
CONFERENCE ARTICLE

Ethical and Social Functions of Characters in the works of Susan Hill

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the ethical and social functions of characters in Susan Hill's *A Kind Man* and *A Question of Identity*. Hill's narrative strategy demonstrates that character identity is not merely psychological but is constructed through actions, dialogue, and social interactions. In *A Kind Man*, characters' moral qualities are revealed through everyday interactions, ethical decisions, and communal perceptions. In *A Question of Identity*, Hill portrays characters navigating social norms and moral dilemmas within a crime investigation context. Drawing on narrative scholarship (Jackson, 1982; Kanitrová, n.d.; Reynolds & Noakes, 2003), this study demonstrates that Hill consistently positions characters as ethical agents whose social conduct shapes narrative meaning, providing readers with insights into morality, responsibility, and community dynamics.

KEYWORDS

Susan Hill; characterisation; ethical functions; social functions; narrative technique; *A Kind Man*; *A Question of Identity*.

INTRODUCTION

Susan Hill's literary output spans multiple genres, but a persistent feature across her prose is her attention to the ethical and social dimensions of character (Jackson, 1982; Reynolds & Noakes, 2003). Hill's fiction frequently examines how characters navigate moral choices, reflect social norms, and engage with the communities they inhabit. In *A Kind Man*, the story revolves around Tommy Carr, whose defining virtue—kindness—is enacted through observable actions and relational conduct. Similarly, in *A Question of Identity*, characters such as DCI Simon Serrailier and the surrounding social actors are revealed through their adherence to or deviation from ethical norms in the context of crime and justice.

This thesis explores how social and ethical considerations shape Hill's character construction. While previous scholarship has focused on Gothic elements and psychological interiority in Hill's works (*The Woman in Black*; Cook, 2014; Scullion, 2003), this study emphasizes the ways in which character actions, dialogue, and social context reveal ethical positioning, providing a framework to analyze Hill's prose across different genres.

Key Findings

In *A Kind Man*, Susan Hill constructs characters primarily as ethical agents, whose moral identity emerges through observable actions and relational interactions rather than through explicit psychological introspection. Tommy Carr's kindness is revealed in his everyday engagements with neighbors, his responses to misfortune, and the ways he contributes to his community, all of which are observed and interpreted by other characters (Jackson, 1982). The narrative emphasizes that morality is relational: ethical conduct is both enacted and socially acknowledged, demonstrating how social perception and communal interaction shape the reader's understanding of character.

Similarly, in *A Question of Identity*, Hill foregrounds the social functions of her characters through dialogue, decision-making,

and interaction within structured social contexts, particularly in the realm of crime and justice. The protagonist, DCI Simon Serrailier, is revealed through his professional diligence, ethical choices, and personal interactions, while secondary characters' social roles and moral positions are made intelligible through their behaviour and verbal exchanges (Kanitrová, n.d.; Reynolds & Noakes, 2003). This emphasis on observable conduct and communication highlights the interplay between individual ethical positioning and wider social expectations, showing that moral and social frameworks are central to character construction in Hill's prose.

Across both novels, a comparative observation emerges: despite differences in genre—literary parable versus crime fiction—Hill consistently constructs characters who perform ethical and social work within their respective narratives. Actions and dialogue function as the principal narrative tools that reveal moral integrity, social responsibility, and relational positioning. In this way, Hill's approach aligns with broader critical perspectives on her prose (Jackson, 1982; Kanitrová, n.d.; Reynolds & Noakes, 2003), demonstrating that ethical and social dimensions of character are fundamental to understanding the meaning and impact of her narratives.

Discussion

Hill's work demonstrates that ethical and social dimensions of character are central to narrative meaning. In *A Kind Man*, the focus on small, everyday acts of kindness illustrates how ordinary behaviour can convey profound ethical insights (Jackson, 1982). The community's recognition of Tommy Carr's virtue amplifies the social function of character, showing that morality is relational rather than isolated.

In *A Question of Identity*, the ethical and social functions intersect with procedural and investigative elements. Dialogue, decision-making, and professional conduct illuminate the consequences of moral or immoral choices, situating characters within a network of social expectations (Kanitrová, n.d.;

This approach extends general critical observations from other Hill scholarship, showing that her characters perform moral and social work within narratives, a perspective that complements psychological and Gothic analyses in previous studies (Cook, 2014; Scullion, 2003; Sharma, 2011). The findings suggest that Hill's narrative craft privileges ethical action and social interaction as central to character formation, providing a model for ethical realism in contemporary British fiction.

Conclusion

This thesis demonstrates that in *A Kind Man* and *A Question of Identity*, characters operate as ethical and social agents, revealing Hill's sustained interest in morality, social responsibility, and human interaction. Hill's characters are understood less through interior psychological exposition and more through their actions, dialogue, and social positioning. By foregrounding ethical and social functions, Hill's prose encourages readers to interpret character in the context of social networks and moral frameworks, underscoring her distinctive narrative approach.

These insights contribute to the broader study of character in literature, suggesting that ethical and social dimensions can be as significant as psychological depth in constructing meaningful narratives.

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