

# Analysis of Round and Flat Characters in Foster's Howard Manor

**Lidan Zhang**

*Pingdingshan Industrial College of Technology, 467000, China*

**ABSTRACT.** *Foster put forward the application of flat characters and circular characters in his novel The Face of Novels. This paper tries to analyze the creation of characters in his masterpiece Howard Manor with his own literary and artistic theory of characters in the novel.*

**Keywords:** *Howard Manor; Flat Character; Round Character; Character Model*

## 1. Introduction

Edward Morgan Foster (1879-1970) is one of the most important British novelists in the 20th century. Howard Manor is regarded as Foster's "most mature and excellent work" in his early years. Trillin, a famous literary critic, highly praised Howard Manor as "undoubtedly Foster's masterpiece". Domestic critics mainly study the novel from the aspects of ecological interpretation and the theme of "connection", while few people have a comprehensive and in-depth discussion of the characters in the novel<sup>[1]</sup>.

Foster is also an important British literary critic in the twentieth century. His famous Novel Face is praised by the West as "the classic analysis of fiction in the twentieth century". Foster put forward the discussion of "round character" and "flat character". Foster himself interprets these two different characters in this way: "In the seventeenth century, flat characters were called character characters, but now they are sometimes called type characters or cartoon characters. Their simplest form is to be created according to a simple idea or characteristic. If these characters add another factor, the arc we begin to draw tends to be circular. Flat characters have the advantages of being "easy to recognize" and "easy to remember afterwards"; while a

round character "must give people a new sense of novelty, must be convincing. If there is no novelty, it is a flat figure; if there is no persuasion, it is only a disguised round figure<sup>[2]</sup>."

Some scholars literally simply believe that Foster advocates round characters while belittling flat characters, but in fact it is not. An excellent and complex novel "often requires flat characters and circular characters to go in and out of it". Although Foster believes that "flat characters are not as effective as round ones". But he also pointed out that "to achieve comic effect, flat characters will be of great use", that is, Foster attaches great importance to the "alternate use of flat characters and round characters and the balance between each other"<sup>[3]</sup>. From this point of view, this paper uses the theories of "round characters" and "flat characters" to analyze the characters in *Howard Manor* in depth, and tries to reveal the meaning behind these characters.

## **2. Flat character**

Foster put forward his use of flat characters and round characters in his *Novel Face*. Flat characters refer to those who are "called 'personality' characters, and are now sometimes referred to as type characters or cartoon characters. Their simplest form is to be created according to a simple idea or characteristic. (Foster, 1927, 59). Flat characters adhere to a personality from beginning to end. The author gives him a distinct personality characteristics, and he will maintain a consistent style in his works. Foster argued against the style of flat characters strongly opposed by some writers and critics. In this particular genre of fiction, flat characters have their own advantages: "One of the advantages of flat characters is easy to identify." Flat characters are very useful to a writer if he wants to try his best to touch the hearts of his readers. (Foster, 1927, 60). Another advantage is that "they are easily remembered by readers afterwards. Because they are not affected by the environment. So stay in the reader's mind all the time." (Foster, 1927, 61)<sup>[4]</sup>.

Because of the above reasons, Foster is fond of flat characters. In *Howard Manor*, Forster's characters are flat characters at a deeper level, which in some ways corresponds to his novel theory. These characters are labeled at a deeper level, even if they deviate from each other at some point or time. Margaret is beginning to be

portrayed as a rational person: wise, insightful, self-control, although there are some twists and turns, such an image actually runs through the whole text. Margaret showed her rational side in dealing with her sister Helen and her brother when she appeared. Another important manifestation is her relationship with Henry. Although her acceptance of Henry's proposal and her persistence in marrying Henry despite his mistakes are partly driven by emotions, further analysis shows that her rationality is more decisive. Before accepting Henry's proposal, she had penetrated into Henry's heart, knew clearly the shortcomings and advantages of him and his family, and recognized clearly her own shortcomings. What they lack is that they can complement each other, which is the complementation of spirit and character. Her acceptance of the proposal is not a pure emotional impulse, but more based on a rational analysis. When she was surprised to learn that Henry had a mistress, she acted sensibly, although she was shocked. Her reason is the main thread that runs through her character. Another important person is Henry. Like Helen, he was more flattened than Margaret. Foster's label on him is the typical bourgeoisie of material type, selfish type and male chauvinism type. This is also the main line of his character. In Helen's letter to Margaret at the beginning of the novel, we already know Henry's dictatorship and male chauvinism. With the discovery of Lutz's will, Henry's grief turned to anger, believing that it was a betrayal for his wife to share part of the family business with others, and no longer grieved over his wife's death. He had no sympathy for Buster's experience and moved out of his fault the theory of "natural selection of things". Even after his son Charles killed Buster, he had no intention of repentance, and told his son that he should have attacked Buster. There is no evidence of his repentance when his son is really convicted and jailed. On the contrary, what we see is his selfishness and materiality<sup>[5]</sup>.

Foster's theory of fiction is closely related to the fact that flat characters dominate Howard Manor. In *The Face of Novels*, Foster puts forward the importance and indispensable position of flat characters, and praises Dickens' novels. He thinks that Dickens' characters are basically flat characters, but they are unique and distinct, reflecting reality better than reality. In terms of practice, Foster's creative mode of characters in *Howard Manor* has its originality. Margaret's rationality is in contrast with her sister Helen's sensibility, forming a binary opposition. This consistent opposition can better carry the author's in-depth meaning and thus express the author's ideas more clearly<sup>[6]</sup>.

### 3. Round figure

Foster did not define a "round person". According to "flat characters", we can deduce that "round characters" are those with complex and contradictory personalities, and their personalities in the plot of the novel show variability. The inconsistency between them makes people seem more real than Mr. Douglas has described. (Foster, 1927, 62). Margaret is the most circular character in *Howard Manor*. This does not conflict with the flat characters mentioned above. In commenting on Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Foster praised Jane Austen's way of portraying characters, in which Mrs. Portland "was expanded into a round character by a simple word, but in turn turned into a flat character. How wonderful Austin is! (Forster, 1927, 67). We can also see this in *Howard Manor*: a flat character is pulled into a disc or a circle by simple words or simple events. As far as Margaret is concerned, she has always been submissive to Henry. Although Margaret wanted to have a house to settle down after marriage, Henry rented it out without consulting her, and Margaret accepted it. After learning about Jackie, Margaret said sorry to Henry. Like Lutz, she was obedient and spoiled her husband. So far, we have seen a flat figure. But then Foster let Margaret's rebellion erupt like a fire. She denounced Henry's double-sided moral standards toward herself and Helen and decided to separate her from Henry. Such a plot construction, so that the reader tired of Margaret's submission, produced a sense of novelty, and Margaret, such a flat figure, has also become a round character, showing a sense of three-dimensional, from becoming boring characters. But then Margaret stayed at Henry's request and obeyed him again, transforming from a round figure to a flat one. Henry's character portrayal is also round. Although he has always been selfish, Foster also shows his love and hospitality for his children. At some point, it also shows the circular character<sup>[7]</sup>.

"The test of whether a character is round is to see if he surprises us in a convincing way." Margaret's personality has further changed and sublimated. She gradually realized the spiritual impoverishment of the Wilcox family under its material abundance, and her belief in "like-minded" was shattered. Especially when Helen was refused by Mr. Wilcox when she hoped to lodge at Howard Hall before she left, Margaret suddenly realized that the Wilcox family was "a person who knew nothing about human nature." She decided to guard Howard Hall and her sister. "A

new feeling came to her: she was fighting men for women. She doesn't care about all kinds of rights, but if the man wants to go into Howard Hall, step on her body. Margaret's behavior heralds her "breaking away from the bondage of traditional customs"<sup>[8]</sup>.

In *Howard Manor*, Foster captures the contemporary characters with his delicate and sensitive strokes, thus creating a profound image. Whether it is Buster who can enter the upper class society by means of "culture" to "turn the clock", Mrs. Wilcox who has always resisted mechanical civilization, or Margaret who wants to reconcile the secular world and the soul world, these are the typical characters created under the background of Foster's survival era. Through the analysis of these typical characters, we can find not only the depth of human nature and social conditions in Edward's era, but also Foster's hope of returning to traditional civilization. The blending of round characters and flat characters in the novel enhances the ideological and artistic quality of *Howard Manor*, thus making the novel rank among Foster's "most mature and excellent works in the early period".

## References

- [1] Wang Jing(2016). A Study of Foster's Novels from the Perspective of Leisure: Taking "A Room with a View" and "Howard Manor" as examples. Zhejiang: Zhejiang University.
- [2] Zhao Shan(2014). On Foster's Nostalgia and Connection View in *Howard Manor*. Anhui: Anhui University.
- [3] Sun Xueshi(2013). Rhythm Study of *Howard Manor* by Ai Mo Foster. Shandong: Ludong University.
- [4] Lai Guizhu(2012). Seeking Harmony - On Foster's Contradictory Feminine View in *Howard Manor*. Fujian: Fujian Normal University.
- [5] Xiao Kemiao(2011). On the Three Social Forces in Ai Mo Foster's *Howard Manor*. Hunan: Xiangtan University.
- [6] Liu Yiwei(2017). On Foster's Social Care in *Howard Manor*. *Journal of Hefei University of Technology (Social Science Edition)*, vol.31, no.5, pp. 42-47.