



The epigraphic character in twentieth-century poetry

Ulug'bek KARIMOV¹

Uzbekistan State World Languages University

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received January 2023

Received in revised form

10 January 2023

Accepted 25 February 2023

Available online

15 March 2023

Keywords:

fiction,
fictional characters,
epigraphic characters,
criticism,
plot,
novel,
interpretation.

ABSTRACT

In this article, the concept of epigraphic character, its unique and common features in twentieth-century poetry works are explored in James Joyce's, Flann O'Brien's, and Graham Greene's novels.

2181-3663/© 2023 in Science LLC.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47689/2181-3701-vol1-iss2-pp103-110>

This is an open-access article under the Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.ru>)

Эпиграфик образ: XX аср poetikasida

Kalit so'zlar:

fantastika,
badiiy qahramonlar,
epigrafik qahramonlar,
tanqid,
syujet,
roman,
talqin.

ANNOTATSIYA

Ushbu maqolada epigrafik xarakter tushunchasi, uning XX asr poetikasida tutgan o'rni, o'ziga xos va umumiy xususiyatlari Jeyms Joys, Flann O'Brayen, Grem Grin romanlari talqinida tahlil qilingan.

Эпиграфический персонаж: в поэтике двадцатого века

Ключевые слова:

художественная
литература,
вымышленные персонажи,
эпиграфические

АННОТАЦИЯ

В данной статье исследуется понятие эпиграфического персонажа, его уникальные и общие черты в поэтических произведениях XX века в романах Джеймса Джойса, Фланна О'Брайена, Грэма Грина.

¹ PhD, Docent, English integrated course №3, Department, Uzbek State World Languages University.
E-mail: u_n_karimov0101@mail.ru

персонажи,
критика,
сюжет,
роман,
интерпретация.

INTRODUCTION

The two characters are examples of the same literary figure the epigraphic character. Epigraphic characters overtly voice ideas about fiction, writing, or literature; what they say always speaks to the novel in which they appear, sometimes obliquely and sometimes more or less directly. Its roots lie in modernist concerns with the ontological status of literature.

The epigraphic character is, from a historical-materialist point of view, a natural outgrowth of the development of the novel from a quasi-literary use of prose into a distinct literary genre. Mikhail Bakhtin gives us an overview of this development at the beginning of “Discourse in the Novel” [6]. Before the twentieth century, problems associated with the stylistics of the novel had not been precisely formulated such a formulation could only have resulted from a recognition of the stylistic uniqueness of novelistic artistic-prose discourse. For a long time, the treatment of the novel was limited to little more than abstract ideological examination and publicistic commentary.

Concrete questions of stylistics were either not treated at all or treated in passing and in an arbitrary way: the discourse of artistic prose was either understood as being poetic in the narrow sense, and had the categories of traditional stylistics (based on the study of tropes) uncritically applied to it, or else such questions were limited to empty, evaluative terms for the characterization of language, such as “expressiveness,” “imagery,” “force,” “clarity,” and so on without providing these concepts with any stylistic significance, however vague and tentative.

If fiction is supposed to present believable versions of reality, why are so many fictional characters authors? Margaret Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin*, John Irving’s *The World According to Garp* and *A Widow for One Year*, Amy Tan’s *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, Stephen King’s *Misery*, and countless other novels all center on writer-protagonists. The author-as-character pervades contemporary popular fiction. Although authors have become familiar characters to today’s readers, few readers may be personally acquainted with an author in real life [11]. The convention does not reflect the experience of the majority of readers; it is not realistic, though many of the novels that employ it are firmly entrenched in realism. In addition to the overrepresentation of authors in fiction, many other novels center on literary theorists, a group whose number is even more circumscribed.

Despite the fact that few people spend more than a few years of their lives in the academy and despite the fact that the academy seems, on the surface, to offer little opportunity for plot advancement the academy is enjoying unprecedented popularity as a setting for novels, among them James Hynes’s *The Lecturer’s Tale*, Richard Russo’s *Straight Man*, Jane Smiley’s *Moo*, and David Lodge’s academic trilogy, *Changing Places*, *Small World*, and *Nice Work*. What ends might these conventions serve? What are their roots? Why are author-characters so common, despite the rarity of real-life authors? And why do theorist-characters exist at all?

Toward the end of the last XIX century, as a counterweight to this abstract ideological way of viewing things, interest began to grow in the concrete problems of artistic craftsmanship in prose, in the problems of novel and short-story technique [13]. However, in questions of stylistics, the situation did not change in the slightest; attention was concentrated almost exclusively on problems of composition in the broad sense of the word. But, as before, the peculiarities of the stylistic life of discourse in the novel and in the short story as well lacked an approach that was both principled and at the same time concrete [9]. Novels, in other words, were not often considered a distinct art form until the end of the nineteenth century. Victorians tended to conceive of the novel in terms of the ideology it reflected; they read and interpreted novels by and large didactically, for their meanings. The artistry of novels was generally considered similar to poetry and was judged by the same stylistic criteria; thus, it was considered far inferior to poetry artistically.

Authors are generally the first to formulate ideas about literature, and critics, lagging a few years behind, start to see literature as it has recently been presented. They codify into criticism and theory what artists have presented in art and commentary. Authors do not change literature by merely adding their own works to it they also change how we see other literary works retrospectively. Critics and theorists take this changed understanding and apply it not only to the newer works that embody this changed understanding but by working it into a broader understanding of literature, they apply it to literature as a whole [5]. Therefore, we take Bakhtin to be working, in part, from ideas about literature presented in the literature by writers working just before him, writers such as Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, or even Eduard Dujardin, who drew attention to the style of novelistic prose. The idea of looking more closely at the style of a novel's prose, in other words, originated with these authors' experiments with the style of a novel's prose. That Bakhtin, working in a time ripe with such ideas, turned his attention to the novel's stylistics into a revolutionary way of looking at all literature and all language, testifies to his particular genius.

Only around the turn of the century roughly around the advent of modernism did a consciousness of the novel as a genre distinct from poetry and from other kinds of prose, such as letters and essays, emerge with much force. According to Bakhtin, this consciousness is neither linguistics nor stylistics of the novel; rather, it focuses on aesthetic theories about how novels are composed. Modernists were interested in how novels are built, both in terms of the relations and workings of the internal parts of novels and in terms of how authors assemble those parts. At the time Bakhtin wrote "Discourse in the Novel," [3] there was, according to him, as yet still no stylistics of the novel, leaving the modernists to wrestle with the ontological status of the novel, to focus on novelistic composition, and to begin to experiment with the stylistics of the novel.

Bakhtin writes to further the linguistics of the novel, a study of how novels employ language on a smaller scale. The modernists, as Bakhtin shows us, were working in a time that conceived of the novel as constructed by an author out of various larger-scale novelistic materials. They were becoming conscious of the large-scale inner, structural workings of the novel. This change in the conceptualization of the novel accounts, in part, for the emergence of the epigraphic character. The novel went from being a window into reality to be a thing in itself, reified into the dimensions of its own materials. The purpose of the novel changed from being a reflection of something external to being an artistic

composition. The modernists thought of the novel in much the same way as Annie Dillard thinks of the writer's work in this excerpt from *The Writing Life*: Here is a fairly sober version of what happens in the small room between the writer and the work itself.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

It is similar to what happens between a painter and the canvas. First, you shape the vision of what the projected work of art will be. The vision, we stress, is no marvelous thing: it is the work's intellectual structure and aesthetic surface. It is a chip of mind, a pleasing intellectual object. It is a vision of the work, not of the world. It is a glowing thing, a blurred thing of beauty. Its structure is at once luminous and translucent; you can see the world through it. After you receive the initial charge of this imaginary object, you add to it at once several aspects and incubate it most gingerly as it grows into itself.

The vision is sub-specie aeternitatis, a set of mental relationships, a coherent series of formal possibilities [7]. Annie Dillard's vision represents an unconventional view of the novel. Rather than being simply a chronological representation of events, the novel becomes a thematic construction in which the theme guides not only the events but also the structure of the writing. For instance, Joyce wrote *Ulysses* not only as a series of pseudo-epical events but also in episodes that mimic, in some way, the structure of *The Odyssey*. Monsters that Odysseus encounters in Homer's text become thematic and structural guides for chapters.

Thus, the prose of "Proteus" is difficult to wrestle with, and Stephen wrestles with the protean nature of art. The controlling aesthetic metaphor tells us how the text is constructed. This is how many modernist works operate. Rather than depending on conventional plot and character for their compositional integrity and meaning, modernist works often rely on a controlling aesthetic vision that determines the structure and, through the structure, the sense readers make of it. Only by understanding how the controlling aesthetic vision works can we understand the work; the conventions of Victorian and Edwardian novels can no longer serve readers of modernist novels. To the extent that readers try to apply or read by such conventions, they misunderstand the work. But Victorian conventions are trenchant, and contemporary readers still find modernist works difficult [4].

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man hangs together not because it is a novel with a plot that goes through the conventional shape, but because it is constructed along the lines of a painting. It is a palimpsest, a portrait of one person at several particular points in time, on one canvas. The parts relate to the whole more in terms of a timeless vision than in terms of a progressive narrative. What happens in the first part happens, in greater detail, with more nuance, in later parts. While the story itself is spectacular, the piece really becomes art when we see how it is constructed along the lines of a painting, the parts of which we look at and contemplate simultaneously. This is how Joyce solves the problem of time and the problem of his interminable early draft of *Portrait*, Stephen Hero: by constructing the book as a series of snapshots, leaving out huge chunks of time [1]. As the purpose of art and literature changed from showing and commenting on reality, the subject matter changed as well – in all the formerly representational arts, painting as well as literature. Because the changes happened across the arts, and because, given its visual nature, it is easier to understand painting as representational, it might be easier to understand the change by turning to a painter's understanding of the shift.

In Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Kandinsky maintains that: One of the first steps in the turning away from material objects into the realm of the abstract was, to use the technical term, the rejection of the third dimension. Modelling was abandoned. Any attempt to free painting from this material limitation to the canvas together with the striving after a new form of composition must concern itself first of all with the destruction of this theory of one single surface attempts must be made to bring the picture onto some ideal plane which shall be expressed in terms of the material plane on the canvas [8]. In painting, in other words, the shift from realism to modernism meant giving up the mimetics of three-dimensionality. But Kandinsky was not content to limit himself to the basic materials and dimensions of painting.

Canvas and color, texture and two-dimensionality, were not enough. He sought to use the flat surface of the canvas to express the metaphysical. The canvas was still a window, then; it just looked out on a different view. Modern novelists had the same problem with subject matter. With the new idea of the novel as an artistic composition as opposed to a window on reality, they lacked a subject. One notable subject modernist writer lit upon was just what Kandinsky arrived at as the proper subject matter in painting: the metaphysical[6]. Another was literature itself: the metafictional. This subject was paralleled in modernist art by the artists' own implicit questioning of the ontological status of art by radically changing its purpose, and culminated with the Dadaists' notorious questioning of the very notion of art itself. Painters' recourses were fairly limited their questioning of the ontological status of art at first had to be either implicit, in their replacing an old paradigm such as realism with a new one such as impressionism, cubism, abstract art, or an out-and-out questioning of art that completely supplanted art itself, such as Duchamp's famous display of a urinal.

Only with postmodernism could the visual arts combine the aesthetic with the questioning of art, with such pieces as Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Can paintings undeniably aesthetically moving, in its own peculiar way, as Duchamp's urinal was not, but still seemingly devoid of meaning at its core. But because of the inherent dialogism of language, modernist writers were able to both question and represent in a single work from an early stage [11]. Often enough, modernists' preoccupations with ideas of art found their way into the subject matter and characters of the novel as well as into the composition of the novel, which is the main reason the epigraphic character takes root during this period. Because meditation on the craftsmanship of the novel was new, novelists looked to other arts for ways to conceptualize their own art. As Virginia Woolf has said in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," the men and women who began writing novels in 1910 or thereabouts had this great difficulty to face there was no English novelist living from whom they could learn their business. Mr. Conrad is a Pole; which sets him apart, and makes him, however admirable, not very helpful. Mr. Hardy has written no novel since 1895.

The most prominent and successful novelists in the year 1910 were, we suppose, Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Galsworthy. Now it seems to me that to go to these men and ask them to teach you how to write a novel, how to create characters that are real is precisely like going to a bootmaker and asking him to teach you how to make a watch[14]. Woolf's statement that how we view character changed "on or around December 1910", the date of the first post-impressionist exhibit in London, tells us that literature was already looking to the visual arts to understand itself. The change in how

Woolf's inclusive "we" viewed character was prompted immediately, in Woolf's estimation, by an art exhibit, but it is reasonable to say that such an exhibit was able to change "our" perceptions of character because of larger forces at work forces that caused a rupture in tradition, which reinforced the need to turn to other art forms for insight into the nature of literature. Because such inter-art borrowing was a defining feature of modernism, generalized or borrowed discussions of aesthetics had a particular influence on its articulation. Thus, with the early forms of the epigraphic character, the character meditates on painting, as in the Lighthouse, or on aesthetics in general, as in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or *Ulysses*.

The subject of *Portrait* and, to some extent, *Ulysses* is the development of the artist and his artistic sensibilities. The subject of *To the Lighthouse* might be expressed as the consciousness of a houseful of particular people on a few particular days, or even the consciousness of a house itself, both when populated and when abandoned. However, we wish to define the subject of *To the Lighthouse*, we can certainly not constrain it to be about Lily Briscoe. And yet Lily Briscoe's meditations on art give us insight into the composition, or vision, as Dillard might say, of *To the Lighthouse*, just as Stephen Dedalus's lecture to Lynch on aesthetics provides a way though not, we will argue, a correct way of reading the composition of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Although the subjects are different, both novels meditate on their compositional features. Joyce and Woolf use the epigraphic character differently, of course. What's exciting about the epigraphic character is that, although we can define it, isolate it, identify it, and even trace its origins, the ways authors can and do use it are virtually unlimited. And, although it grows out of modernist concerns with art, modernist compositional structures, and modernist subjects, it is not bound to those concerns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The epigraphic character is modernist in origin, but structural in nature, and thus can appear in any novel about any subject. To the best of my knowledge, no one has yet written about the epigraphic character as such. While there are numerous books on readers in fiction, metafiction, self-conscious fiction, and the like, there are no books on this particular metafictional phenomenon.

There are, however, a few sentences scattered here and there throughout criticism that point towards the epigraphic character's existence and function. For instance, Randall Stevenson notes in his study on *Modern Fiction* that Wyndham Lewis's novel *Tarr* typifies the epigraphic character, by critiquing fiction from within a conventional story, bringing metafiction and conventional fiction together in a paradoxical, counterintuitive way, which suggests that the aims of metafiction and conventional fiction are not mutually exclusive. Modernist fiction's artistic self-consciousness: opinions about art not only reflect the views of the author but relate directly to the novel in which they are expressed. Self-consciousness and a habit of self-portraiture extend into a kind of self-reflexiveness in which texts talk about their own methods, or artists discuss or demonstrate problems and priorities that also figure in the construction of the novel in which they appear [7].

Stevenson briefly mentions the role self-consciousness plays in the move from bildungsroman to counterwoman, but he focuses on a more generalized and theoretical interest in self-reflexiveness and the problems of semiotics for modernists. It should be noted that Gardner sets this argument up not as his own, but as "The traditionalist

answer to the ‘innovative factionalist’s general line of argument. But he argues the point so well and at such length, and the tone accords so well with the rest of the book, that it is difficult not to attribute the argument directly to Gardner. literature. I’d like to develop his observation along different lines by investigating epigraphic characters and the dynamic they initiate. To determine this, I’ve looked in depth at three related instances of the epigraphic character. This dissertation traces the development of the epigraphic character from James Joyce through Flann O’Brien and Graham Greene, three authors whose works are particularly related. We focus first on Joyce’s creation of the figure, develop strategies for reading that figure, and then trace its development through O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds* and Graham Greene’s *The End of the Affair*, arguing that each used the figure in different ways, changing it in the process according to their own aptitudes and predispositions. The ideas voiced by epigraphic characters range from Stephen Dedalus’s multi-paged lecture to Lynch in the fifth chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to Maurice Bendrix’s musings on questions of composition, authorship, and divinity scattered throughout *The End of the Affair*. Epigraphic characters are comparable to narrators: whether a novel has a narrator or not, its tale is narrated. Likewise, a novel can reflect on itself without employing a special character to do so. Indeed, epigraphic characters are not special characters but are only elevated to that level for brief moments, and then disappear into the story as otherwise “normal” characters. Their main function is as participants in the story.

CONCUSION

To sum up, epigraphic novels reflect on their methods from within themselves, through the limited perspectives of their characters, from within the story level. When a character takes up the role of an epigraphic character, the author usually takes pains to make that character mimetically plausible; most epigraphic characters are characters who are likely to think, write, and talk about writing, literature, or art: students, artists, writers, professors, and such. Epigraphic characters are full-fledged characters and pierce the membrane between story and discourse only during their epigraphic utterances, though they may be unaware that they’re doing so. Wrapped up in the events of their own lives the story they are usually unaware of the ways in which their ideas about writing and their life stories inform or negate each other. They are believable as characters because they are completely unconscious of themselves as literary creations. The fourth wall the boundary between reality and what is portrayed, the boundary between story and discourse though pierced, remains intact. In this way, the epigraphic novel is always conservative with respect to the integrity of the story, the cornerstone of the conventional novel, and the reader is tempted to read the epigraphic statements along conservative lines, as more narrowly about the novel in which they appear, rather than as statements about fictionality. Stevenson, in talking about the modernist novel, assumes the relationship between the epigraphic character and author and theory and practice is straightforward opinions about art reflect the views of the author. Texts talk about their own methods, or artists discuss or demonstrate problems and priorities that also figure in the construction of the novel in which they appear.” But the relationship between the epigraphic statement, the novel, and the author is rarely straightforward. A more tempered view than Stevenson’s is that “all opinions about art relate to the author’s concerns”; such a statement allows for the authorial ambivalence that often accounts for the very introduction of ideas about art in the fictional work.

REFERENCES:

1. Conrad, Joseph. "An Outpost of Progress." Heart of Darkness and Other Tales. Ed. Cedric Watts. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
2. D.H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover." Style 32. 1 (Spring 1998): 102–128.
3. Anna Bostock. The Theory of the Novel. Trans. Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1971.
4. Hoskins, Robert. Graham Greene: An Approach to the Novels. New York; London: Garland, 1999.
5. Бахтин М.М. Вопросы литературы и эстетики. М.: Худож. литература, 1975.
6. Sheldon Michael. Graham Greene: The Enemy Within. – New York: Random House, 1994.
7. Pearce, Joseph. Literary Converts: Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000.
8. Pfordresher, John. Jesus and the Emergence of a Catholic Imagination. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008.
9. Orange, Michelle. "Not Easy Being Greene: Graham Greene's Letters." The Nation. 15th April 2009.
10. O'Malley, John W. What Happened at Vatican II. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2008.
11. Meyers, Jeffrey, ed. Graham Greene: A Revaluation. New Essays. London: Macmillan, 1990.
12. Mauriac, François. "Graham Greene." Hynes.
13. Lawrence, D.H. Women in Love. London: Penguin, 1995.
14. Habermas, Jürgen. "On John Dewey's The Quest of Certainty." Habermas and Pragmatism. Mitchell Aboulafia, Myra Bookman, Catherine Kemp, eds. New York: Routledge, 2002.