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Project Title: A Life Underneath: Finding ‘Character’ Under ‘Caricature’
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Project Proposal:
When Faulkner was asked which three novels he would most recommend to a creative writing student, Faulkner is said to have replied, “Anna Karenina, Anna Karenina, and Anna Karenina.” Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, along with the works of Dostoevsky, Joyce, James, and others are all household names because they offer multi-dimensional characters that embody E. M. Forster’s concept of a “round” character; that is, characters whose growth is tragic, surprising, and heart-warming. According to critic James Wood, on the opposite spectrum is the ambitious social novel emerging in the last 50 years by contemporary authors like DeLillo, Pynchon, Rushdie, Wallace, Eugenides, and Smith, a sub-genre that he criticizes for representing flat caricatures, instead of characters. These novels are problematic because they marginalize the human consciousness in favor of encyclopedic social commentary, delivered by a “low and unliterary ‘comic’ style.” Wood argues that the contemporary author’s task should be to unfold characters in psychologically complex and surprising ways. Or, if the aim is towards a Dickensian model of flat characterization, then at the very least they should aim to “rip the puppetry” of the characters, “break their casings, and let us enter them” (“Human, All Too Inhuman”).

While Wood is not wrong in recognizing a generic shift in the modes of representing characters in contemporary realism, a shift that is charged with caricature, satire, and exaggeration, he is mistaken in its estrangement with the contemporary human consciousness. In Aspects of the Novel, Forster coins the term “flat” to describe the comic and two-dimensional, uncomplicated character whose growth is static as he appears and reappears within the novel. In contrast, the “round” character is tragic; he is not flimsy, nor is he theatrical, and his growth throughout the novel is both surprising and heart-warming. I intend to argue that characters within contemporary realism zigzag between the comedic and the tragic, between the flat and the round, and between the surface and its depths. Ultimately this back-and-forth, orchestrated by a strong-handed author, creates a disconnect between a character’s “round” interior and his “flat” interactions with the external world, giving the illusion of a reduced and obliterated character. The more the characters conceal their interiors, the more flat they appear; on the contrary, when they summon the courage to attempt to deal with the consequences of being known truly and completely, they reveal traditional moments of rotundity. Either way, readers are able to speculate into a painful interior life, which gives depth to seemingly flat characters.

The effect of this is a multiplicity of characters that all possess a blazing inner-life, but whose actions are simultaneously confined within an interconnected web of social relations. Here, contemporary realist authors are different from predecessors in their use of exaggeration, satire, and caricature as a method that highlights social oppressions and creates the need for characters to conceal their personhood in greater degrees. I hope to argue that this technique is, contrary to most critiques, successful in portraying the depths of the human consciousness as it attempts to navigate the social strata of contemporary life. I will ground this effort within an analysis of the characters in Jonathan Franzen’s The Corrections, Zadie Smith’s White Teeth, and Jeffrey Eugenides’s Middlesex, with theoretical frames from David Foster Wallace, James Wood, Georg Lukács, E. M. Forster, and Alex Woloch.
Working Bibliography

**Primary Sources:**
- Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*
- Henry James, *Turn of the Screw*
- Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*
- Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*
- Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*

**Secondary Sources:**