Master 2 Literature and Civilisation

Module: Discourse in the Novel

Teacher: Dr Wassila MOURO

Discourse in the Novel

1. The 'Aspects of the Novel'[1]

The novel differs from its previous forms because of its numerous characteristics. It is made of a plot, a setting and, most important, of a set of different characters. These three aspects are referred to by Wellek and Warren (1985) as 'constituents'. They claim that each one "is determinant of the others" (p. 216). This implies that the three constituents of the novel are interrelated and consequently influence one another.

1.1. Plot

The simplest definition of plot that might be given is that it is a "...series of events or episodes that make up the action of a work of fiction" (Smith & co, 1974, p. 387), and E. M. Forster (1966) slightly widens the definition to make it "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality" (p. 93). While reading a story which is "a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence" (Ibid), the reader questions the reasons of the happenings of the events and this is called curiosity. However, in order to grasp the meaning of a plot and understand it fully, the reader needs intelligence and memory. Many plots are based on mystery (with its element of surprise), and it is here that the reader's intelligence and memory are called for, because curiosity alone does not work (Ibid, p. 94-95).

Wellek and Warren (1985) define plot as a 'narrative structure' which is based on other "smaller narrative structures: episodes, incidents" (p. 217). A novel might be composed of one plot that could be divided into sub-plots. This is the case in a great majority of Victorian novels, and mainly those which where serialized. As it is earlier stated, most Victorian writers published their novels periodically in magazines, and of course they needed to arrange the plot and the story according to the new form in order to keep their audiences,

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[1] This phrase is the title of E.M. Forster's book *Aspects of The Novel*, 1966. I find it quite interesting and it encompasses the whole content of this part.

and the best way of keeping them was to end the chapter or part with the element of mystery, i.e., to keep the readers in suspense until the next serialization (weekly or monthly).

"The plot is elaborate and subtle", says Forster (1966) "and proceeds by action or conversation or meditation through every paragraph" (p. 155). When a writer builds his story, he makes sure that each part of it, every constituent, contributes to the dynamics of the story. Characters, events, time and place all influence one another, and make the plot evolve.

1.2. Setting

Plot alone cannot make a good and plausible novel unless it is associated with the setting of the story, and this setting is time and place. According to Locke "ideas become general by separating from them the circumstances of time and place", so when they are specified, ideas become particular, and it is the same for the characters; they can be 'individualized' only "if they are set in a background of a particularized time and place" (Cited in Watt, 1985, p. 23). The three constituents; plot, setting and characters, are thus interwoven.

According to David Lodge (1992)

> The simplest way to tell a story...is to begin at the beginning, and go on until you reach the end...But storytellers perceived the interesting effects that could be obtained by deviating from chronological order... [...] Through time-shift, narrative avoids presenting life as just one damn thing after another, and allows us to make connections of causality and irony between widely separate events (p. 74-75).

This passage from Lodge's article on time-shift represents the relationship that exists between time and plot. Time contributes to the building of a plot that will make the reader want to know what is going to happen next, how and why.

The Elizabethans thought just a little about history and time. For them time was "an element through which the successive generations of men moved, it was not something that changed men and made one generation of men unlike another" (Allen,1958, p. 23).

Wellek and Warren (1985) believe that if we think of setting, we are attempting at a differentiation between fiction and drama. "In drama a setting may be given verbally within

the play...or indicated by stage directions...But in the novel...description of the setting is to a high degree variable" (p. 220). This setting can be Romantic or Realistic. For Wellek and Warren, setting is 'environment' that "may be viewed as metonymic, or metaphoric, expressions of character. A man's house is an extension of himself. Describe it and you have described him" (Ibid, p. 221). They associate setting exclusively to the description of the environment where the characters are supposed to live; to the 'interiors' (the houses) and to the outside world (village, city, nature, etc), that is why they qualify setting as being either Romantic, Realistic or, as in some novels, both.

In order to talk about his time, the novelist needs a set of characters that will epitomize the members of the society he is trying to depict as Ian Watt (1985) writes:

> Two such aspects suggest themselves as of especial importance in the novel – characterization, and presentation of background: the novel is surely distinguished from other genres and from previous forms of fiction by the amount of attention it habitually accords both to the individualization of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment (p. 19)

While talking about time and space, Bakhtin (1981) uses the word 'chronotope' which means literally 'time-space'. He believes it to be the best way to study "the temporal and spatial categories represented" (p. 425), in order to sort out "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (p. 84).

The novelist is concerned with men in a particular place at a particular time, and according to Allen (1958), the greatest novelist is the one who is able to write about his time in a way to distinguish it from another (p. 23-24).

1.3. Characters

The novel is 'a totality', and 'of this totality' characterization is an essential part and the most important one. Characterization is the expression of the novelist's apprehensions and thoughts (Allen, 1958, p. 16). Forster (1966) uses the word 'people' to emphasise the realistic aspect of the novel, that it is a story which could happen (p. 51-90). Therefore, the characters in a novel differ from those found in the romance, drama, epics or else. The character in a novel resembles strangely and realistically human beings in real life. David Lodge (1992), too, claims that in the different narrative forms that existed, a story could well be told "but

nothing can equal the great tradition of the European novel in the richness, variety and psychological depth of its portrayal of human nature" (p. 67).

Characterization went through different stages in order to reach the kind of 'people' we have in novels. The first break with the old tradition was to select characters from lower classes, no more kings and queens, nor knights. The new hero of the new genre was an ordinary man that we might meet throughout our lives, and the importance of the realistic aspect of characters is demonstrated in Lionel Stevenson's (1960) passage: "no matter how believable the action may be in itself, it does not win the reader's full credulity unless it is performed by distinct individuals who are recognizable in terms of our experience" (p. 8).

Henry James questions the importance of character in a story; he asks "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is *not* of character?" (Cited in Zabel, 1975, p. 401), these questions, indeed, show the supremacy of character in the novel, and that a novel with no character is not a novel.

Characterization's importance was recognized by playwrights well before novelists "discovered that they could handle it more effectively" (Stevenson, 1960, p. 8). Walter Besant calls the characters 'men and women'; he says that the novelist is

> …concerned with their actions and their thoughts, their errors and their follies, their greatness and their meanness; the countless form of beauty and constantly varying moods to be seen among them; the forces which act upon them; the passions, prejudices, hopes and fears which pull them this way and that. He has to do, above all, and before all, with men and women (Cited in Regan, 2005, p. 64-65)

The use of 'men and women' by Besant instead of male and female characters underlines the realistic aspect of this genre, namely the novel.

Cates Baldridge believes that what distinguishes the novel from previous literary genres is the 'character development' element which she traces to 'specifically bourgeois-capitalist cultural pressures'. Furthermore, Mikhail Bakhtin considers 'character development' in a novel as a 'definitional aspect of the form' (Baldridge, 1994, p. 7). He claims that in order to classify novels into sub-categories, we have to study the hero: "the

principle for formulating the hero is related to the particular type of plot, to the particular conception of the world, and to a particular composition of a given novel" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 10). Bakhtin carries on his study of the hero according to the type of novels. He considers the hero in the travel novel as 'a point moving in space' where the focus is much more on the world, contrasts and differences, than on the individual. The hero in the novel of ordeal is presented as already complete and he goes through a series a testing of his qualities. Bakhtin carries his study of the hero in the other different novel's sub-categories that he proposes, such as the medieval chivalric, the baroque, and the biographical sub-category (Ibid, p. 10-19). According to him, these were the characteristics of the hero in the novel until the late eighteenth century:

> The hero is characterized by both positive and negative features...But these features are fixed and ready-made, they are given from the very beginning, and throughout the entire course of the novel man remains himself (unchanged). The events shape not the man, but his destiny (Ibid, p. 19).

In fact, the hero remained unchanged until the novel developed and associated with the element of realism (real time and space) contributed to a new conception of the hero, to become an "image of *man in the process of becoming*". A change in the hero implies a change in plot and it requires a certain kind of time conception to attain this alteration in the hero's development (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 19).

Wellek and Warren (1985) say that "the simplest form of characterization is naming" (p. 219). This feature is studied in a wider scope by Ian Watt. He claims that when a novelist names his characters, he provides them with an identity. The use of proper names is a novelistic device. This does not imply that characters in previous literary forms were not given names, but "the kind of names...showed that the author was not trying to establish his characters as completely individualized entities" (Ibid, p. 19-20), these names were either historical or type names which had no contemporaneity in them. Some other early prose fiction writers named their characters in a way to denote "particular qualities, or...carried foreign, archaic, or literary connotations which excluded any suggestion of real and contemporary life" (Watt, 1985, p. 20). With the early novelists, the naming techniques changed. Defoe gave full and realistic names to his characters, whereas Richardson added to the realistic complete names some aspects of the character's personality such as Sir Charles *Grand*ison or Mrs *Sin*clair. Fielding investigated this field of naming his characters after the

main features of their personalities, but he remained realistic (Watt, 1985, p. 21-22). Fielding's influence on later novelists does not only concern naming characters, but it is about characterization as well as plot conception (Allen, 1958, p. 67). Lodge (1992) sums up the idea of naming characters in the following passage:

> In a novel names are never neutral...Comic, satiric or didactic writers can afford to be exuberantly inventive, or obviously allegorical, in their naming...Realistic novelists favour mundane names with appropriate connotations...The naming of characters is...an important part of creating them (p. 37)

Early novelists chose to introduce their characters by a paragraph "describing in detail the physical appearance and another analysing the moral and psychological nature", such as Sir Walter Scott (Wellek and Warren, 1985, p. 219), whereas other writers made their characters known by a feature of their personality or by their repeated use of certain words. Later, characterization became static, dynamic or developmental (Ibid, p. 219).

E. M. Forster (1966) divides 'people'[2] into flat and round characters. "Flat characters...are constructed round a single idea or quality: when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round" (p. 75). Flat or static characters possess a single trait "seen as the dominant or socially most obvious trait" (Wellek and Warren, 1985, p. 219), whereas a round character, or dynamic is the one who surprises us, that "has the incalculability of life about it" (Forster, 1966, p. 85), the term round or dynamic is "obviously usable for characters focal for point of view or interest" (Wellek and Warren, 1985, p. 219).

There are other aspects of the novel, including pattern, rhythm and story, but the most important ones are those we have seen in the paragraphs above: plot, setting and characters. All of them are necessary to the development of a story, and a change in one implies a change in the others and indeed in the whole development of the novel[3].

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[2] I used the word 'people' to refer to characters and it is the same word that Forster uses in his book *Aspects of the Novel*.

[3] This lecture 1 is purely theoretical since the module is about the theories and concepts that deal with the discourse in the novel. Yet, some practice will be done right after this lecture in order to sort out and analyse these aspects on the novel.

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