A Classification Scheme for Literary Characters
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Abstract
There is no established classification scheme for literary characters in narrative theory short of generic categories like protagonist vs. antagonist or round vs. flat. This is so despite the ubiquity of stock characters that recur across media, cultures, and historical time periods. We present here a proposal of a systematic psychological scheme for classifying characters from the literary and dramatic fields based on a modification of the Thomas-Kilmann (TK) Conflict Mode Instrument used in applied studies of personality. The TK scheme classifies personality along the two orthogonal dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness. To examine the validity of a modified version of this scheme, we had 142 participants provide personality ratings for 40 characters using two of the Big Five personality traits as well as assertiveness and cooperativeness from the TK scheme. The results showed that assertiveness and cooperativeness were orthogonal dimensions, thereby supporting the validity of using a modified version of TK’s two-dimensional scheme for classifying characters.

Keywords
literary characters; archetypes; classification; personality; Thomas-Kilmann; assertiveness; cooperativeness

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