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Character FIRST

Defining and Methodizing Character Depth

Jeff Mason

For many poets, writers, English majors, and moviegoers, our first experience of mathematics entering the English classroom came from the 1989 movie, *Dead Poets Society*. In one of the movie's most famous scenes, a prep school English class reads aloud the introduction of a poetry textbook. The section introduces the Pritchard Scale, which asserts that a poem's greatness can be measured by graphing its perfection (artistic ability) and its importance (the impact of its meaning) and then calculating the area of the graph. This gives us a simple formula for understanding poetry, $P \times I = G$ —"Excrement," as the teacher refers to this equation. "We're not laying pipe. We're talking about poetry" (*Dead Poets Society*). In one sense, presenting mathematics in the English classroom as "PIG Theory" makes sense. This ineffective equation is a classic example of a model overstepping its boundaries. But bashing this equation is more harmful than good. Tearing this introduction out of the book suggests that mathematics has no place at all in the English classroom. I challenge this idea. To those who were taught to label the Pritchard Scale as meaningless, I ask this: Isn't a poem's greatness correlated with its technical perfection and its thematic importance, even if those values are subjective? I would assert that the Pritchard Scale is far from correct, but not entirely wrong either. It fails because of Pritchard's assertion that this is how all poetry must be read, not due to its attempt to better understand poetry through a mathematical

lens. Pritchard's Scale uses a mathematical formula to show the correlation between a poem's perfection, importance, and greatness, though it does so at the cost of being incredibly rudimentary, and therefore suffers in its accuracy. As statistician George Box famously stated, "All models are wrong, but some are useful" (Clear).

Literary critics, English majors, teachers, and avid readers alike may be hesitant to embrace the application of mathematics in literature. I assert that the connections are already there. Mark Danielewski, author of *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions*, supports this notion when he says, "Writing is something that's innate . . . [T]he way a mathematician can reach the end of the universe without traveling there using the language of numbers, there's a way to reach the ends of the heart and the soul by using words" ("Mark Z. Danielewski"). I would argue that because storytelling is made up of innate methods and techniques, which are not created so much as they are discovered, refusing to apply mathematics to them ignores a deeper understanding inherent in these topics. Exactly how mathematics can be applied to storytelling has yet to be fully understood, but this paper is written as a contribution.

In this essay, I seek to advance the understanding of character depth in readers of all proficiencies and professions: literary theorists, movie critics, avid readers, and English educators alike. I do this by discovering a hierarchy of importance inherent within character depth and assigning implicit levels of meaning to elements of a character's history. I start by exploring relevant theories of character depth, such as Baruch Hochman's *Character in Literature* and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and I will use these works to demonstrate that mathematical thinking already exists within theories of character depth and must be expanded on. Based on this, I present a sophisticated definition for character depth that uses mathematical principles alluded to by previous authors and theorists. With such a definition, I also create a method called Character FIRST, which constructs a step-by-step process any reader can apply in their analyses of characters. Finally, I demonstrate the effectiveness of such a method by analyzing *Drive*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *True Grit*'s central characters and comparing the themes this technique arrives at to that of other literary criticism, validating the method by its ability to discover similar meanings.

The Roots of Character Depth

For a basic understanding of character depth, *The Oxford Learner's Dictionary of English* presents two definitions of the word “depth” that make for a solid foundation. In reference to characters, depth is defined as “qualities that give somebody/something extra character and make them/it interesting.” In reference to knowledge, depth is “the quality of knowing or understanding a lot of details about something; the ability to provide and explain these details” (*The Oxford Learner's Dictionary*). We understand character depth in literature as a combination of these definitions. It is the complex details and rationales of a character that make them interesting. This is a good place to start, but this basic definition provides little insight into what makes characters deep or how we can analyze characters for deeper meanings.

Baruch Hochman's book *Character in Literature* furthers our understanding of character depth. Though he does not use mathematics directly, he describes the analysis of character in mathematical terms. Hochman writes:

[W]e register data, relatively “raw” data, involving human behavior. Even at an early stage, such behavior falls into patterns, which we then check against further data as they are provided to us . . . On the whole, however, it is only late in the process of perception that we fully conceptualize our sense of characters, or of people, and come to reflect on the dominance or recessiveness of certain traits or on the relationship between one pattern of traits and another . . . [T]he result of such reflection is a certain reductiveness; we reduce characters . . . to what we take to be their essential meaning. (40–41)

This paragraph alludes to a process of understanding character that involves the mathematical collection and analysis of data. Notice also the line, “the dominance or recessiveness of certain traits,” which implies a level of importance being assigned to different types of character traits. In fact, the word “depth” itself implies layers, suggesting a correlation between depth and importance. Hochman elaborates on this when he says, “In reading character in either life or literature, one moves from level to level, from

surface to depth . . . In moving from level to level, we absorb information that we can use to hypothesize the whole structure of a person's development" (Hochman 51). *Character in Literature* constantly references levels and implies a hierarchy of meaning in the details of a character's life. Hochman presents fertile ground from which a process in reading character can sprout, but he does not quantify this theory of character levels or explain what makes certain traits "dominant" or "recessive." Thus, to expand on Hochman's ideas, we require a way of assigning meaning to character traits.

Hochman's theorizing of "levels" necessitates a model for understanding character depth. When I say "model," I refer to something like Joseph Campbell's monomyth. In his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell asserts that any myth can be broken down into 17 steps by which the hero's journey progresses in a story. This journey, which he calls the "monomyth," can be summarized in a circular graph, along which the hero progresses through each of Campbell's 17 steps of the hero's journey (Campbell 210). Contemporary culture has taken the monomyth and applied it not just to myths, but to stories in general. The model has not always proven effective, even in myth, which Campbell lightly acknowledges. He states, "Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or two of the typical elements of the full cycle" and adds that it is inevitable that some stories "defy description" since his goal is to chart every hero's journey through a story (212). The real use of a model like the monomyth is its insight into stories as a whole. The monomyth notices traits of a hero's journey that prove insightful into understanding storytelling as a whole. For instance, Campbell delves into the cyclical nature of the hero's journey, noticing that most stories start with the hero in a place of comfort in their common life, before journeying into the "underworld," the land of the unknown. They complete the story by returning a changed person, back in the land of their comfort, but a different character because of their journey (23). Though it is a very general understanding of story, and similar to (though much more sophisticated than) the Pritchard Scale for poetry, Campbell's monomyth proves valuable because of its recognition of tendencies and tropes within storytelling as a whole. Therefore, it helps us to better understand what a hero's journey means to a story. Critics have pointed this out as well. In the article "Forget the 'Hero's Journey' and Consider the Heroine's Quest Instead," critic Laura Miller defends the monomyth's value by saying, "Furthermore, as Campbell would argue, his hero's journey is not an arbitrary storyline chosen to make

a moral or political point, but a plot form so deeply embedded in many cultures that we readily recognize and respond to it" (Miller).

Campbell's model of the hero's journey and Hochman's theorizing of character levels lay the foundation of this paper. Additionally, and perhaps most essentially, this essay requires a mathematical lens in analyzing character depth. Specifically, Hochman and Campbell have demonstrated the need for a type of mathematics that measures one element's influence on another, and how it is influenced by other elements. That mathematical theory should also be based on levels and should be able to recognize overall tendencies based on these elements. This is why I have chosen to apply mathematical derivatives to character depth.

Conceptually, a derivative measures the rate of change of the function it is derived from. Basically, derivatives measure change. Imagine a function that describes an object's position. This function may be made up of many terms that describe exactly where an object will be at any given point in time. But those terms also make it very difficult to see *how* an object is changing—and you want to see the deeper patterns in the object's travel. Taking the derivative of the object's position function gives you its *velocity*—the rate at which the object's position is changing. This derivative is also a function, which means it can be derived as well. Taking the derivative of the velocity function will give you the *acceleration* function, which describes how the velocity of the object is changing. Every time we take a derivative, we understand how the object is changing positions on a deeper and deeper level. But, thinking of the original position function as what's called a *polynomial* (an expression with multiple terms, some more powerful or influential to the function than others), every time we take a derivative, the function also gets simpler—some terms disappear while others get easier to understand.

What does this have to do with Hochman and Campbell? Derivatives themselves have patterns that are insightful into depth in literature, and their principles overlap with some of Hochman's and Campbell's principles. Like Campbell's studying of plots in myths and Hochman's registering of data to identify characters, derivatives take a lot of information (terms of the polynomial) and condense that information into a general description. The more derivatives we take, the more dense the information is—simpler, but more powerful. In turn, this relates to Hochman's classification of information as dominant or recessive, as less important terms in the function will be erased while more important terms will stay. We also see a hierarchy

of levels—acceleration tells us more about an object’s patterns of change than velocity does, while velocity is more insightful than the function for position is by itself.

On top of all of this, derivatives teach us that in order to achieve a deeper understanding of what we are analyzing, we need to have a lot of data, and we need to derive levels of meaning one by one. When we start with the raw data, as Hochman would put it, we can only understand depth by simplifying what we know, one level at a time. Too little data and our conclusions will be too simple. Too broad of conclusions too quickly will make those conclusions inaccurate and easy to discredit.

Hochman and Campbell likely had little interest in this field of mathematics, but derivatives correlate with their theories nonetheless. Readers do not need a rigorous understanding of mathematical derivatives to comprehend this paper’s next section, where I introduce my definition and model for character depth. Rather, by studying derivatives, we can make sense of what character depth truly is. More studies into the connections between mathematics and character depth can be done outside of this paper, but in the context of Hochman and Campbell’s work, we can glean from derivatives a more grounded understanding of how to arrive at deeper conclusions by building a hierarchy of levels out of the information we gather. From this mathematical concept, along with Hochman’s theories on character levels and Campbell’s modeling of character tendencies across stories, I put forth my definition of character depth and a technique for its discovery.

Character FIRST

I assert that *character depth is a measure of a character’s internal logic within the story to which can be attributed a large range of complex thoughts, actions, histories and circumstances.* Within this definition are several terms which I will elaborate on. The first word of note is “measure,” which evokes the mathematical principles this definition is founded on. We must measure depth in order to show relativity of meaning, of logic, and of complexity. Depth is a fundamentally hierarchical theory—remember Hochman’s description of “the dominance or recessiveness of certain traits.” Secondly, “internal” does not necessarily refer to the character’s mind. It also refers

to the logic within the story, as a character can be deep not just for what they convey on their own but for what they convey through the context of the story. Finally, note the order of the final four terms, “thoughts, actions, histories and circumstances.” This is a deliberate introduction of hierarchy within the definition. Thoughts are more important than actions, which are more important than histories, which are more important than a character’s circumstances. All of these terms are less important than internal logic, the highest level. The conglomerate of these levels of meaning and their internal consistency is what we know as character depth.

Along with this definition comes a method of understanding character depth. The definition lays down a structure composed of five separate layers of meaning, starting at the most essential to the character with internal logic and ending with circumstance. This approach for comprehension makes sense in terms of a definition. A method, however, must come at character depth in the opposite way. Hochman and familiarity with mathematical models both show that we must start with the raw data, the very words of the text, and then work our way deeper by deriving a more refined understanding of character. Therefore, this method, which I call “Character FIRST,” starts at the most mundane level.

With the Character FIRST process of analyzing character, we begin by collecting the many basic *facts* of the character and their happenstance in the story. Where does this character live? How old are they? Where do they work or go to school? These details do not describe how a character acts or thinks, though the accumulation of these details will show connections from which the character can start to become recognizable. As Hochman puts it, “we identify characters in literature in terms of qualities and of constellations of qualities” (48). Recognizing these “constellations” allows us as analysts to dive a level deeper.

From the many facts of a character’s existence in a story come those *insights* from which we can infer traits about their internal logic. Note that this level is *not* the character’s insights into other people and the world around them. We are still not situated in the mind of the character. Rather, in thinking about this level, we should ask ourselves what events and details of this character’s existence are most linked to the character’s personality and way of life. Do they have a missing parent? Were they close to someone who died tragically? Have they ever been revered or successful in a certain field? Notice this information helps us understand the character on a deeper

level than facts, but it does so at the cost of objectivity. Having a missing parent may affect one character greatly, while that may not be as important to another. Likewise, different analysts may have differing opinions on which events and details of a character's life are most influential or insightful to them. We will see this give-and-take of objectivity versus understanding continue as the levels progressively get deeper into the character's psyche and meaning in the story. Meaning within a story is, after all, always up to interpretation.

The third level of understanding character depth takes a step closer to genuine character, focusing on the *reactions* of that character. How does a character act? How do they react to certain situations? What does this character tend to do? The actions or emotions that could be implied from the character's insights will appear here. For instance, a character insight may be that they once had a nightmare and could not sleep the rest of the night, while a reaction is that they have frequent, debilitating nightmares; they are traumatized. Reactions are not a singular moment, like insights are. They are a character's tendency to act a certain way. Tendencies define characters more than instances.

A character's *subjectivity* makes up the fourth level of their depth. This level enters into the mind of the character and explores how they see the world, consciously and subconsciously. When analyzing this level, it can be helpful to use the first person instead of third person. A character may think, "I must restore my honor, no matter who or what stands in my way," or they may think, "Humans are not intelligent enough to be empathized with." Since we are in the mind of the character, this analysis can be very subjective. Let's say there are two analysts looking at one character. Basing this fourth level of meaning off that character's reactions, one analyst may think a character's subjectivity states, "Family is the most important thing," while another analyst may posit, "Power is the only way to stop suffering." Both can be true, and an analysis can certainly include both. But subjectivity often reveals internal conflict, and assigning one as "dominant" may present separate derivations of our fifth and final level of character depth.

On the previous level, we explored the deepest parts of the character's psyche. Therefore, looking at our character on the deepest level requires us to leave our character's mind and view them as part of a whole. We must take a step back into the world of the narrative and judge how the text itself views this character and their mindset. Doing so derives *theme*, the fifth and

final level of character depth. This is the most subjective level of character, but it is also the most powerful and the most philosophical. It requires our greatest level of interpretation. For instance, a soldier may be the heart of the group of protagonists and believe that “love conquers all; family cannot be broken,” but if this character is brutally murdered in front of their family, an interpretation of this character’s theme may be “love and family have no place in war.” Continuing with the example subjectivities from the previous paragraph, the theme of a power-hungry character who also values their family above all else could be interpreted as “Family is all that keeps a person sane,” or “Power can corrupt even the most righteous of people.” Notice that the themes and the subjectivities of a character can be directly opposed to each other, and that multiple subjectivities can contribute to one theme. This is why it is vital that we as analysts begin with lots of first-level facts about any given character, to ground the character in the language of the story and prevent our analyses from becoming too speculative.

In review, we start with a character’s *facts*, then move a level deeper to *insights*, then deeper to *reactions*, then *subjectivity*, and finally *theme*. This process, Character FIRST, moves the reader through a hierarchy of meaning to base all of their interpretations in layers of dense, thoroughly-structured analysis. In addition to redefining how we view character depth, this method allows audiences a concrete step-by-step guide to arriving at character themes without ignoring the importance of subjectivity. This method, in fact, refines our understanding of interpretation. It is a new perspective on character depth that aligns with the way we’ve interpreted character since the beginning of storytelling. In this method’s infancy, its measure of accuracy has yet to be tested, but in the following section, I will demonstrate the effectiveness of this method by using it on three works’ central characters and interpreting their themes.

The Method in Action

In this section I will demonstrate Character FIRST’s ability to arrive at meaningful interpretations similar to that of other secondary works of criticism. I’ve chosen three stories’ central characters to analyze, and though I do not have the space to present my entire interpretation, a summary of each will demonstrate the themes each character creates in their story. The

first two characters I will analyze come from stories that I am already familiar with and have chosen due to the complexity of their central characters, while the third character I analyze comes from a novel I had not read previously or researched in any way prior to using Character FIRST to interpret it in this paper. I begin this demonstration of the model's effectiveness with a movie, *Drive*, directed by Nicholas Winding Refn, in order to show some of the more bare-bones properties of this method, as well as to display this model's effectiveness in other forms of storytelling beyond literature.

Surprisingly few *facts* are ever given about *Drive's* protagonist. In fact, this nameless character is referred to simply as "Driver" in the movie's credits. We do not know if this character has family, where he's from, or what he has done offscreen before the events of the plot. What we do get is his occupation: He is a mechanic and a stunt driver. But the opening scene of the movie tells us that he is also a getaway driver who doesn't shy away from illegal activities. As the driver says when offered a handshake by the film's antagonist, "My hands are a little dirty." The villain, Bernie, replies, "So are mine" (*Drive*). Throughout the movie, the audience comes to know the driver, but only based on what he does and the violence he is surrounded by. We also see the relationships he builds, which lead us to the next level.

The driver's story becomes more than the typical "getaway driver" trope when he builds a relationship with Irene and Benicio, the mother-son duo down the hall from his new apartment. As the driver tells Irene, "You and Benicio were the best thing that ever happened to me" (*Drive*). This detail in itself is an *insightful* moment, as are the scenes where the driver robs a pawn shop to get Benicio's father out of trouble, and the scene where he finds his friend Shannon's body. But these scenes become more complicated when paired with the scenes of the driver interrogating other criminals, all of which involve the driver mentioning Benicio or his parents. Another insight we get of his violence comes in the form of his jacket, which has a scorpion on the back, implying violent tendencies. Lastly, we should also make note of the moment in which the driver and Benicio are watching TV, and he asks Benicio how he can tell a certain character is a bad guy. Benicio responds, "Because he's a shark." The driver then asks, "There's no good sharks?" and becomes disheartened when Benicio says there aren't (*Drive*).

These insights show a clear set of *reactions*. The driver is not opposed to illegal activities, but he also will do anything (including murder, though mostly in self-defense) to remove himself and those he cares about from

crime rings. The movie's events also demonstrate his compassion for honest and caring people, like Benicio's family. Despite rivaling Standard, Benicio's father, as a father figure, the driver goes out of his way to help Standard. But the violence catches up with the driver, too, as shown in the scene where he brutally murders a hitman in an elevator as Irene watches. The driver is shown to be aware of his own relationship with violence, and he strives to be a hero, though he questions his morality all along the way.

In terms of the driver's *subjectivity*, he is a character in crisis. He questions himself often. He doesn't only wonder about whether or not he can "escape"; more complexly, he questions the nature of morality. He asks himself: Is morality a part of a person's nature? Can sins be washed off as easily as blood? Can I overcome my own flaws? The driver is in turmoil throughout the movie, but what motivates him and what ultimately allows him to get Benicio and Irene out of this situation safely is the one thing he is certain of: Good people who don't get their hands dirty deserve to be happy and safe. The driver believes so firmly in this that he is willing to end the movie by driving off into the night, sacrificing his chance at a life with Irene, but keeping her and Benicio safe.

For *theme*, we must look at how the movie treats the driver and what he stands for. In this regard, the movie doesn't come to a solid answer. Rather, this story is an exploration of complex moral dilemmas. It questions what it means to be, as the background music says, "a real human being, and a real hero" (*Drive*). Another theme that we can derive from this interpretation relates to being "dirty" and the choice to do bad things. Noticing the way blood and injuries seem to stick around, such as on Standard's face and the driver's jacket, and pairing this with the driver's overall goal to escape the crime world, the movie questions the ability to move on from immorality. Most of the characters involved in crime end up dead, and the driver survives but sacrifices his chance at a family with Irene, so I would not disagree with the interpretation that *Drive* demonstrates the corrupting power of evil. However, to give the driver his storybook ending with Irene would have sullied the character's dark and complex tone. This is about as good of a situation as the driver could have hoped for, and his "success" is ambiguous. Therefore, with the driver surviving, I see this theme more as an exploration of evil than a warning of its power.

Both of these themes show up in criticism of the film. Miles Surrey points to the motif of the driver engaging in violence, calling it a "riveting descent

into chaos: a starry, neon-lit L.A. curdling into a bloody (but still neon-lit) nightmare.” Roger Ebert also recognizes the protagonist’s moral crisis, titling his review “The existential getaway driver.” Ebert goes on to say, “[T]he driver reveals deep feelings and loyalties indeed, and undergoes enormous risk at little necessary benefit to himself.” But these reviews do not provide analysis of the driver, only assertions. Because of this, I will also compare the model’s interpretation to video essays published through YouTube. Though none of these channels have as much acclaim as Ebert, these video essays actively attempt to grapple with the themes of the driver as a character. Moreover, the FIRST model must demonstrate its ability to provide substantive analysis before it can be measured against the highest-quality criticism available, so video essays provide an adequate first comparison to measure up against. Regardless of how much value the audience puts in video essays, the FIRST model clearly arrives at similar interpretations as the community. “Drive, Joseph Campbell, & Becoming A Real Hero” comes to the conclusion that “*Drive* ultimately boils down to a study of morality . . . and the consequences of doing [right and wrong].” Likewise, another video essay, “The Driver — A Real Hero,” claims that “The driver has participated in criminal activities, but doesn’t think those actions represent him.” Other video essays comment on similar themes (see “What Does Drive Say About Masculinity”), demonstrating this method’s ability to arrive at sophisticated character-based themes. Formed on fact-based analysis, Character FIRST successfully articulates complex themes which correspond to other critics’ analyses of the driver.

While *Drive* shows Character FIRST’s ability to discover themes from a central character with very little history, a work such as *The Catcher in the Rye* makes for a good demonstration of the method’s usefulness in analyzing unreliable characters. As a novel with a large amount of criticism surrounding it, this method’s accuracy in pointing to themes common within literary criticism of *The Catcher in the Rye* will signify its usefulness. Additionally, as a work featuring an unreliable narrator whose actions and statements contradict throughout, *The Catcher in the Rye* tests the FIRST method’s ability to parse through difficult, dense layers of characterization, further validating its integrity.

Some of the first things we learn about Holden Caulfield seem mundane at first, but will become more important as the story progresses. At the level of *facts*, we learn about Holden in a very basic sense: He is a tall

black-and-gray-haired 16-year-old who wears a hunting hat backwards and smokes a lot, goes to a renowned prep school, etc. We also learn about his family and his past, which are a huge part of Holden's character. Finally, we get a simple understanding of how he interacts with the world by noting his repeated flunking out of school, his numerous roommates, and his previous non-familial relationships. The biggest concern of our analysis should be the sheer mass of data we can accumulate on Holden Caulfield. However, some of the most important details of the facts level to note are Holden's hunting hat, which he calls "a people shooting hat," (Salinger 22) and Holden's gray hair. Both of these details, though they seem mundane, are symbolic of deeper characteristics that will surface later in the analysis.

Moving on to *insights*, we quickly learn that Holden's "lousy childhood" (1) is more traumatic than it initially seems. His younger brother Allie died young, and Holden recounts, "I slept in the garage the night he died, and I broke all the goddamn windows with my fist, just for the hell of it" (39). Additionally, a classmate of his committed suicide while wearing a sweater that Holden had loaned him. These two events are telling, and the way they are presented will be further explored in reactions. We should also note that Holden is writing this book from a mental institution, which makes the reader question Holden's sanity and further complicates his status as an unreliable narrator. Note also Holden's status as a "terrific liar" (16) and his contradictions, suggesting a mental imbalance in Holden.

Deriving his *reactions* from this, we see how Holden behaves on a regular basis. One important detail to note is that his actions often contradict—for instance, the two extremely traumatic events of his past listed in insights are played off as part of life, while things like the ducks in Central Park make Holden sad. He seems to grieve more for the missing ducks than for his deceased brother or his dead classmate. One of the most telling mentions of this comes when his little sister Phoebe asks Holden to name something, anything, that he likes. Holden's response is that he likes his dead younger brother Allie, not "liked" but "likes," as if he is still alive, (171) which suggests an inability for Holden to process grief. Pay attention as well to the things Holden says he hates—movies, plays, "phonies"—and the behaviors Holden engages in, as those statements and behaviors directly contradict each other as well. While one of his foremost reactions is to hate falseness and the establishment, another of Holden's reactions is to "[shoot] the bull" (13) and be completely disingenuous.

This leads us to Holden's *subjectivity*. Holden is careful to never state his true desires or fears throughout the story, as demonstrated by the opening paragraph of the book. But by the end, we come as close as we will get to Holden explaining his truest beliefs: "Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody" (214). Looking back at the previous levels that have brought us to subjectivity, we start to see what this sentiment truly means: Holden does not know how to properly grieve, and he feels as if people and events are only worth something in hindsight. He also hates the "phony" society he's grown up in, but participates in it nonetheless, which seems to show that he wants a better and more genuine life for children but doesn't think himself capable of possessing this better life.

Finally, this brings us to *theme*. Knowing how Holden thinks, we take a step back and analyze how the novel interacts with the ideas he puts forth. Since this is a first-person narrative, it can be difficult to parse out how the novel interacts with Holden, but Salinger does an exceptional job of letting hidden details come across, allowing the reader to identify characteristics about Holden that he can't even identify about himself. Though Holden talks a lot about getting out of the mental institution, the reader is made to wonder how he will do that: What will Holden have to overcome to fit into the world? This phrases the thematic question in terms of the plot. In terms of the themes of the story, Holden's mindset and actions as a character explore the difficulties of adolescence and trauma. Through him, the novel explores the death of childhood, and therefore, its significance. The main questions that the novel seems to explore through Holden are then twofold: What does it matter if we are only able to care about people after they are gone, and can anyone escape the phoniness of the world?

Looking at literary criticism of *The Catcher in the Rye*, we can see that these themes are abundant in analyses of Holden Caulfield. In "Holden Caulfield: 'Don't Ever Tell Anybody Anything,'" Duane Edwards writes, "[Holden] focuses on danger and potential death instead of love and a personal relationship. Ultimately, he reveals his unreliability as the narrator for his own life's story." Later, Edwards continues, "Holden conforms to phoniness because he wants so badly to join the human race." The Character FIRST model and Edwards are clearly picking at the same sentiments of the book, in that they both quantify his status as an unreliable narrator and use Holden's ironic narration to present a theme about phoniness and conformity. In another essay, "Holden Caulfield's Legacy," David Castronovo identifies

Salinger's key exploration of *The Catcher in the Rye* to be "sentiment and idealism, a child-like faith that life contains more than pretensions and phoniness." Likewise, the Character FIRST model picked up on this meaning, questioning whether or not the world of phoniness is inescapable and whether holding onto childhood can produce meaning or only result in madness.

Both of these works, *Drive* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, are personal favorites of mine. While this has allowed for me to pick and choose which works best demonstrate the method I've put forward, it also allows room for bias. To remedy this, I will also demonstrate Character FIRST's effectiveness on a text which I have not researched nor read previous to the writing of this essay. Based solely off of the genre and a personal recommendation, I have chosen to analyze Mattie Ross from *True Grit* by Charles Portis through the lens of this method.

Upon a single close reading, the *facts* relating to Mattie Ross that jump out of this text are numerous but fairly concise. The story is not too complex, and our narrator, though not as psychoanalytical as Holden Caulfield, details herself enough that we have a sturdy foundation of who she is. She is a 14-year-old girl looking to avenge her father's death by hiring a U.S. Marshal to track down his killer. As the story progresses, we see that she is an authoritative figure when it comes to her family and her sense of morality. She barter with many of the characters we meet. This is demonstrated in the details we see of her writing to her lawyer, the numerous bartering scenes, the fact that she is the oldest child, and the words of other characters in dialogue as well. For instance, Mattie's lawyer tells her in a letter, "your headstrong ways will lead you into a tight corner one day . . . You are [your mother's] strong right arm now, Mattie" (Portis 78–79).

In this text, the facts of Mattie Ross can be difficult to separate from the *insights*. Mattie's narration is concise and matter-of-fact, making the events Mattie is emotionally invested in not much different stylistically from the ones that she is not. The most obvious of these insights is Mattie's dead father—that is the heart of the plot and the drive of Mattie's story. We learn to see Mattie as a head of a household, though she is only 14. This responsibility clearly weighs on her, but she is also up to the task, as demonstrated in her conversations with Stonehill, who sold some horses to her father shortly before his death. After realizing how capable Mattie is at striking a deal, Stonehill says to her, "My patience is wearing thin. You are an unnatural

child" (37). Complimenting Mattie's responsibility to her family, we also see the way she interacts with money. Mattie's conversations almost always revolve around payment and debt, whether that is putting the items of life in terms of physical money, or putting her relationships in terms of a different kind of value. The two values, money and emotional value, do not bleed over, however, as demonstrated by Mattie's refusal to haggle with the coroner (24).

What this shows is a strong set of *reactions* in Mattie. She speaks the language of money and economy when interacting with the outside world, but when business gets personal, she does not. We see this as well with Mattie's refusal to take Tom Chaney's bounty into account when planning his lawful killing. The man must pay, but not in money. As a no-nonsense young woman, Mattie demonstrates her ability to command authority and to fend for herself. But there is also something very clearly missing: a sense of deep personal connection. We can only infer Mattie's sense of compassion based on the lengths at which she is willing to go to avenge her murdered father. At the end of the novel, when Mattie seeks out her comrades from this mission who have gone their separate ways, she is unable to find those connections. Rooster Cogburn is dead, and LaBeouf has left no trail to be found by.

With these reactions in mind, we come to Mattie's *subjectivity*. Her obvious and most prominent motivation is to avenge her father's death, which implies a strong connection with family. She also requires that her two comrades bring her out west with them to allow her to see Tom Chaney die herself, which suggests Mattie believes it is her responsibility to seek out her father's justice. But most deeply of all, if we mix these understandings of Mattie with her continued economical descriptions of society and of justice, a line from early in the novel jumps out and speaks for itself: "You must pay for everything in this world one way or another" (40).

The novel seems to view Mattie's sense of the world mostly in agreement. Her and her compatriots' success implies that this subjectivity of personal justice is correct. What's more, the title, *True Grit*, is what is used to characterize Rooster Cogburn, who is described as one of the most unforgiving marshals there is. This title glorifies the toughness of the characters. It serves as a reminder that without the proper toughness to stare down the evils of the world, the heroes would not have succeeded. In fact, it is only despite major injuries to all the characters that they end up succeeding, suggesting a *theme* of the novel: You must be as cold and as unforgiving as the world itself

(at least in the Wild West) to claim your justice. But given that the entirety of this novel's plot is centered on the death of Mattie's father, this theme must also be taken in conjunction with the value of family. Family is the only thing that supersedes the value of money. To phrase it as economically as Mattie would: People pay in cash, criminals pay in blood.

Given this story's relevance in modern society (as showcased by the 2010 Coen brothers movie of the same name), the author R. Baird Shuman gives a disappointingly thin analysis of Mattie Ross in "Portis' 'True Grit': Adventure Story or 'Entwicklungsroman?'" He comes to the conclusion that the novel serves "to chronicle Mattie Ross' struggle to achieve maturity," and sums up the happenings of the novel as "the most crucial days of her life . . . her gargantuan trials." Such an interpretation is counterintuitive to what we learn in the novel and, in some places, downright false—for instance, Shuman incorrectly states that Mattie "is not bitten" by snakes despite this being a major factor in the amputation of her arm. We are also shown that Mattie's ability to barter and to act with grit is not a learned trait. The lawyer's letter states as much when he characterizes Mattie as "an almighty trial" with "headstrong ways" (Portis 78–79). Shuman mistakenly interprets the events of the story as an arc, when in reality, Mattie's story is one of success and bitter fulfillment, not growth. Meanwhile, William Nauenberg's "*True Grit* by Charles Portis," recognizes the novel's struggle with wickedness, but dramatically oversimplifies Mattie Ross and the themes she presents. Nauenberg's thesis, that "the story shows the power of the good to conquer evil," puts into words the most generic interpretation of any story.

In the case of *True Grit*, the FIRST model's interpretation of Mattie Ross proves to be quite effective. Its analysis of her character depth provides us with a better understanding of her value of money and family, and helps us to better understand the concepts of value and grit as a whole. Through this story, as well as *Drive* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, this method of analysis sheds light on the impact of characters on a story and demonstrates how to base interpretation on substantive textual evidence in order to form a concise understanding of a character's meaning. By pointing to themes common among other interpretations, the Character FIRST method proves useful in theory and applicable in practice.

Conclusion

Character FIRST is meant to be used not only as a tool for better understanding of character depth, but also as a springboard for further analysis founded on factual evidence within stories. Likewise, there are further avenues of thought to explore beyond the scope of this paper. It remains to be seen how useful this model might be for the writing process, as is the case for Campbell's monomyth. Character FIRST's use of derivatives should be further analyzed, and mathematics in literature as a whole is a subject with plenty of interpretation and discovery left to be had. I expect this definition and model to be criticized as well; specifically, though I firmly believe in the five levels of character depth asserted in this paper, I expect the number of character depth layers to be contested and further theorized. Nevertheless, this paper lays the groundwork for a new way of thinking about character depth, the potential of which has yet to be fully discovered.

Analysts should be encouraged by the success these interpretations of three major characters achieve in understanding deeper meaning in stories. It proves successful in analyzing films and novels, favorites of literary critics and overlooked works, first-reads and old favorites. It makes use of mathematical ways of thinking in order to better understand what it is that makes characters deep and to form a new, more applicable definition of character depth. It is founded on substantive literary theory, specifically Hochman's *Character in Literature* and Campbell's monomyth from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Most importantly, it expands our understanding of storytelling and the characters within. By learning this derivative-based definition of depth and applying the Character FIRST method, readers of all levels can discover for themselves more complex and sophisticated interpretations of character depth.

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