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The Vanishing Antagonist: Changing Forms of Conflict in Literary Fiction

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Abstract

Narrative conflict has traditionally depended on the presence of a clear antagonist—an identifiable character whose opposition shapes plot, morality, and resolution. From classical tragedy to nineteenth-century fiction, antagonists provided moral clarity by concentrating responsibility for harm in a single figure. However, modern and contemporary literary fiction increasingly departs from this model. Many texts no longer present villains who can be named or defeated. Instead, antagonism is relocated to systems, institutions, social norms, and technological structures. This paper argues that antagonists have not disappeared from literary fiction but have undergone a structural transformation. Through readings of works by Shakespeare, Hardy, Kafka, Ishiguro, Eggers, and Aravind Adiga, the paper shows that the "vanishing antagonist" reflects changing experiences of power and responsibility in modern life.

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict is central to narrative. Stories progress because characters face resistance and opposition. Traditionally, this opposition has been embodied in the figure of the antagonist—a character who actively resists the protagonist and gives the narrative moral direction. Antagonists make conflict visible and ethically manageable. Readers can identify blame, judge actions, and expect closure through confrontation or punishment. In modern and contemporary literary fiction, this model is increasingly challenged. Many important texts no longer feature clear villains. Instead, characters struggle against impersonal forces such as bureaucracy, class systems, ideology, or technology. Power appears faceless, and responsibility

becomes difficult to locate. This shift reflects broader social This paper examines this transformation through the concept of the "vanishing antagonist." It argues that antagonists have not disappeared but have changed form. As power becomes systemic rather than personal, literature adapts by representing conflict in new ways.

The Antagonist and Narrative Conflict

In traditional storytelling, an antagonist is the force that opposes the protagonist. Classical narrative theory assumes that this force is best represented by a character with clear intention and agency. Aristotle's emphasis on action and causality assumes identifiable agents behind events.

Later narrative models continue this approach.

Vladimir Propp's analysis of folktales formalised this tendency by defining fixed roles such as hero and villain [2]. In this structure, the antagonist is essential because it concentrates conflict in a single figure. Moral judgment becomes straightforward.

Modern narratology, however, complicates this view. Mieke Bal argues that antagonistic forces need not be human characters but can also be abstract systems or institutions [3]. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan similarly notes that conflict may arise from social or ideological constraints rather than personal opposition [4]. In such cases, responsibility is dispersed, and moral clarity is reduced.

This shift prepares the ground for narratives in which antagonism remains present but loses its personal form.

Personalised Antagonism in Early Literature

For much of literary history, antagonism is clearly personalised. Classical tragedy and early modern drama rely on villains whose moral agency structures narrative conflict. Shakespeare's plays offer strong examples. Iago in Othello is a calculating and intentional villain whose manipulation drives the plot. His conscious malice allows readers to locate responsibility clearly [5].

Nineteenth-century realist fiction largely continues this tradition. Victorian novels often locate social harm in individuals who embody vice. Characters such as Uriah Heep represent moral corruption that can be exposed and punished.

Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles complicates this model. Alec d'Urberville functions as a recognisable antagonist, concentrating sexual and patriarchal violence in one figure [6]. Yet Hardy also highlights impersonal forces such as poverty, rigid morality, and social judgment. Angel Clare's actions cause harm without villainous intent. The novel suggests that individual antagonists alone cannot explain suffering.

This period marks a transition: antagonists remain important, but their explanatory power is increasingly questioned.

Kafka and the System as Antagonist

A decisive shift occurs in the early twentieth century, most clearly in the work of Franz Kafka. In The Trial, conflict no longer arises from an identifiable villain. Josef K. is arrested changes in how authority and control operate in modern life [1]. and prosecuted by an opaque bureaucratic system. He never learns the charge against him and never confronts a clear authority figure [7].

Power in the novel operates through procedures and delays rather than cruelty or intent. Officials appear powerless, and responsibility is endlessly deferred. There is no antagonist to defeat and no resolution to achieve.

Max Weber's analysis of bureaucracy helps explain this condition. Weber describes modern authority as impersonal and rule-based, exercised through systems rather than individuals [8]. Kafka's fiction captures the psychological impact of such power: confusion, anxiety, and helplessness.

Here, antagonism becomes structural. Conflict exists, but it cannot be resolved through confrontation.

Normalisation and Moral Diffusion in Late Modern Fiction

Late twentieth-century fiction develops Kafka's insight further by showing how systems persist through normalisation rather than force. Antagonism becomes embedded in everyday life and sustained by acceptance.

Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go presents a society in which human clones are raised for organ donation. The narrative tone is calm and restrained. Teachers are kind, and no character displays open cruelty [9]. The absence of a conventional villain is what makes the novel disturbing.

The system survives because it is accepted. Characters internalise their fate and rarely imagine resistance. Harm occurs not through evil intent but through compliance.

This portrayal aligns with Hannah Arendt's idea of the "banality of evil," which describes how immense harm can result from ordinary actions within bureaucratic systems [10]. Ishiguro's novel presents conflict as ethical and collective rather than confrontational.

Contemporary Fiction and Technological Antagonism

In contemporary fiction, antagonism becomes even more diffuse and is often shaped by technology. Dave Eggers's The Circle depicts a society obsessed with transparency and data sharing. Surveillance is not imposed violently but welcomed voluntarily [11].

The antagonistic force is not a person but a system of constant visibility and digital monitoring. Power operates by shaping desire and behaviour rather than issuing commands.

Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power is useful here. Foucault argues that modern power produces self-regulating individuals through surveillance and normalisation [12]. The Circle illustrates this process in a digital environment. Shoshana Zuboff's work on surveillance capitalism further explains how such systems exploit personal data while appearing beneficial [13].

Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger presents a similar form of systemic antagonism grounded in class hierarchy. Although corrupt individuals appear in the novel, they are interchangeable. The true antagonist is the social structure that sustains inequality [14]. In these works, conflict persists

without a central enemy, and resolution remains partial and troubling.

The Vanishing Antagonist and Reader Responsibility

The transformation of antagonism also changes how readers engage with fiction. Traditional narratives allow readers to externalise blame and achieve moral satisfaction when villains are punished. Systemic antagonism removes this comfort.

By refusing clear villains, modern and contemporary fiction implicates readers in the systems it represents. The discomfort produced by such narratives reflects a world in which injustice cannot be solved through heroic confrontation but requires collective responsibility [15].

The vanishing antagonist is therefore a deliberate narrative strategy rather than a weakness.

CONCLUSION

The decline of the traditional antagonist in modern and contemporary literary fiction reflects a broader shift in how power and responsibility are experienced. As authority becomes bureaucratic, systemic, and technologically mediated, literature adapts by reconfiguring narrative conflict. Antagonists do not disappear; they lose their faces. By representing power as impersonal and structural, contemporary fiction challenges simplistic moral solutions and exposes the persistence of harm through collective participation. The vanishing antagonist thus emerges as a meaningful formal choice that aligns literature with the realities of modern life.

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