

A Semiotic Study of Characters in French Novels

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Abstract: This paper presents a semiotic study of characters in French novels. It consists of two parts. Part I considers two types of characters: narration characters and action characters, divided according to their different functions in novels. Part II analyzes the elements of semiotic representation of characters: name, person, discourse and so on. We can make use of semiotic studies of characters in France to shed some light on our own researches on characters and promote the development of researches on novel characters.

Characters constitute one of the key elements of novels. By surveying the history of French literature, we can find that macroscopic features of characters were simply mentioned till the end of the Middle Ages. At that time, with fixed qualities, the same character could appear in many literary works and have the same destiny. From the end of the Middle Ages to about 1900, writers expatiated on macroscopic features of characters, who were not limited to heroes or dignitaries, but reached all strata of society. Since the 20th century, many authors adopt new writing techniques. But for characters, we can say that their macroscopic features become indefinite again. Many authors only mention very few features and abandon a particular description.

From this, we can find that in order to understand characters, we should gather all the information about these characters in literary works. Now we will make a semiotic study of characters in French novels on two dimensions: division of types of characters and elements of semiotic representation of characters.

I . Division of Characters According to Their Functions

According to their different functions in the novels, we could divide the characters into two types: narration characters and action characters.

As senders of information in novels, narration characters assume the narrative function. This type of characters include the narrator as an outsider and the narrator as a character within the story. There is always a narrator in novels,

though sometimes he or she seems to be absent. This type of characters is similar to the *personnage-embrayeur* raised by Philippe Hamon^①. (Barthes, Kayser, Booth & Hamon, 1977, pp. 115—180)

In a lot of novels, there is a narrator as an outsider, who appears as a stander-by or an eyewitness. For example, in the novel named *Je m'en vais* written by Jean Echenoz, when Ferrer meets Hélène in a restaurant, the narrator suddenly appears and says: "... et cela je me l'explique mal, moi qui suis là pour témoigner qu'Hélène est hautement désirable..."^② (Echenoz, 1999, p. 165) ("... and about this I explain myself badly, I am there to testify that Hélène is highly desirable...") However, the readers do not know his or her identity. Besides that, the narrator as an outsider may not present himself or herself in a novel which is written in the third person, such as the novels written by Flaubert and Zola. Nevertheless, the narrator can also interfere from time to time and make some subjective comments on characters and events.

Narration characters include also the narrator as a character within a novel. In the novel named *Une vie française* written by Jean-Paul Dubois, for instance, Paul Blick's (hero of the novel) life is narrated in the first person. The narrator may also act a minor character in a novel. For example, *Tout est passé si vite*^③ is written in the first person, but the main character is actually an authoress called Elisabeth.

The second type of characters participate in different actions in novels. We could call them action characters and divide them into two kinds: main characters and minor characters. The main character plays a very important role in the plot development. Some novels use main characters' names or identities as their titles, such as *Carmen*, *La reine Margot*, *Comte de Monte-Cristo* and *Les trois mousquetaires*, etc. We could easily know main characters of these novels from their titles.

Minor characters help main characters to achieve their actions or convey some ideas of the author. In novels, most of minor characters belong to the first function, but there are also some minor characters assuming the second function. Take *Je m'en vais* for example: "... Sur les trottoirs on peut surtout apercevoir, lents, solitaires et perplexes, des natifs du tiers-monde et des ressortissants du troisième âge..." (Echenoz, 1999, p. 132) ("... On pavements we can particularly see natives of the Third World and senior citizens

① In his paper named *Pour un statut sémiologique du personnage*, Philippe Hamon divides characters into three types: *personnage-référentiel*, *personnage-embrayeur* and *personnage-anaphore*.

② Echenoz, J. (1999). *Je m'en vais*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

③ Pancrazi, J. N. (2003). *Tout est passé si vite*. Paris: Gallimard.

who are slow, solitary and perplexed...”) Through the portrayal of the lonely and perplexed immigrants from the Third World countries and the old emigrants who live on the edge of society, the author expresses his dissatisfaction with the social reality.

When we read novels, we could distinguish between main characters and minor characters according to some concrete criteria. A main character would have some connection with most of the minor characters in a novel. The author expatiates on his or her appearance, actions and mental activities. Comparatively speaking, the description of minor characters is more concise. Bernard Valette and Philippe Hamon have developed their respective theories concerning the distinction between main and minor characters.

Bernard Valette (2005) makes a distinction between main characters and minor characters according to three criteria: the order of characters' presence in novels; the position of a character in the system of roles; the quantity and the choice of a character's aspect signs. However, this theory has its own insufficiencies. According to Valette, the hero is usually the first character appearing in a novel and the heroine the first character appearing or described in a novel. However, this criterion cannot be applied to all the novels. We can give two examples. In *Colomba* written by Mérimée, Colonel Sir Tomas Nevil and his daughter Lydia appear at first, the heroine Colomba does not appear until the fifth chapter. In *Le Père Goriot*, the hero Goriot appears after several pages. As for the position of a character in the system of roles, Valette himself also points out that the character appearing in the first person may not be the hero.

Comparatively speaking, Philippe Hamon's theory is more convictive. Hamon (Barthes, Kayser, Booth & Hamon, 1977) makes a distinction of characters according to six parameters: difference of qualities (quantity of qualities in the description of characters), difference of distribution (frequency of characters' presence, length of description of these characters), difference of independence and difference of functions, importance of characters in different types of literature (e. g. a detective is usually very important in detective stories) and definite comments (the narrator may directly call a main character “hero” in a novel). Taking all these parameters into consideration, we can distinguish between main and minor characters.

Since characters can perform diverse functions in literary texts, these two types of characters divided by us are not totally opposite to each other. A certain character can belong to these two types at one time. A narration character may also be a main or minor character in a novel. After ascertaining a character's position in the characters' system, we will then consider how these characters are presented by different signs in novels.

II. Character Signs Presented in Novels

Characters are presented in novels by different signs, including name, person, way of discourse and so on.

A character's name may have several functions, and the most common ones are as follows: firstly, a character's name is the simplest and the most direct means to reveal the information about him or her. For example, in *Les trois mousquetaires*, the captain's name "de Tréville" includes an identity sign "de" which shows his status as a nobleman. Secondly, authors can reveal a character's traits and destiny through his or her name and sometimes they may also use some methods such as intertextuality and allusion in a character's name. The heroine of *La Cousine Bette* is Lisbeth Fischer. Balzac called her "Bette" which was pronounced the same as "wild animals" in French. This appellation reveals her nature of a barbarian. Another character in this novel is a Brazilian baron named Henri Montès de Montéjanos. This name reminds us of a character in *Comte de Monte-Cristo*: Edmond Dantès de Monte-Cristo. These two names have a similar pronunciation. Balzac revealed the character's actions through the intertextuality: like Edmond, Montès considers himself the embodiment of justice, and thinks that the people punished by him deserve it. The name of Baron Hulot is Hector Hulot, which alludes to Victor Hugo, a famous French writer of the 19th century. Both of them courted women continually throughout their lives. Besides that, the name of Hulot's wife is Adeline Fischer, and the name of Hugo's wife is Adèle Foucher. These two names have a similar pronunciation, too.^④ Finally, authors may express their emotions through one character's name. Flaubert considered Emma in *Madame Bovary* as his favorite character and imputed her tragedy to the society. "Emma" means *joviality, gentleness and good cultivation*. This name's pronunciation is similar to a French word "aimer" which means *love*. We can find Flaubert's emotions from this name. In his short story *Un coeur simple*, the name of the heroine is Félicité, which means *praise in French*. The author praised her for her fine qualities, such as honesty, bravery and fidelity, and etc.

When we read novels, we could judge the type of a character and distinguish between main and minor characters. We will analyze two novels here as

④ About the analysis of names in *La Cousine Bette*, we refer to the comments included in the novel's French version (Balzac, H. de. (1984). *La Cousine Bette*. Paris: Librairie Générale Fran? aise).

examples: *La parure*^⑤ written by Maupassant and *Le jardin clos*^⑥ written by Régine Detembel. The person of some characters in these two novels is briefly summarized as follows:

Types Novels	Narration characters		Action characters	
	Narrator as an outsider	Narrator as a character	Main characters	Minor characters
<i>La parure</i>		0	Mathilde Loisel + she	Mr. Loisel + he; Mrs. Forestier + she; Minister Georges Ramponneau
<i>Le jardin clos</i>	0	I	I	Elsa + you + she; Father/mother + you + he/she/they; Patrick + he; Sandrine + she; Etc.

The first person is not used in *La parure*. The narration character stands out of the story and does not appear in the novel. The narrator uses mainly the third person “she” when the heroine Mathilde Loisel appears. Among the minor characters, the name of the minister Georges Ramponneau only appears once and the narrator never uses the third person for him. It shows that this character is less important than Mr. Loisel and Mrs. Forestier. *Le jardin clos* is written in the first person, and the narration character is exactly the main character of the novel. As far as minor characters are concerned, the narrator uses the third person to present Patrick and Sandrine, while he uses alternately the second and the third person to present Elsa and his parents. It means that Elsa and the hero's parents have a tighter relation with the hero than Patrick and Sandrine. Feeling ashamed and regrettable, the hero is not able to face Elsa. She was attacked and violated in broad daylight before her frightened boyfriend. He can not face her except in his memory and narration, so he uses sometimes the second person to present Elsa. However, the hero has a deep-seated resentment when he uses the second person to present his parents because he thinks his cowardice is the result of their improper education. By analyzing the person, we can understand the characters' functions and also their relations with each other.

⑤ Maupassant, Gu. de. (1984). *La parure*, in *Contes du jour et de la nuit*. Paris: Gallimard.

⑥ Detembel, R. (1994). *Le jardin clos*. Paris: Gallimard.

Furthermore, we could also consider a character by his or her way of discourse. The appearance of the first person “I” shows that it is the narration character who is speaking. As a special discourse of the characters, the interior monologue presents a character’s underlying thoughts and mental activities that he or she does not speak. This kind of discourse “totally breaks away from the narrator’s control, adjustment or handling, so that the character’s mental activities are presented in the most active way” (Zhao, 1998, p.164). It seems as if the medium of the narrator is omitted, which helps the readers to understand directly the character. As a result, in action characters, main characters may have both interior monologues and dialogues, while minor characters have less interior monologues and even have not any interior monologue. Besides that, minor characters talk often with main characters or at least talk about main characters. In *Le Père Goriot*, the hero’s discourse is found mainly in the latter half of the novel, but in the first half, many minor characters’ discourses center on Goriot, such as Mme. Vauquer, Sylvie and Eugène de Rastignac, etc. It reflects Goriot’s central position in this novel.

With division of novel characters according to their different functions, we can know a character’s position in the system of characters in a novel. The analysis of character signs such as name, person and way of discourse can help to understand these characters better. These two dimensions constitute the elementary semiotic study of characters in French novels. In their researches on characters, Chinese researchers usually borrow ideas from classical French theories, such as semiotic square (Greimas, 1995) and actantial mode (Greimas, 1970, 1983) of Greimas. However, in recent years, semiotic researches in France have made further progress. For example, *L’Effet-personnage dans le roman* written by Vincent Jouve is published by PUF in 1998. In 2007, Editions Gallimard published *Le Personnage de roman* written by Jean Bardet. Both of them have taken novel characters as the object of study. The result of these new researches about characters could help to widen our vision, shed some light on our own researches on characters and promote the development of researches on novel characters.

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