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Fictional worlds' characters: people or clothes hangers?

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FICTIONAL WORLDS' CHARACTERS: PEOPLE OR CLOTHES HANGERS?

Klíčová slova: literární postava, strukturalismus, sémiotika, mimesis, teorie fikčních světů.

Key Words: literary character, structuralism, semiotics, mimesis, theory of fictional worlds.

Postavy fikčních světů: lidé, nebo věšáky na šaty?
Abstrakt

Studie vychází z klasické naratologické dichotomie týkající se kategorie literární postavy: jsou literární postavy čistě sémiotické konstrukty, nebo jsou do určité míry podobné lidským bytostem? Na dnes již klasických konceptech je nastíněn vývoj této části naratologického uvažování, od Proppova systematického uchopení pohádky, přes Forsterovy „fikční lidi" a koncepty Tzvetana Todorova a Rolanda Barthese, až po participanty Davida Hermana. Poslední část studie se sousřeďuje na to, jak se tyto teoretické návrhy zúročily v moderní sémantice fikčních světů, tak jak ji známe především z podání Lubomíra Doležela.

Over the last eighty years of theoretical investigation of fictional characters we have witnessed the development of particular attitudes and strategies which have substantially contributed to the modern stage of this field of literary theoretical inquiry embodied by narrative semantics of fictional worlds. This paper is a short contribution to this topic and highlights the most important milestones and breaking-points of this development.

"'Optimism is the opium of the people! The healthy atmosphere stinks! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik.' The words sounded so awful in the little room belonging to the political secretariat that I was afraid of them and felt they had a destructive power against which I was powerless to resist. 'Comrades, it was meant as a joke,' I said, feeling no one could believe me. 'Do you consider it funny?' one of the Comrades asked the other two. Both shook their heads." (KUNDERA 1970: 33–34).

"Agnes, the heroine of my novel… Who is Agnes? Just as Eva came from Adam's rib, just as Venus was born out of the waves, Agnes sprang from the gesture of that sixty-year-old woman at the pool who waved at the lifeguard and whose features are already fading from my memory. At the time the gesture aroused in me immense, inexplicable nostalgia and this nostalgia gave birth to the woman I call Agnes." (KUNDERA 2001: 7).

The first quotation with its simplicity and clarity, and also by its reference to *what could have been happening* behind the iron curtain in what was then Czechoslovakia being ruled by the communist government, can be considered a very effective example of both human misery (on the side of Ludvík) and cruelty (on that of the Comrades'). Having experience with the despotism of totalitarian regimes, regardless of whether explicitly or implicitly, we can truly feel for poor Ludvík as if he were a human being, a fellow of ours; and maybe even as if we were him: we can 'feel' his feelings. By contrast, the second quotation clearly shows us one possible process of the birth of a literary character – the same author with the same impressiveness shows us the "far-from-being-human" Agnes, comparing her birth to the births of Eva and Venus; Kundera simply shows us her birth in summoning her forth with letters and words.

No one could possibly argue with the fact that a literary character is an important part of a narrative – in fact it is important to the extent that it is a category crucial for narratological investigation, At the same time, we must admit that it is a very complex category; the way we can approach characters varies in many respects. One of the classical demarcations of literary characters refers to the above quoted paragraphs of Kundera's books: characters might be viewed as purely semiotic entities constructed by linguistic and semantic devices but also as beings somehow (and considerably) similar to human ones; however, these two possibilities represent only two poles of one of the axes the issue of literary character rests upon.[1]

If we look at the modern investigation of literary character and its quest for a systematic description of this phenomenon we have to start with Vladimir Jakovlevič Propp's contribution to the topic This Russian ethnologist in his *Morphology of the Fairytale* (1928) makes a revolutionary turn in literary theoretical investigation. He uses literary characters and in turn their abstract counterparts as the very basis of his system of narrative consisting of thirty one functions and seven roles; namely he refers to *the villain*, *the donor*, *the magical helper*, *the princess and her father*, *the dispatcher*, *the hero or victim*, *and the false hero*. Nevertheless, in the same decade, another remarkable thinker and writer, E. M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) offers a very thorough observation of the difference between Homo Sapiens and Homo Fictus based on the comparison of how much information about them can be received, or how deeply they can be explored: "We know each other approximately, by external signs, and these serve well enough as a basis for society and even for intimacy. But people in a novel

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[1]   Another important axis a literary character in its theoretical investigation rests upon is the axis which has character as one pole and plot as the other: since Aristotle's *Poetics,* which started this way of thinking, the mutual relationship between character and plot has been examined: they can be either viewed as generally subordinate to plots, generally superior to plots or subordinate/superior to plots only in particular narratives. Whereas, for example, Aristotle subordinates characters to plots, E. M. Forster subordinates plots to characters.

can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes, their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed. And this is why they often seem more definite than characters in history, or even our own friends; we have been told all about them that can be told; even if they are imperfect or unreal they do not contain any secrets, whereas our friends do and must, mutual secrecy being one of the conditions of life upon this globe" (FORSTER 1970: 54–5). These two contributions substantially influenced research on fictional characters for a number of decades following: Propp's conception serves as the core of the structuralist approach (which is connected with the semiotic point of view); Forster's thoughts inspire conceptions primarily focused on the human-like side of literary characters. Nevertheless, two important conclusions can be drawn from the efforts of these two scholars. Firstly, literary characters as parts of narratives can be seen as abstract entities on functional bases. Secondly, that the textual strategies which found them can completely vary from the strategies we employ in everyday story-telling. Whereas the first result brings research of literary characters closer to the linguistics-based approach of French structuralists, and thus renders it open to systematic analysis, the second approach is an attempt to set borders between the actual and the fictional.

The French structuralist approach to literary characters, highly inspired by Propp's typology is based on the precondition that linguistic and narrative structures resemble each other since they are derived from general semiotic structures which are superimposed upon them. As a result, narrative structures can be analysed and described in the way that we analyse and describe linguistic structures: A. J. Greimas in his *Sémantique structurale* (1966) stipulates that in terms of narratives we can differentiate between actants and acteurs (according to Greimas actants are fundamental elements of narrative syntax and acteurs are concrete manifestations of these actants in concrete discourses). Greimas also provides us with a system of three pairs of actantial roles. If we compare this model with Propp's roles (the villain, the donor, the magical helper, the princess and her father, the dispatcher, the hero or victim, and the false hero) we can draw two important results: Firstly, we can see that Propp's system of roles is reduced to a set of six actantial roles (subject and object, giver and receiver, and helper and opponent); secondly, Greimas' categories of subject and object are the only categories which directly refer to syntactic structures whereas the other two pairs of actantial roles refer to different criteria: while we can understand the pair sender x receiver as a certain metaphor for the syntactic construction for an direct and/or indirect object (to give something to someone x to receive something from someone), it is rather difficult to find any syntactic parallel for the pair supporter vs. helper.

There is, however, another narrative grammarian, Claude Bremond, who, in his book *Logique de récit* (1973), almost completely omits the structuralist commitment to linguistics and moves to a two-fold set: agents vs. patients. According to Bremond the status of these narrative entities changes in every narrative

situation – either for better or for worse. While the term "either for better of for worse" could easily be considered too general and vague, Bremond's approach points out one important aspect of the whole narratological analysis of literary character – the aspect of value (or profit). Nevertheless, as we have just seen the aspect of value (value for acting) can be seen as implicitly present in the general design of Propp's and Greimas'es conceptions.

Unlike Greimas and Bremond, who, strongly influenced by Propp and by structuralist linguistic, tried to design a system of universal narrative grammar on the bases of literary characters and their abstract roles, Tzvetan Todorov and Roland Bartes devoted much more of their interest to the phenomenon of literary characters themselves, especially the way text accommodates them and the way we apprehend them in the universe of discourse. Roland Barthes, who in the 1960s formulates the need for narratology to by inspired by linguistic inquiry, in his 1970's book *S/Z* considers characters to be "bunches" of semes: "As for the semes, we merely indicate them – without, in other words, trying either to link them to a character (or a place or an object) or to arrange them in some order so that they form a single thematic grouping […] When identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is created. Thus, the character is a product of combinations: the combination is relatively stable (denoted by the recurrence of the semes) and more or less complex (involving more or lee congruent, more or less contradictory figures); this complexity determines the character's "personality", which is just as much a combination as the odour of a dish or the bouquet of a wine. The proper name acts as a magnetic field for the semes; referring in fact to a body, it draws the semic configuration into an evolving (biographical) sense" (BARTHES 1974: 19; 67–68). In contrast, Tzvetan Todorov tends towards the twofold substance of literary characters; in his view the figure is an object, referred to by narrative texts, which is a subject/or object of a sequence of actions (described in propositions) and which carries anthropomorphous features; the figure becomes a character only during the process of psychological determination – only then we do refer to literary characters as to fictional beings: „We have to differentiate between figures and characters since not all figures are characters. A figure is a segment of a represented space-time universe, no more; figures appear as soon as any referential language form (proper name, nominal designation, personal pronoun) appears in the text and refers to anthropomorphous beings. Figures as such do not have any content: somebody is identified without being described. We can imagine texts (and they actually exist) in which a figure is a mere agent of a consequence of actions. However, as soon as psychological determinism appears, the figure is transformed into a character, i. e. acts in a certain way because it is shy, weak, brave etc. Without a determination of this kind no character could have been created" (TODOROV 2000: 294).[2] On the one hand, the conceptions of Roland Barthes and Tzvetan Todorov have founded

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2   My translation.

the whole tradition of analyzing literary characters as purely semiotic entities, as sets of propositions. On the other hand the above stipulated psychological dimension of literary characters offers a literary theoretical investigation of characters new tools and strategies which are usually derived from a variety of disciplines.

Among these, let me mention two literary theoretical fields within which we deal with literary characters as fictional (human) beings – that of cognitive narratology and that of the narrative semantics of fictional worlds.

In terms of the wide field of cognitive narratology I would especially like to single out David Herman's approach to the phenomenon of the literary character. David Herman in his *Story Logic* (2002) introduces a system which accommodates both the structuralist (narrative-grammatical) and the cognitive approaches, and combines them in one cohesive design. David Herman refers to *participants* who are accommodated in *story-worlds* – entities based in narartive texts and revealed and understood by cognitive strategies during the act of reception (and interpretation): "I believe that this way of approaching participant roles and relations affords a rich synthesis of linguistic and narrative theoretical tools – a synthesis that can, in turn, throw new light on how narrative helps to organize human's understanding of the world. Debatably, the cognitive strategies enabling interpreters to discern and monitor participant roles and relations in stories have the same provenance as […] those used to make sense of participant structures in social situations generally" (HERMAN 2001: 121).[3]

As we can see, whereas the French structuralists based the perceived similarity between linguistic and narrative structures on the presumption of the existence of a superior semiotic structure, David Herman sees similarities between the way we conceptualize factual human beings and fictional narrative characters based on the presumption of the existence of general cognitive rules of conceptualization.

The situation of theoretically approaching literary characters changes as soon as we enter fictional worlds as pure semiotic entities: in their realm of fictional worlds we can encounter literary characters on various occasions and in various theoretical forms. It seems that as soon as this theory proclaimed fictional worlds as ultimate universes of narrative meaning it was possible to view these worlds in almost in the same ways as we usually view our actual world; it was possible to employ almost any strategy we use in order to explore our world. However, when I say 'in almost the same ways' I am aware of the unfair simplification I am making – It is a matter of fact that fictional worlds are unique entities which

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3   Here Herman, using his own specific character investigation strategy, combines A. J. Geimas' and Uri Margolin's approaches. Wheras the former enriches David Herman's system with a modified theory of actants, the latter gives Herman's participants a specific ontological status of non-actual individuals.

are specifically based on specific fictional texts and which are revealed in specific ways during the act of reading. Nevertheless, in terms of the general design of the worlds and their inhabitants it is possible to use achievements from the investigations of other fields of human existence in order to better explain the ways in which the fictional universe functions. Among other fields of investigation we must emphasize especially that of the 'action theory' as introduced by George von Wright (*The Varietes of Goodness*, 1963): "The concept of narrative world, defined by the presence of at least one fictional person-agent, enables us to leave behind the split that traditional narratology created by separating story from character. A narrative semantics based on action theory radically psychologizes the story and, at the same time, features fictional characters as for and in acting. Action theory (logic of action) emerged within analytic philosophy in the 1960s and has been actively cultivated ever since. Advances in cognitive psychology provide another, complementary source of inspiration for our semantics" (DOLEŽEL 1998: 55).

The semantics of fictional worlds usually differentiates between extensional and intensional structures of fictional worlds – whereas the former is connected with the paraphrasable part of a narrative (story), the latter refers to the way the story is realised in actual narration (discourse). If we relate these two structures to the issue of literary character we may conclude that whereas from the point of view of the intensional structure of a fictional world the character is treated as a purely language-constructed entity which can be investigated by linguistic tools, from the point of view of the extensional structure characters are studied as basic and crucial entities of stories and their tellability (if I may use Marie-Laure Ryan's term). Thus, to an extent, in this difference we can see both of the main trends of French structuralist investigation into character: In narrative worlds characters are both – language constructs and sources of stories.

Let us, at this point, leave characters and their linguistic features and move towards characters as basic elements of narrative worlds. In this respect Doležel introduces a system of four elementary narrative *constraints* (or *modalities*) which form fictional worlds into specific narrative universes: *Alethic constraints* split fictional worlds into the realms of possible, impossible and necessary, *deontic constraints* into permitted, prohibited, and obligatory, *axiological constraints* into good, bad, and indifferent, and, finally, *epistemic constraints* split fictional worlds into the realms of known, unknown and believed. According to Doležel all narrative situations are designed by constellations of the presence or absence of these constraints which "have a direct impact on acting; they are rudimentary and inescapable constraints, which each person acting in the world faces" (DOLEŽEL 1998: 113). According to Doležel it is necessary that all these constraints apply to both, to the fictional world in which the actions and interactions of particular entities take place (codex constraints), as well as to the particular worlds of fictional characters and other entities (subjective constraints). As a rule,

one of the modalities is placed in a dominant position in a particular fictional world and determines its potential for generating atomic narratives (stories).

Marie-Laura Ryan, another prominent theoretician of fictional worlds, uses Doležel's system of narrative modalities and also his idea that a fictional world produced by a fictional text contains certain sub-worlds of particular inhabitants of the fictional world and that all these worlds are structured by the same system of narrative modalities. She refers to three types of worlds: K-worlds (knowledge-worlds), O-worlds (obligation-worlds), and W-worlds (wish-worlds). At the same time she claims that for the purpose of narrative theory it is important not only to describe the system of narrative worlds and their domains, but also to investigate the relationships between these worlds and their domains in order to describe narrative conficts which are the main source (and also a pre-condition) of narrativity: "The best of all possible states of affairs for a system of reality is one in which the constitutive propositions of all private worlds are satisfied in the central world. In such a system, everybody's desires are fulfilled, all laws are respected, there is a consensus as to what is good for the group; what is good for the group is also good for every individual, everybody's actions respect these ideals, and everybody has epistemic access to all the worlds of the system. We can represent this situation as a number of coinciding circles. Whenever some propositions in a private world becomes unsatisfied in the central world, the system falls into a state of conflict. This event can be visualized as a satellite of TAW[4] leaving its orbit" (RYAN 1991: 120). However, the conflict between fictional and private worlds is not the only type of conflict Ryan describes: she also shows the importance of conflict within a character's private world and also conflict between the private worlds of different characters.[5]

We can summarize the above by saying that the fictional-worlds approach to characters is, thanks to its actional background, to a large degree an extension of one part of the French structuralist tradition, itself derived from Propp's system of functions and roles in marvelous folk-tale narration: in the system of narrative modalities and private-worlds structures we can easily recognize traces of

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[4]   TAW = Textual Actual World, i.e. the world the reader enters during the act of reading and in which he considers himself to be "real" in the *make-believe* game, which is the game which allows us to enter worlds of fiction.

[5]   The idea of a narrative conflict seems to be especially alluring for the literary theoretical approaches which refer to whole literary universes; for example, David Herman accommodates conflict as a necessary pre-condition of narrative in his narrative story-worlds: "Yet a minimal condition for narrative can be defined as thwarting of indended actions by unplanned, sometimes unplannable, events, which may or may not be the effect of other participants' intended actions. This is another way of expressing the intuition that stories prototypically involve *conflict*, or some sort of (noteworthy, tellable) disruption of an initial state of equilibrium by an unplanned and often untoward event or chain of events" (HERMAN 2002: 84). As we can see, David Herman connects the narrative conflict with another important issue of modern narratological investigation, that of minimal narrative.

helpers and opponents, judging and valuation, among others. However, in the theory of fictional worlds we can also find the influence of the second theoretical approach to literary characters, originating within the context of French structuralist thought: fictional characters living in their worlds are also semantic entities reffered-to by specific semiotic tools and strategies. Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized that one of the most influential sources for fictional-worlds theory comes from the realm of logic. In spite of the fact that there is a fundamental gap between fictional and possible worlds,[6] fictional worlds are to a considerable extent metaphorically based on the idea of innumerable and infinite possible worlds. Thus, the fictional world theory also absorbed some of the ideas developed in the field of possible worlds of logical calculus. With regard to literary characters it is especially the notion of trans-world reference (or trans-world-identity) which connects the idea of a literary character as "clothes-hanger (meat-hook)" with modern semiotic and semantic investigation. At the same time, the idea of trans-world reference (identity) represents a very useful tool for the investigation of the ontological status of fictional individuals tracing the reffered-to individuals across all fictional worlds they appear in and describing their fundamental features. On top of that, the idea seems to be especially fruitful for the general investigation of the relationship between actual and fictional individuals and between fictional individuals reffered-to the same proper name themselves: Whereas the former results in factual vs. fictional vs.counterfactual fiction inquiry, the latter provides us with tools for intertextual investigation.

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6   The most detailed analysis of the difference between possible worlds of intentional-logic systems and fictional worlds is provided by Ruth Ronen (see RONEN 1994).

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