

The open character

Both in life and in literature, open characters come in many varieties, joined by their readiness for the new, and the unknown. This readiness ranges from the dramatic chance taking of a **Faust**, in literature, to the simple willingness to engage strangers and old friends in new kinds of conversation, as we find it in Prince **Myshkin**, or the readiness for romance and poetry which we enjoy in Shakespeare's **Ferdinand**, whose love for Miranda brings nature itself to a fresh new openness. Ferdinand's father-in-law to be, the magician **Prospero** who governs the isle around which Shakespeare's tempest blasts, is open to the occult and faery, and cannot be bound by the chains of the everyday world.

Faust is not the only one, of the 'open' characters before us, who is willing to wager his very soul for passionate new experiences. Homer's **Odysseus** might well fit the same description, venturing, as he does, to risk seduction by the Sirens, bestiality at the hands of Circe, or in general the challenge of inventing a rescue plan for his besieged wife; so might Ibsen's **Stockman**, who is prepared to sacrifice all—his family, his finances, his community standing—for the truth as he sees it, the scientific truth about his city's water supply. **The Old Gringo**, approaching the end of his life, willingly crosses the Texas Mexican border in order to join the guerilla forces of the Revolution, and thereby throws himself open to every kind of romance and armed danger.

Some characters—**Alyosha**, **Zosima**, or (very differently) Thomas Mann's **Aschenbach**—live as openness to the joys, fears, and challenges of the spiritual life. Alyosha, as a novice monk, is all ears for whatever wisdom his Father Superior, Zosima, can bestow on him, and is the Karamazov brother spiritually open enough to understand Ivan's Grand Inquisitor speech. Father Zosima, as we know from the notes on his biography and spiritual development, incarnates the spirit of openness as generosity and love. **Aschenbach**, the novelist and sensualist, is open to the beauty of the young boy, Tadzio, and struggles with his physical love for the youngster. He is as open as Father Zosima, but to a different manifestation of the beauty of the world.

Social openness, a readiness to move out into society, whatever the cost, drives three of our characters: **Pip**; **Oliver**; and **Jourdain**. Racine and Dickens had impeccable ears for the individual struggling to make his way in the new modern society around him, whether that is the new moneyed society of 17th century Paris, or the mean streets of early industrial England, in the 19th century. Both Pip and Oliver remain open to the possibilities of individual development, even of high success, despite the disadvantages of their initial poverty, and the obstacles of the ill-wishers who surround them. M. Jourdain is surrounded by mockers, social individuals who have mastered the drawing-room game, and easily discover that he has nothing but money to promote his social climbing. Jourdain remains open to the dream of becoming a polished and socially smooth gentleman, and nothing will close his dream for him.

Among all these characters openness and freedom are drivers. Aschenbach longs for sensual fulfillment, and is open to it in his longing; Alyosha dreams of the freedom of moral purity; Pip is open to whatever will bring him social and communal success, in a hard-bitten society; Stockmann is open to the truth wherever it can be found, damn the consequences: the literary imagination, which at its best opens the nature of our world to us, excels in mirroring the human quest for whatever openness most satisfies it.

Discussion questions

What kind of condition is openness, in literature? Is it a state of mind, a state of affairs in the world 'out there,' or a valuable illusion that sweetens the taste of our essentially closed and limited lives?

Are openness and freedom tightly connected? Or can one remain open even when confined, like the Italian radical Antonio Gramsci, whose *Letters from Prison (1929-35)* seem to express the deepest hopes of mankind, or Anne Frank, whose *Diary of a young girl (1942)* written in confined hiding in 1942, opens out the beauty of an innocent world for us?

Are hope and openness related to one another? Michael J. Fox, struggling against Parkinson's, writes that 'hope is informed optimism.' Does openness, like optimism, persist in the face of closures, and do so on the basis of 'the information of the heart'?

From the evidence of our samples, would you say that openness is historically conditioned? How would you compare the kinds of openness discovered by Odysseus with that of Faust? Is Odysseus, who is frequently directed by Athena, less open than Faust, who makes a free-will pact with the Devil?

Does the example of M. Jourdain suggest that you can be open without understanding? Does the example of Stockmann indicate that you can be open without 'emotional intelligence'? Does the example of Aschenbach prove that you can be open while trapped in sensuality?

Readings

Frank, Anne, *Diary of a Young Girl*, 1942
Kazantzakis, Nikos, *The Saviors of God*, 1922
Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness*, 1943
Shelley, P.B., *Prometheus Unbound*, 1820
Sophocles, *Antigone*, 441 B.C.
Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*, 1891-2.