

INTRODUCTION TO THE EVOLUTION OF CHARACTER IN MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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Abstract: This paper explores the transformation of character construction in modern English literature, focusing on the shift from traditional, archetypal figures to complex, fragmented, and hybrid identities. Influenced by socio-cultural changes, philosophical movements, and critical theories, modern characters reflect the uncertainties and diversities of contemporary life. Through an analysis of representative literary works by authors such as Kazuo Ishiguro, Zadie Smith, and Sally Rooney, the study examines how new character types embody themes such as posthumanism, gender fluidity, cultural hybridity, and environmental consciousness. The research highlights how modern English literature redefines the concept of character as a dynamic and evolving site of identity, ideology, and experience.

Keywords: Modern English literature; character development; postmodernism; identity; gender fluidity; posthumanism; cultural hybridity; literary theory.

Introduction. The evolution of literary character has always been a central concern in English literature, as characters serve not only as vehicles for narrative development but also as reflections of the human experience. In earlier literary traditions, characters were often designed according to fixed archetypes—heroes, villains, tragic figures, and moral exemplars—who operated within well-defined social and psychological frameworks. However, as society has become increasingly complex, so too have literary characters. In the modern and postmodern eras, English literature has witnessed a radical shift in the portrayal of fictional figures, moving away from static, predictable representations toward more fluid, fragmented, and multifaceted character constructions. This transformation in character depiction is not accidental—it is deeply tied to historical, cultural, and philosophical changes in the 20th and 21st centuries. The two World Wars, the rise of existentialism, the feminist movement, the postcolonial turn, the digital revolution, and the climate crisis have all contributed to reshaping how writers conceive of human identity. As such, characters in modern English literature often grapple with disorientation, alienation, cultural hybridity, gender ambiguity, and even a loss of physical or psychological coherence. This shift marks a significant departure from the realism and moral clarity of Victorian and early modernist literature. Moreover, with the advent of poststructuralist and critical theories—such as postmodernism, posthumanism, queer theory, and ecocriticism—the notion of a stable, coherent self has been fundamentally questioned. Consequently, literary characters have come to embody instability, performativity, and contradiction. They are no longer passive entities shaped solely by plot but are now sites of ideological conflict, social commentary, and existential reflection. This article seeks to explore how new types of characters in modern English literature represent the changing realities of the contemporary world. It

investigates how authors use narrative techniques and theoretical frameworks to redefine what it means to be a "character" in a literary text. By examining selected works by writers such as Kazuo Ishiguro, Zadie Smith, Sally Rooney, and Richard Powers, this study aims to highlight the diversity and depth of modern character construction and to trace the broader cultural and intellectual currents that have influenced this evolution.

Literature Review. The evolution of character in modern English literature has been widely discussed by scholars from various theoretical perspectives, including modernism, postmodernism, gender studies, postcolonialism, and ecocriticism. These approaches offer a comprehensive understanding of how literary characters have transformed in response to shifting social, cultural, and philosophical contexts. One of the foundational thinkers in the transformation of identity and character is Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that gender is not a fixed trait but a performative act, challenging traditional notions of identity. This idea has had a profound influence on literary studies, particularly in analyzing characters who defy binary gender categories or embrace fluid identities, such as in Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* (1992). Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) exemplifies the emergence of culturally hybrid characters in postcolonial British fiction. Scholars such as Paul Gilroy (*Postcolonial Melancholia*, 2005) have explored the complexities of diasporic identity, which Smith captures through her multiracial and multicultural protagonists who navigate between their heritage and British society. The psychological interiority of characters has also changed. Authors like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce revolutionized character portrayal through stream-of-consciousness techniques. This tradition continues in contemporary works by Sally Rooney, whose novels such as *Normal People* (2018) explore emotional vulnerability and existential uncertainty in the lives of young adults. In the realm of technological influence on identity, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) offers a posthuman character in the form of an artificial intelligence robot, raising questions about consciousness, empathy, and what it means to be human. N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), provides a theoretical foundation for understanding such characters, emphasizing the fluid boundary between human and machine. Environmental themes have also reshaped character construction. In *The Overstory* (2018), Richard Powers creates characters whose lives are intrinsically tied to trees and ecological systems. This aligns with the arguments in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), which urges scholars to consider the environment as a critical context for literary analysis. These diverse approaches illustrate that characters in modern English literature can no longer be analyzed through conventional lenses alone. Rather, they must be understood as products of—and responses to—complex social dynamics, philosophical shifts, and global crises.

Cited Works in Review

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
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Research Methodology. This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to examine the evolution of character in modern English literature. The methodology is based on close textual analysis of selected literary works, supported by theoretical frameworks from literary criticism, gender studies, postcolonial theory, posthumanism, and ecocriticism. The goal is to explore how characters in contemporary fiction reflect complex identities shaped by cultural, social, technological, and environmental transformations. The research focuses on a purposive sample of key literary texts published in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, including:

- *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith (2000) – for multicultural and hybrid character identity.
- *Normal People* by Sally Rooney (2018) – for emotionally complex and psychologically nuanced characters.
- *Klara and the Sun* by Kazuo Ishiguro (2021) – for AI/posthuman character representation.
- *The Overstory* by Richard Powers (2018) – for ecologically conscious character development.
- *Written on the Body* by Jeanette Winterson (1992) – for gender-ambiguous and fluid characters.

These texts were selected for their critical recognition, thematic relevance, and representation of diverse new character types.

The analysis proceeds through:

- **Thematic coding** – identifying recurring themes related to identity, hybridity, technology, gender, and environment.
- **Narrative technique evaluation** – examining how literary devices such as stream-of-consciousness, nonlinear structure, or shifting perspectives affect character construction.
- **Application of theory** – integrating relevant critical perspectives (e.g., Butler's gender performativity, Hayles's posthumanism, Gilroy's postcolonial identity) to interpret character roles and meanings.

This methodology allows for a nuanced understanding of how literary characters are constructed in a way that reflects contemporary human experience. The approach is primarily analytical and interpretive, with a strong emphasis on textual evidence and critical context rather than empirical data.

Conclusion. The evolution of character in modern English literature reflects a profound

transformation in the way writers conceptualize human identity. Moving beyond the traditional, archetypal figures of earlier literary periods, contemporary authors now construct characters that are fragmented, hybrid, and dynamic. These characters are shaped by a range of contemporary influences, including globalization, digitalization, gender and identity discourse, environmental consciousness, and philosophical shifts toward posthumanism. The analysis of works by Zadie Smith, Sally Rooney, Kazuo Ishiguro, Richard Powers, and Jeanette Winterson reveals how modern literature embraces complexity and challenges fixed definitions of the self. Whether through the lens of race, gender, technology, or ecology, new character types reflect the instability and diversity of the modern world. This study demonstrates that character is no longer a stable, consistent entity, but rather a fluid, evolving construct that mirrors societal change. Literature continues to serve as a critical space where the boundaries of identity are explored and redefined. As the world continues to change rapidly, so too will the characters that inhabit its stories—providing new insights into the human experience.

References

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