Willem G. Weststeijn,
Towards a Cognitive Theory of Character

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Inhalt

Towards a Cognitive Theory of Character

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A striking aspect of how narratology has developed since the sixties of the twentieth century is the lack of attention paid to character. This is surprising because character, together with plot, is one of the most important elements of any story (the third, equally 'indispensable' element, setting, has, generally, an auxiliary function with regard to character and events). In comparison, far more work in narrative theory has been done on the structure of action, the various kinds of narrators, the implied author, focalization, and the way narrative content is communicated: the discourse, with as one of its main elements represented speech (particularly free indirect style).

"It is remarkable how little has been said about the theory of character in literary history and criticism," comments Seymour Chatman in *Story and Discourse,*[1] surveying what has been said on the subject from Aristotle to contemporary structuralist narratology. Sixteen years later, when the heyday of structuralism had long since passed, Patrick O'Neill in *Fiction of Discourse: Reading Narrative Theory* echoes Chatman's observation.

> The multifarious ways in which characters emerge from the words on the page, in which story-world actors acquire a personality, is one of the most fascinating and least systematically explored aspects of narrative theory and narrative practice.[2]

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[1] *Chatman S.* Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film. Ithaca, 1978. P. 107.

[2] *O'Neill P.* Fictions of Discourse: Reading Narrative Theory. Toronto, 1994. P. 49.

Yet, despite his professed fascination, O'Neill devotes only four pages to character.[3]

Whereas both Chatman and O'Neill were influenced by classic French structuralist narratology and are working within its terms, most recent narrative theory has largely abandoned this tradition. As David Herman says in his introduction to *Narratologies. New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, 'postclassical' narratology has become narrative analysis which "is marked by a profusion of new methodologies and research hypotheses; the result is a host of new perspectives on the forms and functions of narrative itself."[4]

Many of these new perspectives have been introduced by narrative theorists who are not confining themselves to literary texts, but are drawing "on fields such as Artificial Intelligence, hypertext, psychoanalysis, film studies, and linguistics (including possible-world semantics and discourse analysis) to broaden and diversify our conception of stories and to provide new ways of analyzing their structures and effects."[5]

The 'host of new perspectives' (Herman's book contains twelve articles by well-known narratologists) in recent narrative theory seems even less inclined to analyze character than traditional narratology. If we look up 'character' in the index of Herman's book we are redirected to 'actants.' Subsequently, all the references to 'actants' refer to Herman's own texts, either to his *Introduction* or to his article *Toward a Socionarratology: New Ways of Analyzing Natural-Language Narratives*.[6] This silence on character (and even actants) is all the more remarkable when one notes that among contributors to Herman's collection we find not only Seymour Chatman, who pointed to the tendency to ignore character in classic narra-

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[3]   See also John Frow: "The concept of character is perhaps the most problematic and the most undertheorized of the basic categories of narrative theory" (*Frow J.* Spectacle Binding. On Character // Poetics Today. 1986. Vol. 7, 2. P. 227). My own beginning of the present article already sounds like a cliché. Even so, clichés are often true.

[4]   *Herman D.* Introduction // Narratologies. New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis / Ed. by D. Herman. Columbus, 1999. Pp. 2—3.

[5]   *Herman D.* Introduction. P. 2.

[6]   *Herman D.* Toward a Socionarratology: New Ways of Analyzing Natural-Language Narratives // Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis / Ed. by D. Herman. Columbus, Ohio, 1999. Pp. 218-246.

tology,[7] but also James Phelan, one of the few narratologists who produced a theoretical model of character.[8]

After almost half a century of narratology, it seems as if the 'case against character'[9] has resulted in the virtual disappearance of the concept of character from narrative theory. One of the main reasons, is, of course, the type of fiction that has been produced during the past fifty years. In contrast to the modernist writers (Proust, Kafka, Thomas Mann), who created a great variety of psychologically complex characters, the postmodernists, with Nabokov as an exemple, focused on the artificiality of character and on deliberate character construction. Modernist doubt as regards the knowableness and unity of the subject was taken very seriously up to and including existentialism. Postmodernism went a step further and proclaimed the disappearance of the subject as a unity, as a single motivational system, a *fait accompli.* Accordingly, studying character in the sense of a literary figure that looks like a human being in real life became an anomaly, at least for those theoreticians who focused on contemporary literature. It did not come as a surprise, then, that in the semiotically and linguistically oriented approaches that dominated modern narratology characters were viewed as provisional entities and were often reduced to their verbal and grammatical components.

However, there have been periods in the history of literature when the existence of character as a single entity was not only taken for granted, but also played a prominent part. Modernist writers' attitude to character has already been mentioned, but particularly the nineteenth-century realist writers are known for creating lifelike and 'whole' characters. Many of these

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[7] Chatman also contributed to a special issue of *Poetics Today* on character (1986. Vol. 7,2). However, in this contribution he focused more on the problem of focalization than on character. (*Chatman S.* Characters and Narrators. Filter, Center, Slant and Interest-Focus // Poetics Today. 1986. Vol. 7, 2. Pp. 189―204.

[8] *Phelan J.* Reading People, Reading Plots. Character, Progression and the Interpretation of Narrative. Chicago; London, 1989.

[9] 'The Case Against Character' is the title of the first chapter in Baruch Hochman's book *Character in Literature* (1985). Hochman postulates that there is no fundamental difference between the way in which we consider literary figures and the way we look at people in real life (*Hochman B.* Character in Literature. Ithaca; London, 1985).

characters live on in our memory long after we have forgotten the language through which they came to life.[10] The period of postmodernism now seems to be coming to an end[11] and although it is risky to predict the features of the new period, there are many indications that there will be a return to more realistic expression. In contemporary Russian literary criticism there is much talk of the 'new realism' in Russian literature. The huge success in America of the novel *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen, with its highly detailed descriptions of 'contemporary' characters in their social surroundings, points in the same direction.

The question, then, is: what can a narratology that came of age during the postmodernist period and was under the influence of postmodernist literature, offer us with regard to the study of characters in literary texts that are not postmodernist? Or, more specifically, how can this kind of narratology be applied to the analysis of traditional and 'new realism' literatures that invite a sociological and / or psychological reading?

Leaving aside the functional approach to character of structuralism,[12] I would like to mention three books published during the past twenty-five years in which character is more or less substantially discussed as a specific entity of the literary work. The first one is the above-mentioned *Story and Discourse* by Seymour Chatman, the second is *Vvedenie v literaturovedenie* (*Introduction to the Theory of Literature*, 1991) by the Polish Slavist and semiotician Jerzy Faryno,[13] the third is *Reading People, Reading Plots* by the American anglist James Phelan, also mentioned above.[14]

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[10] The point is made by *Chatman S.* Story and Discourse. P. 118. Characters cannot be equated with 'mere words,' because we can recall them vividly, whereas we cannot usually remember the words of the text that brought them to life.

[11] According to Dmitrij Lichačev's theory, the twentieth century may be considered a 'megaperiod,' with modernism as its primary, postmodernism as its secondary phase (*Lichačev D. S.* Razvitie russkoj literatury X―XVII vekov. Epochi i stili // Lichačev D. S. Izbrannye raboty v trech tomach. Leningrad, 1987. T. 1. S. 24―260).

[12] The pioneering work was Vladimir Propp's *Morfologija skazki* (1928); it lay at the basis of (French) structuralist narratology (Greimas, Bremond, Todorov, Barthes).

[13] *Faryno J.* Vvedenie v literaturovedenie. Warszawa, 1991.

[14] I do not discuss strictly psychological approaches to literary character, as, for instance, Bernard Paris, who employs the theories of the psychoanalyst Karen Horney to analyse

Chatman divides the three elements of narrative under two headings: 'plot' under *events* and 'character' and 'setting' under *existents.* Having mentioned that Aristotle, the formalists and the structuralists subordinated character to plot, he argues for an 'open theory of character.' Characters generated in literary texts are, of course, not 'living people.' However, "that does not mean that as constructed imitations they are in any way limited to the words on the printed page."[15] Characters cannot be equated with words. We construct a literary character (Hamlet) in the same way that we construct a historical person (Samuel Johnson) and we even 'construct' the people we meet in real life: "We read between their lines, so to speak; we form hypotheses on the basis of what we know and see; we try to figure them out, predict their actions, and so on."[16]

In his 'open theory of character,' Chatman views characters as more or less autonomous beings, not as merely a function of the plot. But what do we actually do when we encounter a character in a literary work or a film? Chatman's answer is that in the course of reading a story or watching a film we gradually construct a character by piecing together his or her personal qualities. These qualities are inferred from all kinds of textual data: a character's name, his actions, thoughts and speech, what is said about him by the narrator or by other characters, etc. In this way we form an image of the character that is, in principle, a "paradigm of traits," a trait being a "rela-

character (he himself having profited from psychotherapy, as he writes in his book). See *Paris B. J.* Imagined Human Beings. A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict in Literature. New York; London, 1997. This kind of analysis, which is exclusively concerned with the psychology of a character as a real human being, contributes more to the interpretation of a character's actions and motivations than to narrative theory. In the present article I partly subscribe to Uri Margolin's definition of character: "a human or human-like individual, existing in some possible world […] to whom inner states, mental properties (traits, features) or complexes of such properties (personality models) can be ascribed on the basis of textual data" (*Margolin U.* The Doer and the Deed. Action as the Basis for Chracterization in Narrative // Poetics Today. 1986. Vol. 7, 2. P. 205). I would add, however, the importance of the visual aspect. The image created by and stored in our consciousness is not only the image of a 'mind,' however important the psychology and the (changes in the) inner life of a character may be.

[15] *Chatman S.* Story and Discourse. P. 117.

[16] *Chatman S.* Story and Discourse. P. 118.

tively stable or abiding personal quality."[17] This image or reconstruction can be separated from the text and, indeed, it often is. We do not remember characters because of the words they say or the words used to describe them, but we remember them as constructs (sometimes vague and blurred, sometimes vivid and intense) in our consciousness.

Faryno's *Vvedenie v literaturovedenie* is not specifically concerned with narrative theory, but I mention the book here as it goes at length into what Chatman called the *existents* of the story, the characters and the setting. More than half of the book is devoted to these two aspects of the literary work (the chapter *Literaturnye personaži* numbers 170, the chapter *Predmetnyj mir* 160 pages). The emphasis on *existents* is all the more remarkable because Faryno does not discuss action or *events* at all. He relies heavily on Soviet semiotics and considers the literary figure as something that is modeled and which, in its turn, has a modeling function.[18] Being part of the literary work, the character has a specific meaning. This meaning is based on personal qualities ascribed to the character: his or her name, behaviour, ideas, external appearance, social position and relationships with other characters. The wider literary context also plays a role: the character's relation with characters from other literary works by the same author or with characters from recent and past works by other authors.

To establish a character's significance within the semantic structure of the entire work, Faryno focuses particularly on external features such as the character's physique, facial expression, clothes, diseases and ailments, gestures, behaviour, and, most importantly, his or her name.[19] These exter-

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[17] *Chatman S.* Story and Discourse. P. 126.

[18] *Faryno J.* Vvedenie v literaturovedenie. S. 102. — One of Faryno's recent articles can be considered a 'logical' development of his semiotic views on character (*Faryno J.* O paradigme "portret—akt—natjurmort" i ee semiotike // Studia literaria Polono-Slavica. 2002. Vol. 7. Pp. 13—74.

[19] The significance of names Faryno illustrates by his analysis of the many connotations and associations connected with the name *Smerdjakov*. The primary, negative association is with the verb "smerdet'"—to stink, but, according to Faryno, there are many more reasons why Dostoevskij chose this name for Karamazov's alleged illegitimate (fourth) son. As Fedor Pavlovič Karamazov himself called him that after his mother's nickname *Lizaveta Smerdjaščaja, Karamazov* becomes one of the connotations of the name *Smerdjakov*. The name *Smerdjaščaja* is clearly associated with the names of

nal aspects can be intrinsically linked to the character's inner self;[20] together they combine to form 'a meaning-bearing entity' within the overall semantic structure of the literary work.

James Phelan[21] agrees with Brooks[22] in suggesting that character should not be considered in isolation from the plot. The literary character develops and changes as the plot develops. Hence, the inclusion of the crucial word 'progression' in the subtitle of his book. Character development has to be seen in terms of the wider context of the whole narrative as it progresses.

According to Phelan, character is a literary element composed of three components: the mimetic, synthetic and thematic. The mimetic component refers to how a character can be the image of a real and possible person. The synthetic component concerns the artificiality of character, that is to say it stresses that character is a literary construct. Finally, the thematic component refers to how a character can be used to represent a certain idea,

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Saints, just as Lizaveta, as a 'jurodivaja,' is herself. From the novel's context it is obvious, however, that Smerdjakov belongs to the opposite pole, that of the devil. This fits his name: traditionally the devil stinks of sulphur. The word "smerd," Faryno continues, formerly meant "slave," which in mythology was connected with the realm of death. The chain of mythological associations makes it possible to see Smerdjakov to a certain extent as the double of Dmitrij (the name originates from Demeter, the goddess of fertility). Here, too, he is on the opposite pole, Dmitrij being associated with 'earth' and 'resurrection,' Smerdjakov with 'death.' Smerdjakov is called *Pavel Fedorovič*, which suggests that he might indeed be the son of Fedor Pavlovič Karamazov. As a result of his name, Smerdjakov acquires the status of an 'inverted' Karamazov. The names *Karamazov* and *Smerdjakov* become synonymous, which is confirmed by the meaning of "kara-"―"swarthy," again an epithet used for the devil, etc. (*Faryno J.* Vvedenie v literaturovedenie. S. 129―131).

[20] Much analysis of literary figures is exclusively concerned with a character's inner life and psychology, see, for instance, Harvey (*Harvey W. J.* Character and the Novel. Ithaca, 1965). Harvey claims that, from a moral and psychological point of view, the most meaningful aspect of literature derives from our identification with the characters. Hence, probably, the rather unfortunate terms 'character' and 'characterization.' An interesting aspect of Faryno's chapter *Literaturnye personaži* is that if shows that a literary figure is more than its character and that external features may have other functions than showing a person's character.

[21] *Phelan J.* Reading People, Reading Plots.

[22] *Brooks P.* Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative. Cambridge, 1984.

a group or a class within the semantic structure of the literary work. The extent to which the three components are developed depends on the kind of fiction. In realistic fiction the mimetic aspect prevails, in postmodern fiction the synthetic component is most important, whereas in fiction with a thesis thematic characters are more common. Characters can be represented people, artificial constructs and themes to varying degrees. Phelan's theory of character takes place "through an examination of the range of relations among the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic components of character."[23] A character's 'attributes'[24] can make him or her a plausible person, a unique individual, but may at the same time have a thematic function. This function 'generalizes' the character so that he or she becomes the embodiment of an idea or the representative of a group.

One of the advantages of Phelan's theory compared to those of Chatman and Faryno is that the literary character is not seen as a static but as a dynamic entity. Chatman is undoubtedly right when he says that we often recall fictional characters vividly without remembering a single word of the text through which they were created. Whereas "the medium falls into dimness, […] our memory of Clarissa Harlowe or Anna Karenina remains undimmed."[25] It is, however, not immediately clear what exactly the image is that we retain in our memory. For instance, we read about Anna Karenina in a variety of situations but when we have finished reading the book we do not remember her as a "paradigm of traits." We are left with an image of a many-faceted, interesting and beautiful woman that has been built on the various layers of her narrated life. Moreover, to use a term coined by Thomas Docherty, she functions as a 'kinetic' character, one whom we can only partially know.[26]

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[23] *Phelan J.* Reading People, Reading Plots. P. 20.

[24] Phelan uses the term 'attribute' for the fundamental unit of character: "The fundamental unit of character is neither the trait nor the idea, neither the role nor the word, but rather what I will call the *attribute,* something that participates at least in potential form in the mimetic, thematic and synthetic spheres of meaning simultaneously" (*Phelan J.* Reading People, Reading Plots. P. 9).

[25] *Chatman S.* Story and Discourse. P. 118.

[26] In his study on character in literature Docherty distinguishes between 'static' and 'kinetic' characters. A static character is "one whose existence is entirely accounted for in

Faryno is not interested in 'kinetic' characters that exist beyond the bounds of the fiction in which they were created. Character is only important for him as a composite of meaning within the semantic structure of the entire text. In looking at historical figures in fiction, for example Puškin's Pugačev or Tolstoj's Napoleon, Faryno emphasizes the principal differences between the character in the text and their real life counterparts and even denies the possible role of referentiality.[27] The text contains everything that is needed to understand the meaning of its characters. However, as his painstaking analysis of the semantic potential of the name *Smerdjakov* proves, Faryno obviously takes the view that in order to determine this meaning, with all the possible associations and connotations, the reader has to have a thorough general knowledge of, for instance, linguistics, folklore and mythology (see note 18). If a reader's knowledge of such outside information plays such an important part in the construction of meaning, it is hard to see why referentiality can be ignored. In other words, how can the character Napoleon in *Vojna i mir* not be affected by the 'real' Napoleon? In this case the reader's (historical) knowledge may add important connotations or reveal hidden meaningful relations.

Faryno's analysis of literary character eventually also results in a paradigm of traits, although, in contrast to Chatman, he does not grant a character an existence as a 'private self' outside the text. In viewing character as more or less mimetic, Phelan, like Chatman, accepts this possibility. At the same time, he does not lose sight of the thematic aspect, the character's role in the action of the story and in the semantic structure of the text. As

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the fiction: this character is simply a function in the plot or design of the whole and cannot step outside the bounds of the fiction." The 'kinetic' character, on the other hand, "will be one who is able to be absent to the text; this character's motivation extends beyond that which is merely necessary for the accomplishment of the design of the plot, and he or she 'moves' in other spheres than the one we are engaged in reading. […] In this kind of 'Realistic' kinetic character, the unity of person is assured by the integrity of the proper name, the consonance of the characteristics, and the final opacity in the character, keeping [him, her] finally unknowable, owner of a 'private self'" (*Docherty T.* Reading [Absent]] Character. Towards A Theory of Characterization in Fiction. Oxford, 1983. P. 224).

[27] *Faryno J.* Vvedenie v literaturovedenie. S. 102.

mentioned above, Phelan uses 'attributes' instead of 'traits' as the funda-
mental units of character. Yet neither he nor Chatman nor Faryno show
how the reader determines these attributes.

Literary characters are by definition generated through the words of the
text. The relation between the words and the character or a character's traits
or attributes is generally taken for granted.[28] When a text states that a hero-
ine is beautiful, we 'see' the image of a beautiful woman. All kinds of at-
tributes may be added to this image, some based on direct textual state-
ments, some inferred from a description of the heroine's actions, thoughts,
words or relationships with other characters. The image generated can have
both a physical appearance and a 'psychology', aspects of the former being
often causally connected with aspects of the latter. Sometimes, especially in
'authorial narration,' the information about a character is such that we feel
that we can easily and unambiguously 'translate' the words of the text into
an image. However, contemporary narrative theory has amply demon-
strated, by exploring aspects such as the unreliable narrator, changes of fo-
calization and free indirect style, how extremely complex literary discourse
can be. A satisfactory theory of character cannot ignore discourse but, on
the contrary, will have to concentrate explicitly on textual patterns and de-
termine accurately what information is given about a character, who gives
this information and how this information relates to other, possibly incom-
patible and conflicting data. Such a theory, which combines discourse
analysis and reader's response (generating images on the basis of words
and imaginative involvement) might be developed by using insights and
concepts of cognitive science, the relevance of which in literary theory
seems to be rapidly increasing.[29]

A useful model from cognitive science that may be applied to a theory
of literary character is the so-called 'frame theory', developed by Marvin

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[28] See, however, *Margolin U.* The Doer and the Deed, who carefully analyses how action
may contribute to characterization.

[29] See, for instance, the recent issue of *Poetics Today* (2002. Vol. 23,1), entitled *Literature
and the Cognitive Revolution*. Cognitive science is not new to literary theory (*Tsur R.*
What is Cognitive Poetics? Tel Aviv, 1983 ; *Tsur R.* Toward a Theory of Cognitive Po-
etics. Amsterdam, 1992), but is recently attracting more and more attention.

Minsky and others in the study of artificial intelligence.[30] This model, employed in literary theory by Jahn,[31] Herman[32] and others,[33] postulates that every time a person encounters a new situation he tries to make sense of it by selecting from his memory a mental structure or 'frame' that matches the situation as closely as possible. Minsky defines 'frame' as

> a remembered framework to be adapted to fit reality by changing details as necessary. […] We can think of a frame as a network of nodes and relations. The 'top levels' of a frame are fixed, and represent things that are always true about the supposed situation. The lower levels have many *terminals*—'slots' that must be filled by specific instances and data. Each terminal can specify conditions its assignments must meet. (The assignments themselves are usually smaller 'sub-frames.') Simple conditions are specified by *markers* that might require a terminal assignment to be a person, an object of sufficient value, or a pointer to a sub-frame of a certain type. […] Much of the phenomenological power of the theory hinges on the inclusion of expectations and other kinds of presumptions. *A frame's terminals are normally already filled with 'default' assignments.* Thus, a frame may contain a great many

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[30] *Minsky M.* A Framework for Representing Knowledge // Frame Conceptions and Text Understanding / Ed. by D. Menzing. New York, 1979. Pp. 1—25. — As regards the terms 'Field of Reference' and 'frame of reference,' see also the interesting article by Hrushovski (*Hrushovski B.* Segmentation and Motivation in the Text Continuum of Literary Prose: The First Episode of "War and Peace" // Russian Poetics. Proceedings of the International Colloquium at UCLA, September 22—26, 1975 / Ed. by Th. Eekman, D. S. Worth. Columbus, Ohio, 1983. Pp. 117—146). It is not clear whether Hrushovski invented these terms himself or whether he at that time (he wrote his article in 1975 at the latest) was influenced by nascent cognitive science.

[31] *Jahn M.* Frames, Preferences, and the Reading of Third-Person Narratives: Towards a Cognitive Narratology // Poetics Today. 1997. Vol. 18,4. Pp. 441—468; *Jahn M.* "Speak, friend, and enter": Garden Paths, Artificial Intelligence, and Cognitive Narratology // Narratologies. New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis / Ed. by D. Herman. Columbus, 1999. Pp. 167—194.

[32] *Herman D.* Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology // PMLA. 1997. Vol. 112. Pp. 1046—1059.

[33] Instead of 'frame' the word 'script' is often used. See, e. g., *Schank R. C., Abelson R. P.* Scripts, Plans, Goals and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge. Hillsdale, NJ, 1977.

details whose supposition is not specifically warranted by the situation.[34]

A not unimportant advantage of frame theory in its application to a narrative text is that it makes us realize that new textual data are always seen in the light of previous knowledge. In other words, in the process of reading, the frame or frames are continually adjusted, the slots are filled in, further or differently, in response to the new information communicated through the text. It is possible, I think, to see literary characters as 'frames' or a part of a 'frame.' As soon as characters are introduced into the text, we allocate them a particular frame. At first, this frame is fairly general (male, female, old, young) and still has many vacant slots. Gradually the slots are filled in as new data are provided by the text. However, these data always have to be considered within the framework of the entire context. Statements by an unreliable narrator or the reproduction of the point of view of an obviously prejudiced character have to be assessed in another way than 'objective' observations and pronouncements by an omniscient narrator. Contradictory information about a character from different focalizers may be stored in different slots. One might consider the possibility that at a certain moment in the reading process a slot or a number of slots, as part of the frame, are more or less complete and do not receive nor need any supplementary information. Or perhaps the reader will 'close' one slot or more, for instance at the end of a chapter or after an important narrative sequence. This makes it theoretically feasible that readers may retain in their memory not one but several more or less different images of the same character. Anyone who has read *Anna Karenina* knows that at the end of the novel Anna commits suicide by throwing herself in front of a train. It is unlikely that a reader when remembering the fictional character Anna Karenina will recall an image of her mangled body on the tracks. So what kind of image does the reader recall? Anna in love as portrayed in the first part of the novel, the unhappy Anna of the last part? The answer must be that the reader sees a number of images simultaneously, including perhaps that of her dead body. Reading is an interpretative and imaginative dynamic process that starts with the first words of the story and goes on until the last line. Apart from

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[34] *Minsky M.* A Framework for Representing Knowledge. Pp. 1—2.

following the plot and imagining the setting, it entails the dynamic process of constructing character in terms of both physical and psychological attributes by filling in slots and applying frames.