

Novelists who Give their Name to a Fictional Character

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Summary

Names of fictional characters may reveal attributes of the novelist's personality and creative methods. Novelists probably feel special identification with a fictional character who shares their personal name. In a sample of six male and six female novelists, one or more fictional characters shared the personal name of five male novelists, William Makepeace Thackeray, Charles Dickens, Harry Sinclair Lewis, John Updike, Philip Roth, and four female authors, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Margaret Drabble, Anna Quindlen. No fictional namesake was found in the novels by male author Ernest Hemingway and female authors Marian Evans (George Eliot) and Edith Wharton. The fictional namesake was usually more prominent in the novels by male than female authors. The characteristics of the fictional namesakes generally appear to express either rational self perceptions or wishful fantasies of the author.

Introduction

One of the earliest perceptions in social learning is the personal name. It differentiates oneself from all or most other family members. A subsequent but also early perception is the family name, which differentiates the child's family from other families. The personal and family name are learned so early that their role in self identification is usually not consciously recognized. Dale Carnegie (1981) gave examples of "the astounding importance people place on their own names" (page 77).

I believe that the author's name is usually the principal reason for the choice of a fictional namesake, even if the same name is popular and shared with many other people. The author feels a special affiliation with the fictional namesake. The attributes and experiences of the fictional namesake may reveal corresponding attributes of the author's personality.

Among six male and six female novelists, five males and four females gave their personal name to one or more fictional characters. The fictional characteristics and events for the fictional namesakes are associated with biographical information on the nine authors.

Methods

In the following list of six male and six female novelists, each name is followed by the national residence, years of birth and death, number of novels searched, and number of fictional namesakes.

William Makepeace Thackeray	UK	1811-1863	3	4
Charles Dickens	UK	1812-1870	14	12
Harry Sinclair Lewis	USA	1885-1951	7	4
Ernest Hemingway	USA	1899-1961	6	0
John Updike	USA	1932-2009	8	2
Philip Roth	USA	1933	3	1

Jane Austen	UK	1775-1817	6	3
Charlotte Bronte	UK	1816-1855	4	1
Marian Evans (George Eliot)	UK	1819-1880	4	0
Edith Wharton	USA	1862-1917	5	0
Margaret Drabble	UK	1939	3	1
Anna Quindlen	USA	1952	5	1

The names of the fictional characters were recorded in multiple novels by each author. Most of the novelists are admired by literature scholars. Many people have read one or more of their novels. The selection criteria included equalizing the number of male and female authors. Other selection criteria were residents of two English speaking nations, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, and two eras of birth, before 1870 and after 1880.

The importance of each character to the plot and events of the novel was rated on a scale from 1, brief and minor, to 5, one of the most prominent and influential. No fictional namesake was found for one male novelist, Hemingway, and for two female novelists, Marian Evans (George Eliot) and Edith Wharton. For the other five male and four female authors, biographical information was associated with the character, behavior, and outcome of each fictional namesake.

William Makepeace Thackeray

The author's second novel, "Vanity Fair," is the most popular of his five novels. He characterized it as a novel without a hero. Most of the fictional characters are vain and foolish. The most admirable character, and the most continuously prominent, is William Dobbin. His first name is the same as the author's. His family name is more commonly a reference to a horse than the name of a human family.

William Dobbin begins as a clumsy and ridiculed school boy, the son of a grocer among sons of wealthy parents. He matures into a heroic army officer who performs successfully in the Battle of Waterloo and becomes a colonel. He is in love with a young woman who marries another man. After her husband dies, she eventually marries him.

The fictional William constitutes a realistic portrayal of the author. William Thackeray was a large, heavy, awkward man who was not handsome. His character was admirable and he had many friends. His wife became mentally ill but he cared for her solicitously for many years.

The author had no military history. The military success of the fictional William probably constituted a wish fulfillment.

A much less prominent character than William Dobbin is his father, also named William Dobbin. The father William becomes wealthy and is knighted, earning the title "Sir William Dobbin." In common with his son, he is admirable and successful.

Near the end of "Vanity Fair," the son William Dobbin, a passenger in a ship, is told by the captain about "his Lordship and Lady William." The three fictional characters named William in this novel therefore range from one of the most important and admirable characters to an aristocratic but very minor character.

Diversity of the author's fictional namesakes increases further in the author's next two novels. The third novel, "Pendennis," contains a fictional namesake who is an important servant of another fictional character who appears briefly in the story. "Mr. Dolphin, the great theatre manager from London, accompanied by his faithful friend and secretary, Mr. William Minns: without whom he never travelled." In the fourth novel, "Henry Esmond," the fictional namesake is aristocratic but briefly mentioned. "There are but two marquises in all England, William Herbert Marquis of Poris, and Francis-James Marquis of Esmond..."

Charles Dickens

Charles John Huffam Dickens did not use his middle names. John was the personal name of his father and also maternal grandfather. The 14 completed novels by Charles Dickens contain 12 fictional characters named Charles or Charley. The author's childhood nickname was Charley. The large number of fictional namesakes is more extraordinary than the large number of novels. My search for fictional namesakes excluded the incomplete novel, "The Mystery of Edwin Drood," and the Christmas stories, including the famous "Christmas Carol." Newlin (1995, pages 82-83) listed the same 12 fictional namesakes and an additional one, the son of Charles Darnay in "A Tale of Two Cities." The son dies in infancy and the edition of the novel I used did not reveal his name. Newlin listed more than 20 additional fictional characters named Charles or Charley in shorter writings by Charles Dickens.

A sense of humor was prominent in the social interactions and writings by Charles Dickens. Harder (1959) gave examples of humor and satire in the names of many of his fictional characters. Most of the examples listed by Harder are family names instead of personal names. Most of the fictional characters given the personal name Charles or Charley have prominent social connections and a happy outcome. These attributes are consistent with the author's sociability and optimism.

Barry (2007) briefly identified the 12 fictional characters given the personal name of the author, in eight of the 14 completed novels. The fictional namesakes vary greatly in prominence, from a principal character to brief identification of a minor character. Some of the eight novels contain two or more namesakes. Novels without a fictional namesake are numbers four to six in the published sequence, "The Old Curiosity Shop," "Barnaby Rudge," "Martin Chuzzlewit," numbers 10-11, "Hard Times," "Little Dorrit," and number 13, "Great Expectations."

The first novel, "Pickwick Papers," contains two fictional namesakes. One of the most prominent characters, other than Mr. Pickwick and his friends and servant, is Charles Fitz-Marshall. He is a swindler who uses an alias, Alfred Jingle. His speech contains humorously disconnected words and phrases. He has a loyal servant, Job Trotter. The fictional Charles and Job both eventually become worthy members of society.

The other fictional Charles in the same novel appears briefly as a shambling pot-boy. He is a humorous contrast with Charles Fitz-Marshall.

The second novel, "Oliver Twist," contains Charley Bates, one of Fagin's group of young boys who pick pockets. Charley frequently bursts into irritating laughter. One of the references to him is "Master Bates," which has the same spoken sound as "masturbates." He eventually becomes an honest worker.

The third novel, "Nicholas Nickleby," contains two fictional namesakes who have contrasting attributes. Charles Cheeryble is an admirable, elderly, prosperous businessman who rescues the title character. His business partner is his twin brother, who has the same missing teeth. At the end of the novel, Charles Cheeryble is surrounded by happiness and increases it. The other fictional namesake of the author in the same novel is Charley Blockson, who appears briefly. He has a damaged elbow and a twin.

The seventh novel, "Dombey and Son," contains Charles MacStinger, whose nickname is Chowley." He is a young boy, one of three children.

The eighth novel, "David Copperfield," contains three fictional namesakes of the author. Charley Mell, one of several important fictional characters, befriends and helps David Copperfield. The fictional Charley also takes care of his aged mother. He is a school teacher who is exploited by the schoolmaster. Charley eventually migrates to Australia where he becomes the highly respected Dr. Mell.

Two other fictional namesakes in the same novel appear briefly. An old clothes dealer, Charley, utters expressive, explosive speech. He is well known in the community. David

Copperfield needs to trade his suit for enough money to travel to his aunt, Miss Betsey Trotwood. Charley eventually gives the needed money after repeatedly trying to exchange other clothes for the suit. Charley Pyegrave, a young boy, is the son of a Duke and his legs are not a pair.

Newlin (1995, page 110) revealed that Charles Dickens considered choosing Charles Junior instead of David as the personal name of the title character. The first letters of David Copperfield (DC) are the reverse of the first letters of the author, Charles Dickens (CD). The same novel also contains an important fictional character given part of the author's family name. Mr. Dick, whose family name is the first syllable of Dickens, is benign and partly crazy. He lives with Betsey Trotwood. Mr. Dick is obsessed with the troubles of King Charles I, who was beheaded in 1645.

The ninth novel, "Bleak House," contains an admirable young girl whose name is Charlotte Neckett, but she is always called Charley. She takes care of a younger brother and sister. She is deficient in penmanship. She eventually marries a prosperous farmer.

The 12th novel, "A Tale of Two Cities," contains Charles Darnay. He differs in several ways from all of the other fictional namesakes. He is one of the most important fictional characters. He is extravagantly idealistic and admirable. His personality otherwise is not clearly described. His speech is seldom reproduced. His possibly humorous attribute is his extraordinarily noble and self-sacrificial behavior. His role in the plot is predominantly passive instead of active.

In some ways, Charles Darnay resembles the fictional namesakes in the other novels. He is socially connected to other important characters. He is originally the nephew of the cruel French Monsieur Marquis Evremonde. He emigrates to England and selects Darnay as his new family name. His close physical resemblance to Sydney Carton twice saves Charles Darnay from death. He escapes being hanged as a French spy because Sydney Carton's close resemblance to him discredits witnesses in an English court who saw him on the ship from France. Charles later returns to France to rescue a friend but is sentenced to be guillotined as the Marquis, following the death of his uncle. Sidney Carton replaces him at the guillotine with the help of the close physical resemblance.

Charles Darnay marries Lucy Manette, the daughter of an important character. The author foresees for Charles Darnay a peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy life in England.

Dickens wrote this novel shortly after he separated from his wife because of his love affair with Ellen Ternan, a young actress. The rescue from the guillotine for the fictional namesake Charles Darnay probably expressed the author's yearning for rescue from a stressful social situation.

The 14th novel, "Our Mutual Friend," contains Charley Hexam, a selfish boy who tries to exploit Lizzie, his admirable sister, and also tries to assist an evil schoolmaster, Mr. Bradley Headstone. Charley is rescued by his sister and eventually attains his ambition to become a schoolmaster.

The fictional namesakes created by Charles Dickens are diverse in addition to being numerous. They express the author's contradictory characteristics, including idealistic and selfish, sociable and quarrelsome, joyous and depressed.

Harry Sinclair Lewis

The first name was omitted from the author's name in the novels by Sinclair Lewis. The four fictional namesakes found in the seven novels that were searched are much fewer than Charles Dickens created but exceed the number created by most of the other authors.

In his first popular novel, "Main Street," Harry Haydock belongs to the young smart set of Gopher Prairie. His dad owns most of the Bon Ton restaurant, but Harry runs it and gives it the pep. He's a hustler.

In his fourth popular novel, “Elmer Gantry,” Harry Zenz is the most confirmed atheist in a Baptist theological seminary. He subsequently has a large church in a West Virginia mining town.

In the fifth popular novel, “Dodsworth,” Harry McKee is an ex-tennis champion, a Captain during the Great War, wears his clothes and his slang dashing. He is hard-surfaced, glossy, ferociously driving in business, and outside of business absorbed only in sports and cocktail-dancing. Unexpectedly, he is also fanatically interested in children. He marries a daughter of the title character, Sam Dodsworth.

In a later novel, “It Can’t Happen Here,” Harry Kindermann is a Jew and prosperous businessman who is described by a Fascist as “a fresh Kike.” Kindermann laughs at the flag, the Church, and even Rotary. Soon after the Fascists take control of the fictional United States, Harry is selling frankfurters by the road, and his wife dies from pneumonia caught in their one-room tar-paper shack.

The fictional namesakes in the first and fifth popular novel probably express the author’s wish to be a popular and a successful businessman. The fictional namesakes in the fourth and later novel express his actual alienation from conventional society. This alienation is expressed by the satire that is prevalent in his novels.

John Updike

In the first novel, “The Poorhouse Fair,” John F. Hook is the most active and admirable resident of the poorhouse. He is also more prominent and definitely more admirable than the director, physicians, and other staff members of the poorhouse. John Hook is financially poor and elderly but highly intelligent and wise.

The sixth novel surveyed, “The Witches of Eastwick,” in page 92 briefly refers to another fictional namesake of the author. “...very subtly raunchy oils by a newish painter called John Wesley, no relation to the crazy Methodist, he does what look like illustrations in children’s animal books until you realize what they’re showing. Squirrels fucking and stuff like that.” The fictional namesake reproduces in paintings the explicitly sexual thoughts and actions in most novels by the author.

The high frequency of the personal name John in the population probably contributed to the small number of two fictional namesakes created by John Updike. The majority of the other 11 novelists listed in Table 1 created more than two fictional characters named John. The largest number, more than 25, was by Dickens. The exceptions, fewer than two, were by Roth, Wharton, and Drabble. These three authors may have felt inhibited from giving this highly frequent personal name to their fictional characters.

Philip Roth

In one of the most recent novels by Philip Roth, “The Plot on America,” the fictional narrator is Philip Roth. Additional associations with the author are that the fictional Philip Roth was born in the same year (1933), grew up in a Jewish family in Newark, New Jersey, with an older brother, and his parents had the same personal names. The father was Herman; the mother was Bessie. The fictional narrator was an important member of his family and community as a young boy. He had no influence on the national and international events that were emphasized in the novel. The fictional history featured election of Charles Lindbergh instead of reelection of Franklin D. Roosevelt as President of the United States in 1940. President Lindbergh, whose first son is held hostage in Germany by the Nazis in the fictional narrative, cooperates with Hitler by maintaining American neutrality in the Second World War and appearing to persecute the American Jews. After the death of President Lindbergh, in 1941, Roosevelt wins a special presidential election, the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, and the fictional history thereafter conforms to the actual history.

No fictional character named Philip was found in the four other novels by Philip Roth that

were searched. All of these novels had autobiographical attributes. The principal fictional character thereby is a Jewish male who lives in Newark, New Jersey.

Jane Austen

The earliest novelist searched was the most enduringly popular female author, Jane Austen. Two of her six novels contain an important character named Jane, The fictional Jane is very beautiful but subordinate to the heroine of the novel.

In the second novel, “Pride and Prejudice,” which is the most popular, the fictional Jane Bennet is the older sister of the heroine, Elizabeth. Jane Bennet meets and falls in love with Charles Bingley, a rich and amiable young man who is subordinate to his richer friend, Mr. Darcy. After multiple social contacts with Charles Bingley, Jane Bennet fails to communicate her desire to marry him. When Charles leaves temporarily, Mr. Darcy convinces him that Jane Bennet is not interested in him. Eventually, Elizabeth Bennet reveals their love for each other, and they marry.

In the fifth novel, “Emma,” Jane Fairfax is a very beautiful young woman who also is a talented piano player. Her mother, also named Jane Fairfax, is a genteel but poor woman, the widow of an army officer. She appears only briefly in the novel. The daughter Jane is secretly engaged to marry Frank Churchill, who is a friend of the heroine, Emma Woodhouse. Frank is afraid that his rich grandmother will disinherit him if she becomes aware he wants to marry a woman of low status and no wealth. The daughter Jane therefore feels compelled to witness silently the flirtation of Frank with Emma. Eventually, Emma marries the very wealthy and prestigious Mr. Knightley and Jane marries Frank after the death of his grandmother.

Barry (2001) briefly summarized the information on Jane Austen’s fictional namesakes, Jane Bennet and the daughter Jane Fairfax. The physical beauty of both fictional namesakes is attributable to the author’s wishful fantasy. Jane Austen’s older sister, Cassandra, was regarded as more beautiful. The deficient social communication by both fictional namesakes is attributable to the author’s realistic self perception. Jane Austen devoted much of her adulthood to writing satirical novels and to her relationship with family members, especially her sister. She neglected her social obligation to attract and marry a rich man.

Charlotte Bronte

In the last of Charlotte Bronte’s four novels, the heroine, Lucy Snow, during a boat trip from England to Belgium, overhears a conversation by the mother and brother of the fictional Charlotte. They say that Charlotte is planning a romantic but imprudent marriage. The mother strongly disapproves and the brother defends his sister. Charlotte’s family name is not revealed. She appears in the novel only as a topic of discussion by family members.

This fictional namesake was mentioned briefly in an article on the fictional characters created by Charlotte Bronte (Barry, 2009). This was the written report of a paper at the 23rd International Congress of Onomastic Science (ICOS). Wishful fantasy of the author was expressed by the fictional Charlotte’s romantic but imprudent marriage. The author was romantic but not imprudent concerning love and marriage. No fictional namesake was found in her other three novels. Barry (2009) identified numerous fictional characters who Charlotte Bronte revealed were modeled on actual people, but the fictional characters were given different names.

Margaret Drabble

One of the three novels by Margaret Drabble that were searched, “The Needle’s Eye,” contains a fictional namesake, Lady Margaret Bresson. She is an aristocrat who writes an invitation for participation in a party, to the principal character. She is a very minor character

in the novel. A wishful fantasy for membership in the aristocracy might be expressed by this fictional namesake. The minor role in the novel might indicate the author's inhibition against sharing her personal name with a fictional character. A possible alternative or additional reason is the author's realistic self perception of deficiency in social interactions. Authors who spend a major part of their time writing thereby curtail their social activities.

Anna Quindlen

In "Object Lessons," the first novel by Anna Quindlen, the heroine's maternal grandmother was Anna Mazza. At her gravestone, an old man says that she "was one tough cookie." That brief phrase might express Anna Quindlen's realistic self perception or a wishful fantasy to be tough or the matriarch of her family.

This is the only author's namesake found in her novels. Anna Quindlen probably was inhibited from giving her personal name to fictional characters. The only fictional namesake is dead.

Three Other Novelists

No fictional namesake was found in the novels that were searched by one male author, Ernest Hemingway, and by two female authors, Marian Evans (George Eliot) and Edith Wharton. These three authors constitute only 25% of the sample of 12 novelists. A selection bias should be noted concerning one of the authors, Philip Roth. The present author selected him for this sample because of reading about his fictional namesake, Philip Roth, in a review of his novel "The Plot Against America."

Discussion

The nine novelists who created at least one fictional namesake include males and females, residents of the United Kingdom and United States of America, who wrote between early in the 19th century and early in the 21st century. The most conspicuous difference is between male and female authors. Each of the five male authors included at least one fictional namesake with an important role in the novel. Only one of the four female authors, Jane Austen, included an important fictional namesake.

A probable reason for the gender difference is the prevalently inferior occupational and political status of females. Lower self esteem of female than male authors may be directly expressed by the briefly described and unimportant fictional namesakes created by female novelists. A gender difference in this respect cannot be proved by this small sample of authors, but the absence of important fictional namesakes created by three of the four female authors is a conspicuous and suggestive difference.

Fictional namesakes were more numerous in novels by British than American authors, especially by three British novelists who wrote prior to 1880. They are William Thackeray, Charles Dickens, and Jane Austen. Inhibitions against creating fictional namesakes were probably weaker for these early British novelists. An additional influence may have been the high degree of popularity of their given names, William, Charles, and Jane. Most names have subsequently been given to smaller proportions of the population because of a rapid increase in diversity of given names in the United States subsequent to 1900 (Barry and Harper, 2004) and also in the state of Pennsylvania from 1990-2000 (Barry and Harper, 2010).

No fictional namesakes were found in the novels by three authors: Ernest Hemingway, Marian Evans (George Eliot), and Edith Wharton. An inhibitory influence might have been that their personal names were less frequently given to contemporaries than the personal names of most of the other nine authors. A further inhibitory influence was probably that writing novels was less important to them than to most of the other nine novelists.

Hemingway devoted much attention to warfare, bullfighting, and his celebrity status. His novels contained relatively few fictional characters. Evans (Eliot) was primarily interested in social relationships, especially her cohabitation with George Henry Lewes, who was separated from his wife. Wharton was a wealthy heiress who devoted much time and attention to her husband, successive lovers, traveling, and relief efforts during World War I.

Only one of the 12 novelists in this sample, Philip Roth, gave the family name to a fictional character. His fictional namesake was also given his personal name. Authors might feel less entitled to give their family name than their personal name to a fictional character. Another probable influence is that with few exceptions, family names are more diverse than personal names. Most family names therefore are infrequent in the contemporary population. None of the 12 authors in this sample had one of the most frequent family names, such as Miller and Smith.

Novelists appear to be more inclined to give the personal names of their family members and friends to fictional characters. Barry (2005) identified an important fictional character given the personal name of each of Jane Austen's six brothers. Biographical information indicated the hero of the novel was given the name of a brother the author liked and admired more while an important but lesser fictional character was given the name of a brother who was less favored by the author. Other fictional characters were given the personal name of other relatives and ancestors. A conspicuous exception was Cassandra, the name of the author's sister and mother. None of the fictional characters is named Cassandra. Barry (2009) likewise identified fictional characters given the personal names of Charlotte Bronte's relatives and friends. Additional information was identification of fictional characters who were modeled on actual family members and friends. The name of the fictional character almost always differed from the name of the actual model.

The novels by the 12 authors in this sample are greatly admired by most literary critics, and their novels have been read and enjoyed by many readers. The only author who has not received a prestigious award or great expert approval is Anna Quindlen. She was born most recently, and her career has been mostly as a columnist for a weekly newsmagazine. I believe she deserves and will receive future recognition for her novels.

A question to be asked but probably not satisfactorily answered is whether the novels that contain a fictional namesake thereby have greater merit and popularity than the novels by the same author without a fictional namesake. Most novels have substantial autobiographical attributes. Authors describe their own experiences and characteristics. I believe that fictional namesakes more strongly express either the author's realistic self evaluation or the author's wishful fantasy. The author's self revelation by the fictional namesake might improve the quality of the novel.

It is possible that an author who is introspective and thereby recognizes more fully the personal desires and feelings is more likely to expose these attributes by creating a fictional namesake in some of the novels. If this is true, an indication of an author's self awareness might be the number and importance of the fictional namesakes in the novels. In this respect, Charles Dickens is foremost among the 12 novelists in the sample.

Evidence for a link between merit and fictional namesakes would be if authors of novels that are not admired by critics, whether or not they are enjoyed by many readers, less often contain a fictional namesake of the author. I do not know of such evidence. My opinion is that the presence of a fictional namesake in at least one novel by 75% of the sample of 12 authors is an unusually high proportion. Useful comparisons would be authors whose novels that do not sell many copies, or are rejected by publishers, and also authors whose successive novels are highly popular but are not admired by the literature critics because of insufficient development of characters and situations and excessive similarity of the multiple novels. This opinion is potentially testable. It can be tested rapidly, without the need to read entire novels,

if the author provides a complete list of the names of the fictional characters.

I plan to continue research on names of fictional characters with the same policies as I have applied to the sample of 12 authors. I will continue to read the entire texts and record the names of all fictional characters in multiple novels by each author. I will select novelists whose fiction is admired by literature critics or by myself. This policy limits my sample of authors and novels, but I believe that high quality of the writings compensates for the limited quantity. I hope similar analyses of additional novelists will be contributed by other researchers.

The research on names of fictional characters is not limited to fictional namesakes of the authors. Other analyses can include number of named fictional characters in each novel, relative numbers of fictional males and females, and the proportion of fictional personal names and family names that are frequent in the population at the time the novel was written.

Advantages of research on novels are that they usually contain a large number and variety of fictional characters, and often reproduce the author's experiences and social interactions. Short stories and plays contain smaller numbers of fictional characters. A special advantage of plays is that they list the names of all the fictional characters so that the actors and actresses can be identified. These shorter fictions enable analyses of a larger number of different fictional writings and authors.

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