

THE TYPOLOGY AND FUNCTIONS OF SECONDARY CHARACTERS IN BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *DEMON COPPERHEAD*

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Abstract

The study examines several types of secondary characters and their functions in Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead*. Relying mainly on Maria Nikolajeva's classification of secondary characters, the research focuses on the following types depicted in the novel: catalyst, satellite and backdrop characters. Character and contextual analysis are applied to examine the contribution of secondary figures to narrative development and characterisation. According to the analysis, while catalysts are responsible for major changes in Demon's life, satellite characters play an important part in revealing different aspects of the protagonist's personality as well as representing his social environment. Backdrop characters, having limited influence on the plot, serve to ensure the authenticity of the setting. The findings suggest that secondary characters in the novel fulfil functions ranging from shaping Demon's experiences to constructing the fictional environment surrounding him.

Keywords: secondary characters, *Demon Copperhead*, Barbara Kingsolver, character typology, catalyst characters, satellite characters, backdrop characters, characterization.

Introduction

Characters are one of the significant components of the narrative and contribute not only to the action in the plot but also to the meaning of the literary work, as they are "*formulated in words*" (Walcutt, 1966, p.7). According to Hochman, character and action are interrelated as the scholar draws attention to Henry James's argument defining character and action as "the twin pillars of the narrative" (Hochman, 1985, p.21). As far as the functional typology of characters is concerned, Fishelov classifies them into several categories: "the protagonist, then the ficelle in a subordinate role and a backdrop" (Fishelov, 1990, p.423). For secondary characters in particular, Nikolajeva offers a concise definition, stating that "all characters other than the protagonist are secondary characters" (Nikolajeva, 2002, p.112).

Secondary characters perform a number of functions within a literary work and forming a "network of relationships in the novel" (Harvey, 1965, p.30) is one of them. Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead* features a wide range of secondary characters that create the environment and network of relationships. Such characters as Stoner, Fast Forward and Dori surround Demon at different stages of his life, performing different functions in the narrative. Thus, the present study analyses the catalyst, satellite and backdrop types of secondary characters, focusing on their functions in the novel.

Theoretical background

The functional approach to character provides a significant theoretical basis for the analysis of secondary characters in literary works. Vladimir Propp's definition of characters establishes them as the "agents of the plot and secondary element necessary to the enactment of the story" (Propp, 1968, p. 79), which emphasises their relationship with the narrative action. Maria Nikolajeva offers a more sophisticated classification of characters, dividing secondary characters into catalyst, satellite and backdrop characters.

A catalyst is defined as “a character who sets the plot in motion” (Nikolajeva, 2002, p.112); therefore, catalysts have greater influence on the course of events. Satellite characters, on the other hand, have less direct significance to the progression of the narrative. However, they illuminate specific aspects of the plot and “represent a variety of human types” (Nikolajeva, 2002, p. 113). The purpose of the final category of secondary characters is to add colour and authenticity to the setting of the narrative (Nikolajeva, 2002, p. 114), that is, backdrop characters have no essential impact on the plot. These categories collectively constitute the theoretical framework for analysing secondary characters in the novel *Demon Copperhead*.

Analysis and discussion

Two of the major characters that fall into the category of catalysts in *Demon Copperhead* are Stoner (Murrell Stone) and Dori. Stoner is Demon’s stepfather and his arrival in the protagonist’s life alters the domestic environment for him. Stoner oppresses Demon, pressures him and his mother constantly, contributing to Demon’s placement in foster care. The displacement from home pushes Demon towards a journey through foster homes.

Dori, another catalyst in the novel, is Demon’s girlfriend who is already addicted to drugs. Her presence in Demon’s life marks the starting point of his heavy drug dependence, as Dori introduces Demon to more intensive drug use. While foster homes deprives him of his chance to proper care and educational opportunities, drug dependence affects his career and future prospects. Thus, Stoner and Dori function as catalysts at different stages of Demon’s life, leading to important changes in both his circumstances and the development of the narrative.

When it comes to satellite characters, Fast Forward is one of the major satellites in the novel. He is the boy Demon meets at Creaky Farm, who is in the foster care system like the protagonist himself. Fast Forward serves a contrastive purpose in relation to the protagonist. His hostility to the other boys at Creaky Farm and later his abusive relationship with Emmy highlight the distinction between his behaviour and the compassion and support Demon displays.

Furthermore, Fast Forward represents the type of young person who abuses his power over others. His active involvement in illegal drug dealing establishes him as an example of a young person who has chosen a criminal path. Therefore, Fast Forward is a satellite character who represents a particular social type in the narrative.

Backdrop characters in the novel mainly consist of school students, foster children at Creaky Farm and boys on Coach’s football team. These characters ensure the authenticity of the setting described in the narrative. Barbara Kingsolver uses them to give a realistic representation of the social environments the protagonist encounters. Taken together, all three character types discussed above perform distinct functions in the narrative, contributing to plot development, the characterisation of the protagonist and the representation of the social environment in the novel.

Conclusion

Secondary characters hold a significant place in a literary work as they influence the plot and form the wider circle of relationships around the protagonist. The analysis of non-central characters in *Demon Copperhead*, based on Nikolajeva’s typology, demonstrates their different roles in the narrative. Catalysts influence the course of events in the protagonist’s life while satellite characters contribute to his characterisation and represent a particular social type in

the novel. Despite having less impact on the plot, backdrop characters provide a realistic view of the setting of the story.

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