

The introvert character

The introvert is often a favored playground of the literary artist. Many writers are themselves introverted, got into the writing business that way, and are at their finest in reproducing their own peculiarities.

Jane Austen is a master of male interiority, giving us—in **Edward**, in *Sense and Sensibility*—a lasting portrait of a gentle man of clean conscience and easy going ways, who is eager for women's companionship, but is shy and self-deprecating when it comes to putting himself forward. Long attracted to Elinor, a discerning and demanding protagonist, he wins her in the end, for the modesty and integrity of his life. In **Colonel Brandon**, modest and preoccupied suitor of Marianne, long and careful waiting results in a significant mature marriage. **Pierre** Bezukhov, a similarly thoughtful and interior man, deepens Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, by bringing into it the inner virtues of good humor, affection, and spontaneous honor. **Persio**, in Cortazar's *The Winners*, is an imaginative mystic, who sees meaning in the ocean and the stars. He is the conscience and the insight bearer during the mysterious cruise which he and a diverse group of lottery winners share.

Aksionov, in Tolstoy's 'God sees the truth but waits,' is a successful merchant who becomes burdened with a dreadful miscarriage of justice. The victim of false accusation, in a murder case, he finds himself transferred to a life in Siberia, where his saintly proclivities ultimately find full realization, and like Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov, he attains the ultimate power of self-sacrifice.. **Trigorin**, the writer thinker in Chekhov's *Seagull*, resembles Gregers, in what seems to him the cutting edge modernity of his thinking. Forever probing deeper than his contemporaries, Trigorin sees that the new world of commerce and competition has irrevocably replaced the world of traditional values, and that the role of the writer, in this new world, is maddening and worth nothing.

Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* introduces us to the most tortured and dangerous of introverts. **Raskolnikov**, his mind bent out of shape, inspires himself with the desire to rid the earth of scum, such as a certain worthless old lady who lives in his neighborhood, and whom he does in fact murder in cold blood. The novel, which concerns Raskolnikov's exile to Siberia, and progressive search for redemption, is one of the world masterpieces of introversion under the lens. An equally tortured introvert can be found in John Gabriel **Borkman**, in Ibsen's play of the same time. A former bank manager, convicted of fraud at his bank, and imprisoned for some years, remains virtually isolated in his home, where he rehearses his innocence, and dreams vast plans for the future he will create. No part of his mind touches the surface of the real world.

Finally **Hamlet**, whose indecisive interiority has made him the poster child for the modern temper. Here is a man who knows what he needs to do, to take a good old fashioned revenge on his mother and step-dad, for their killing and deposing of his father. Hamlet has many allies who will help him, but he is reluctant to make the revenge move expected of him. He continually postpones that action, and dies before achieving his goal. The audience is left wondering just what it is that hindered Hamlet's completion of his mission. The mission is buried in the introverted quandaries of the character himself.

The introverted characters we profile, here, are natural spin-offs of the self-reflective minds of their authors. It has been said that the world inside us is vaster than the starry heavens and the heaving oceans, and the evidence from literature supports this conclusion.

Discussion questions

We have been dealing with introverted characters. Are these characters at the same time introspective? That is, is the introverted character, who is 'turned in,' at the same time the introspective character, who observes himself within?

Our examples of introverted literary characters are 100 percent male? Why? Are men more often introverted than women?

Plot is a forward moving element in literature, while introspective characters are plot slowers. Do strongly introverted characters bog down the plots in which they are embedded? Hamlet? Pierre? Raskolnikov? Do their plots use them to good advantage?

Does introversion in literature connote mental unbalance or instability? (Ivan; Raskolnikov; Borkman?). Or can introversion, in life and literature, go either way, into unbalance or a healthy sense of self, as in Edward or Pierre?

Does Edward, in *Sense and Sensibility*, reflect a woman's creative imagination? Can you produce examples of male authors who have been masters at creating introverted female characters?

Reading thoughts

Fromentin, Eugene *Dominique* (Dominique) 1862

Gide, André, *Journals* 1889-1913

Greene, Graham, *The Heart of the Matter* (Henry Scobie) 1948

Lowry, Malcolm, *Under the Volcano* (Geoffrey Firmin) 1947

Mauriac, Francois, *The Knot of Vipers* (Monsieur Louis) 1951

Montaigne, Michel de, *Essays* 1570—1592