; flat characters, though lacking in depth, are finished creations, possessing what one might call contextual closure. A successful minor character may invite curiosity, but a well-drawn flat character provokes no further probing. When "what if" extrapolations are applied to flat depictions, the result is apt to be a failure, as with Falstaff in love in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

On the other hand, flat characters, as fairly simple creations with one or two salient traits, can often be identified with more easily than more complex, round characters. Forster talks of the hail of recognition with which a

reader greets a flat character, partly because one knows the type, but also, one might argue, because less is expected of the reader than with a fully rounded character. A flat character whose defining characteristic is The One Who Is Always Late, for example, may elicit a sympathetic response from Reader A, who has the same problem. A character, however, who is always late and who also has a variety of other neuroses may be more difficult to align against one's own mental configurations. Of course, when the reader does form a bond with a fully rounded major character, the reader has much more to see and hold onto, not just in number of facets but also in duration of presentation. In Iser's schema, a fully rounded character opens up a paradoxical response, however: more words inevitably open more gaps, so the more one knows about a character, the more questions may arise. Still, if one pursues Iser's analogy of the text as Samuel Johnson's definition of a network—with interstices between the intersections—at least the holes in a character get smaller and smaller the more the writer adds, if more numerous. The reader has learned the character's hair color, for example, but now wants to know what brand of shampoo she uses. There is no mistaking the emotional pull of a complex, round character—that is, of a successfully realized piece of verisimilitude. The attachments to slighter characters, however, are arguably more numerous. To choose an example for the old common reader: many *Wizard of Oz* fans have far more feelings associated with, say, the Cowardly Lion or the Tin Woodsman than with Dorothy.

A psychological analysis of the reader's response suggests a series of cognitive functions akin to the psychic mechanisms used in relationships with real people—with some significant differences. For example, one might think that, because flat characters represent clean, two-dimensional surfaces, readers would tend to project upon them their own traits. In fact, however, readers seem to identify far more than they project, though in fact the two processes are linked. As Norman Holland notes, identification with a literary character is "a complicated mixture of projection and introjection, of taking in from the character certain drives and defenses that are really objectively 'out there' and of putting into him feelings that are really our own" (278). This may be a limited operation, however, particularly with bounded characters. One may empathize with Tess and her plight, for example, while reassuring oneself that one would not have stood Angel Clare's hypocrisy for an instant. Such a form of projection, wherein one does not assign one's own unfavorable traits to others but rather practices a form of like liking like, is what Freud termed narcissistic object choice and is simply a strategy for coping

with the world, here transferred to the mimetic text. One instinctively seeks allies, whether real or imaginary.

The psychic operation of identification may involve several strategies, from simple hero-worship to filling the void created by the loss of a loved one; its motives, as with the text or reality it confronts, may be polysemous. The advantage of literary characters for these operations is their susceptibility to manipulation—that is, they cannot fight back. They can, however, seem to change, depending on reader affect. Since the process of reader identification actively engages the reader, there is always the possibility of betrayal in the text—that is, encountering the opposite of what one had been led to believe. One should keep in mind this possibility of betrayal when a character whom one cares about, for example, acts against our wishes or comes to a bad end. Given sufficient cathexis onto a textual figure, this fixation can even be seen from a Lacanian perspective: the viewing of the self in the mirror stage (the blank text, an initially faceless character) becoming the Other as the text is filled in. A reader who commits himself to the text is thus plagued with uncertainty, worrying over the outcome of a story not his own.

The inherent danger in allying oneself with an uncertain fictional future may account for the relief a reader feels in spotting a buffoon or some other fairly obvious figure. In predictability and flatness lie a certain comfortable assurance. In the brevity of minor figures lies the guarantee that one will not be closeted with any unpleasantness for too long. Minor and flat figures, then, offer an easy hold for identification, an attraction that promises to be stable.

The realms of flat and minor characters do not so much merge, however, as intersect. A voice may reiterate a familiar message, or a shadow may speak from across the room, and herein lies the common ground of flat and minor characters: because of constrictions in space, deliberate or otherwise, the author only partially fills in the portrait. Voyeurism comes into play when the reader is granted only a glimpse: herein lies the titillation of the keyhole view, even the joy of the fetishist, since a minor character is often described by an article of clothing or body part. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (27), Barthes describes exactly these fetishistic aspects of the text.

From a more utilitarian perspective, Arnold Bennett writes: "You can't put the whole of a character into a book" (Allott, 290). Along these lines, Hochman (59ff.) suggests several differences between what he terms "homo fictus and homo sapiens," among them the idea that one can influence a real

individual. Forster recognizes these points, saying in *Aspects of the Novel* that characters are mere word-masses (44) and in his *Commonplace Book* observing that no author is complete, so that all characters lack some development (21). Since the concept of roundness is an illusion anyway, the reader's response is really the significant factor: round characters are those *perceived* to be as fully rounded as living, breathing individuals—despite the apparent flatness of certain living individuals we may know.

Flat characters invite rather different feelings, among them a sense of mastery. The reader inevitably feels superior to an obviously two-dimensional personality, to a stooge. Though perhaps best suited as brief representational types, they may nonetheless occasionally play protagonist roles. Here, their lack of depth may prove annoying to the reader. Dickens's fair-headed heroes, for example, are often less interesting than the surrounding eccentrics. Nicholas Nickleby is a ready example. Still, truly flat characters may be played for full comic effect; the hapless hero of a black farce represents such an example, as in Lemuel Pitkin in Nathanael West's *A Cool Million*, to whom catastrophe comes pat as in the old comedy. Flat characters in general seem to suit comedy better than tragedy, if only to afford the reader a superior, less-engaged view. Still, as Bakhtin (421) points out, flat depictions can be "re-accentuated" from one era's literature to the next, so that the comic miser of Chaucer becomes the deeper, tragic figure of Dombey in Dickens.

In any event, mere flatness is no guarantee of brevity. Alternately, the short duration of a role does not mean that the portrayal will lack depth. The character of Hazel Shade in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, for example, is only a memory by the time the narrator Kinbote begins his annotations. Still, as a precocious loner who takes refuge in language, she represents the confabulator of the novel in miniature; even her suicide hints at the probable end of the grandiose narrator Kinbote. Other, briefer appearances, such as that of the rake Jimmy in Ford's *The Good Soldier*, illustrate further the intrigue in insufficient detail. Even when a minor character is truly minor because of his insignificant role, he may not come across as flat. Rather, he may appear to have unplumbed depths, mainly because the light of exposition never fully illuminates him. He is, in the most famous instances—Joyce's man in the macintosh, Woolf's Johnnie Sturgeon—a character out of context.

Few critics have really dwelt on this subject. Percy Lubbock, in *The Craft of Fiction*, deals with flat characters only as those who show their insubstantiality over time. Wayne Booth, in his otherwise masterful *Rhetoric of Fiction*, deals mostly with character as a succession of major figures. William J. Harvey, in *Character and the Novel*, goes further, examining the phenome-

non of verisimilitude while also establishing a form of taxonomy consisting of protagonists, background characters, and intermediate figures. Harvey also provides a convincing reason for what Forster calls Dickens's shimmering quality; "a background figure, a mere stereotype, may be granted a moment of dramatic intensity in which he achieves fullness as a human being" (55). Hochman applies a battery of critical tools but ends up with mostly a descriptive analysis. Perhaps the most impressive study along these lines remains Auerbach's *Mimesis*, specifically "Odysseus' Scar," where Auerbach postulates the emergence of two types of depiction. Comparing the Homeric with the biblical style, Auerbach notes:

On the one hand fully externalized description, uniform illumination, uninterrupted connection, free expression, all events in the foreground, displaying unmistakable meanings; few elements of historical development and of psychological perspective; on the other hand, certain parts brought into high relief, others left obscure, abruptness, suggestive influence of the unexpressed, "background" quality, multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation, universal-historical claims, development of the concept of the historically becoming, and preoccupation with the problematic. (23)

While one might quarrel with Auerbach's oversimplification of Homeric complexities, or point out that much biblical depth has to do with overinterpretation of insufficient textual material, his basic distinction remains supremely useful.<sup>2</sup> Over the last two centuries of the novel, the older method of presenting the reader with all the history and particulars of a character in an introductory page or paragraph has gradually given way to a series of hints and approximations. In *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, Michael Irwin stresses the importance of visual imagery to a pre-cinema-and-television audience. One may also note an overlay of Flaubertian aesthetic, as in Conrad's famous imperative: "before all, to make you *see*" (*Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* xiv).

Generations have argued over the implications of these aesthetic general-

2. To some extent, Auerbach is arguing a dichotomy created by historic overlay. Much of what he claims are the deep, unexpressed, abrupt qualities in the Bible that make demands on the reader has to do with the sheer lack of detail in the biblical text, juxtaposed with the complexity of religious interpretation. As for the supposed unmistakable meanings of Homer, Gregory Nagy's *The Best of the Achaeans* goes far in demonstrating some of the linguistic and symbolic ambiguity in the *Odyssey*.

izations. Though novelists such as Dickens and Bennett achieved commercial and artistic success through full presentation, Woolf's essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" has a fine edge to it: "One line of insight would have done more than all those lines of description; but let them pass as the necessary drudgery of the novelist" (*CE*, 1:329). Somerset Maugham, in a 1929 entry in *A Writer's Notebook*, points out the pitfalls on both sides:

The older novelists were very precise in their enumeration of their characters' physical parts, and yet if any reader could see in the flesh the person whom the author has thus elaborately described I do not believe he would recognize him. I think we seldom form any exact image in our minds as a result of all these words. (234)

On the other side:

The cataloguing of characteristics is certainly dull, and a good many writers have tried to give liveliness to their description by an impressionistic method. They ignore the facts altogether. They scintillate more or less brightly on the subject of their characters' appearance and expect you from a few epigrammatic phrases, from the way he strikes a vivacious onlooker, for instance, to construct in your mind a human being. Such descriptions may often be read with a pleasure which you cannot get from a sober enumeration of traits, but I doubt whether they take you much further. I have a notion that their vivacity often conceals the fact that the author has no very clear picture in his mind of the character he is inventing. (234–35)

Full depiction has an apparent completeness; the "few deft strokes" method, in the right hands, possesses subtlety. Maugham, of course, did not have the last word on the subject; neither did Woolf. As Hochman notes (13), the complexity of modernist characters gave way in turn to a postmodern angularity and simplification.

The postmodern trend in characterization raises its own problems, as it tends to reject both closure and verisimilitude. As Hans Bertens has observed: in the face of "the impossibility of representation" and the inadequacy of language, many postmodernist authors treat causality and consistency as relics (139, 157). But mimesis is not a dead technique, as the modernists who rejected the nineteenth-century realistic novel realized, and postmodernists simply adhere to a different standard of reality. If there is any

trend in our contemporary pluralism, it would seem to be toward the piecemeal rather than the unified, but this too is often mimetic. In fact, a work of any great length written by an author of any great merit tends to mix modes. And in spite of gaps and flaws, any successfully evoked character, no matter how apparently insignificant, stands a good chance of surviving its creator.

## 2. Theory of Species

In order to continue a coherent discussion of minor and flat characters, one must establish some definitions—or, to put it more accurately, one must erect some range within which to pursue the discourse, even if such strictures prove artificial. Though Forster put forth a few guidelines for flat creations, the field remains essentially open, especially for minor characters. Ideally, any definitions should take into account both reader and writer, since to ignore the writer's technique seems to miss half the equation. In the realm of character, the writer is unquestionably a creator (the reader does not build a person *ex nihilo* from a blank page), and perhaps the most useful way to think of the reader's function is as an interpreter or recreator. One starts, however, with the writer's creation.

The simplest question is "What is a minor character?"—or perhaps one should say the most basic question, since to answer it is not a simple matter at all. Certain figures in novels are clearly minor: the chambermaid who makes the bed, even if it is the *fille de chambre* in Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*; the relatives the author alludes to once or twice or has appear in a brief episode, as Lawrence does in *The Rainbow*. But how about the man in the bowler hat, glimpsed briefly in the street—is that enough for the reader to get a feel for him? Must one have a real feel for a character if he is only in the realms of minority?

A feel for a character is an imprecise term, at best. Presumably, what one means is a process that involves both cathexis and anthropomorphization: cathexis for the reader to connect to the character in some way, and anthropomorphization because the reader can also connect to a rubber ball or a grassy hillside. Wellek and Warren in *Theory of Literature* point out that the simplest form of characterization is naming. "Each 'appellation' is a kind of vivifying, animizing, individuating" (226). Gass echoes this point: "A character, first of all, is the noise of his name, and all the sounds and rhythms that proceed from him" (49). Barthes, too, talks of the "nomination of seme" as

the start of character (S/Z, 192), and Todorov invokes "a segment of the spatio-temporal universe represented . . . with regard to an anthropomorphic being" (45). The question remains: when one is searching for limits, what is the smallest amount of information one can give and still be said to have produced a minor character?

"I talked to Bill the other day," says a character in a story, and if the story is modern and minimalist, that may be the end of Bill. Is Bill "there" for the reader, or is he part of the background, the way Woolf uses shopkeepers' names as her main characters walk down the street? If the aforementioned Bill is renamed—"I talked to Jesus Christ yesterday"—then a definite resonance is set up in the reader's mind, but this may be saying merely that a lot of what exists as character depends on previous information, some of which resides in what the reader brings to the text. In fact, most critics overstate the case: as Beckett has shown, a character need not even be named to exist on the page. Assuming a group of fairly intelligent readers, one may conclude that the vanishing point of a minor character is merely a reference on a page, a name or epithet or a phrase of description. Such an allusion will at least set up a point of reference.

To posit "a group of fairly intelligent readers" is also a slippery assumption, though one that many previous critics have assumed. Stanley Fish's "informed reader" (*Text*, 34), for example, would seem to possess an experiential base, which, when applied to reading a text, operates as a system of referents. That is, an informed reader needs nothing more than "Abraham Lincoln" to build an image. Even here, of course, images will diverge: a Northerner and a Southerner may well come up with rather different portraits. And when only an epithet is provided, such as "crack addict" or "taxi-cab driver," so much depends on the reader's particular experience that general analysis seems impossible.

This does not preclude some consensus among readers. A taxi-driver, for instance, may vary tremendously in physical particulars, but the reader will nonetheless make certain basic functional assumptions, such as the primary fact that the character drives a cab. Given the usual circumstances of cab-drivers, the character probably also makes money at the job but is not overly wealthy. These are the kind of common-sense extrapolations that most readers can be expected to make. Other extrapolations, such as a surly attitude toward other drivers or a dead stogie wedged between the teeth, are far more tenuous, unless the writer has provided more description or is writing for a select audience sharing the same background. Only minimal cues are

necessary here for shared evocation—not an improbable assumption for epics or court poetry, for example.

If one wishes to make this character stand out, the writer can simply highlight or negate the very information conveyed. For example, Victorian: "The cab-driver took great pains to be a good cab-driver." Modernist: "Sometimes the cab-driver wondered why he was a cab-driver at all." Postmodernist: "The cab-driver no longer drove a cab." The matter of saliency may derive mostly from an item of appearance, action, or dialogue that rises above the rest of the text. In the visual arts, this equivalent may be the bewitching face in the crowd.

Concentrating on the technique behind effect, however, leads to another point: many minor and flat characters are simply meant as background. In fact, should they be noted as anything but animated scenery, they will detract from other, more important characters. To some extent this is true of Dickens, whose Fagin and Sykes are more intriguing than Oliver Twist. The reasons for such a shift in focus are various, from an artistic miscalculation to an interest in quiddities to political sympathy for marginal groups. One could go further and argue that any minor or flat character so highlighted is actually a major character—and this opens up another definitional, even descriptive, problem.

The problem is the dividing line between minor and major characters. In some ways, this is the same issue that plagues those who classify works such as *Heart of Darkness* or "The Man Without a Country" as either long short stories or short novels. Of course, no real division exists, since every fuzzy instance must be decided by some vague rule of thumb. The problem is compounded by the level of importance that some minor characters achieve, either as symbols or as plot necessities. Given a strong structuralist bent, one could draw up, say, four useful criteria: plot, theme, space, and action. That is, if the character is irreplaceable in the plot or the theme, he is a major figure even if he does not physically appear. Conrad's Kurtz is one such instance; Godot is perhaps a more complete instance, present by his all-pervading absence. Similarly, if much space in the work is given over to a character, no matter what kind of cipher he may be portrayed as, he is major. The narrator Overton in *The Way of All Flesh* occupies that curious ground, too major to be minor. The same ruling applies if the figure carries out too much of the action, though this last criterion is tricky because minor characters are essential to so many actions, even crucial ones. Stevie Verloc in *The Secret Agent*, for example, in his limited appearance and even more limited

mental capacity, carries out one of the most significant actions in the book, albeit unintentionally.

Mystery writers from Agatha Christie to Dorothy Sayers have long been aware of the crucial importance of minor characters, particularly for morbid purposes such as murdering vagrants or witnessing atrocities. Because corpses often bulk large in their exposition, they raise the interesting question of whether they too are characters. They certainly are; they simply are not living. Roger Ackroyd is definitely a character in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, though not really major. The same applies to Marley's ghost in *A Christmas Carol*.

Some critics choose to regard anyone besides the protagonist and antagonist as minor; others can find a solid artistic motive for almost all the characters and so, in a fine democratic display, regard no one as minor. The truth, as Forster noted, resides in no comfortable middle ground but rather in an honest examination of all the terrain.

The problem may be compounded: given a miscellaneous assemblage of minor characters, one can further break up the group according to relative importance. Basically, minor characters fall into three groups, or at least points on a continuum. Minor characters who appear as mere names and phrases, or single, isolated looks, may be relegated to the category *cameos*. Those who have a few sentences about them, or a brief description in a paragraph, may be called *bit parts*. Those who bulk largest, to the point where they have a healthy hand in the plot and theme, are *minor roles*. The terms are borrowed from drama because so often minor characters are used for a miscellany of dramatic purposes, what Robertson Davies has characterized as "Fifth Business" on the stage. To apply this classification system to a well-recognized text: in *Ulysses*, Dlugacz the pork butcher is a cameo, the man in the brown macintosh fills a bit part, and Milly or Rudy Bloom have minor roles.<sup>3</sup>

The divisions of minor characters bring up the point that, for a reader immersed in a text, epistemology is ontology. What one knows about character X on the printed page is the very means by which character X exists.

3. The man in the brown macintosh evades resolution in a way that comes to stand for the world's resistance to definitive interpretation. As with his name, M'Intosh, an error of transmission preserved in a newspaper, he is life imperfectly co-opted into print. He is, as Robert Adams has put it, the object of "unfulfilled curiosity" (218). For a commentary on the reader's urge to smooth over such discrepancies, see Kermode's "The Man in the Macintosh, the Boy in the Shirt." This subject is also taken up in greater depth in the Woolf chapter under "Unaccountable Characters."

Minor characters can be said simply to have less ontological pull on the reader, to insist less on their existence, as it were, because the writer offers less knowledge about them than about other, more significant depictions. The objection to this equation—and it can be damning—is that it ignores the extrapolations performed by the reader, who adds his own knowledge to the portrait. The way out of the objection is to note that the equation still holds but that the epistemological burden is really shared by the writer and the reader. There seems to be no forceful objection to this, but the element of "reader extrapolation," as always, introduces a gray fuzz into the proceedings. Only a scientific discussion on the neurological configuration of the general reader would enable further discussion along these lines—the kind, for instance, offered by a cognitive psychologist *cum* literary critic such as Victor Nell.<sup>4</sup>

Flat characters live along the same kind of continuum as minor figures, though again one can perceive beginning, middle, and end: completely flat, slightly shaded, and not-quite-real. That is, some characters are cardboard and good for the uses one expects of a poster. Big Brother in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is such a composition, a character who is literally a poster, with a monstrous flatness. As a counterpoint: *Gatsby's* Dr. T. J. Eckleburg, while a poster, is not flat; he resonates with the eyes of some obscure deity. Others are slightly shaded, with that illusion of movement that the eyes of certain portraits have, or they may simply be placed in a more varied context and gain complexity through sympathetic attraction. The epsilon morons in Huxley's *Brave New World* have such a quality. The use of *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is significant: science fiction novels, more than mainstream works, depend heavily on background figures to explain the worlds they depict.

The last type, not-quite-real characters, simply fail to convince for one reason or another, either by contrast with their more rounded associates or because of a certain didacticism of the author that may come through. The Self-Taught Man who argues with Roquentin in *Nausea* to bring out certain philosophical points is one such figure. Of the three types, cardboard and not-quite-real characters are more likely to stem from artistic defects—that is, not deliberately lacking depth but portrayed as they are because of some

4. Nell's *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* really does scientifically investigate such phenomena as the absorption effect in ludic reading, through a series of laboratory tests. Of course, given the number and complexity of the variables, any conclusions remain tentative.

failure of the author's imagination. The middle ground, on the other hand, is often the type that any artist uses for shading and the illusion of depth.

Some of the same issues raised by the depiction of minor characters apply to flat creations. For example, given that a flat character is a creation that the writer endows with one trait, does the reader stop at that point? Casual studies of children's literature, which relies heavily on flat depictions, suggest that many children wish the portraits would come to life, even though in many cases the characters lack whole personalities to the point where they are cartoon-like. Casual studies of adult readers, however, suggest the same point: one instinctively wishes to embrace certain flat creations, often because of their endearing purity, which is really only the simplicity of the sketch. Noting this phenomenon, G. K. Chesterton cannily observes: "The very people that we fly to in Dickens are the people we fly from in life" (*Appreciations and Criticisms*, 36). One of the more poignant aspects of any character, flat or round, minor or major, embraceable or repulsive, is the slight but unbridgeable distance between the character and the reader. At one level or another, the veil of art is drawn.

Discussing literary characters from a structural vantage is always difficult because, in the end, one is always trying to take apart a sleight-of-hand trick. The effect is in the illusion, not in the laborious steps. Nonetheless, technique does have a great deal to do with the relative success of a writer's creations, and there are a variety of limning styles. At the most basic level, all minor and flat types may appear through the direct expository method or may be developed indirectly, through dialogue, events, and interaction with other characters. Brooks and Warren, in *Understanding Fiction*, put their case clearly: "Direct presentation works best . . . with rather flat and typical characters, or as a means to get rapidly over more perfunctory materials" (169). Brooks and Warren's book came out in 1949; by 1961, Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* had demolished or at least done severe damage to that viewpoint. Over the course of history, writers from Chaucer to Auden have used both direct and indirect characterization with equal grace.

The confounding factor nowadays is the post-structuralist position that nothing is really direct. Just as J. L. Austin analyzed performative and constative utterances and eventually concluded that all language is, in some sense, performative, not even the simplest declarative sentence about a character is safe from hidden bias, indirect hints, and so forth. The description "She had blonde hair" implies that this fact is somehow important over other considerations; moreover, it opens up the whole issue again of individual response—the reader who has various associations to "blonde" and

"hair." As with much post-structuralist assumptions, the thing to do is not to resist the unassailable but rather to admit it and get on with the business at hand. No characterization is entirely direct—but some are more direct than others. " 'Mary has always had beautiful blonde hair,' remarked her mother" opens up ambiguities that the previous sentence simply does not contain.

The main issue should be a question of technique and what works best in a given situation. As commentators from D. W. Robertson to Mary McCarthy have shown, art does not necessarily progress over time, and though indirection may seem more artistic and subtle, one need only question the assumption that equates art with indirection. Simplicity of presentation is another such matter: though a few deft strokes may seem preferable, baroque art has its adherents, and what seems almost an empirical argument devolves to a preference of style. Some writers use events and dialogue as expository agents, and others tend more toward description, especially those with strong authorial voices. For Henry James, the distinction between a novel of character and a novel of incident, in the end, tended to be artificial: "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" (15) One might even go so far as to define a minor character as a slight incident, or a flat character as an example.

### 3. A Structuralist Exercise With a Nod to Vladimir Propp

To say that a writer's characters interact with the reader is to posit a creation and re-creation model, with due emphasis on the writer. M. H. Abrams (457), disputing J. Hillis Miller's purely reader-centered model, proposes a threefold schema combining authorial intent, linguistic structure, and the mind of the reader. T. S. Eliot's objective correlative fuses all three but has long been rejected as too structuralist, almost Pavlovian in a sense. Unfortunately concomitant with this de-emphasis of craft has been a rejection of the writer. Most novels of any complexity are not miraculous, unconsciously produced works but structures that are planned out, labored over, rewritten, revised, and polished. Early drafts of manuscripts often indicate how style follows from assumed intent. Borrowings from other authors also show the importance not just of style but also of certain matters of technique, usually commandeered for their effect. If Jane Tompkins is right in pointing out that ours is an interpretive aesthetics, as opposed to the classical concentration on