

The agreeable character

The commander of the Greek forces assembled for the Siege of Troy, in Homer's *Iliad*, is the rather one-dimensional **Agamemnon**. From the start this leader has been tossed around by difficult choices. On the way to Troy the gods still the winds around the Greek navy, at the Greek port of Aulis, and the fleet is stalled. The gods inform Agamemnon that he must sacrifice his daughter, Iphigeneia, before the ships can move. He does this—though by some accounts she is saved by the gods and transported to another country. Agamemnon is agreeable to the dictates of fate. He moves history forward. In the same way, at Troy, Agamemnon is immediately faced with a stand off against Achilles, the most powerful rival Greek commander, over Agamemnon's seizure of Achilles' girl friend, Briseis. In the end, with a good deal of hostility on both sides, Achilles withdraws from the war, sulking. The gods are waiting for Agamemnon to smooth over the crisis, before they will permit the Greek attack to begin. Agamemnon sends a treasure laden deputation to Achilles, begging him to return to battle. This move is simply another example of Agamemnon as *agreeable*. He is agreeable in the classical fate-soaked culture world sense, in which doing the will of the gods is being agreeable. He is not a back slapper but a compromiser. He agrees with inevitability.

At the opposite extreme, from the haughty grandeur of Agamemnon's 'agreeableness', would be the little-guy agreeableness of **Akakyevitch**, in Gogol's 'The Cloak.' This petty bureaucrat is holed up in a government office in St. Petersburg, where he does the kind of work that suits him, copyist. He is a petty paper-pusher. He fits in. As he ages he desires nothing more than a new cloak, to protect himself from the bitter winter winds of his city; with great patience he collects enough kopecks to buy just the overcoat he desires; he is at last freed from the joking banter of his office mates, who used to mock his threadbare old cloak, and he is praised for his spiffy new appearance. This aging man rises in general esteem, and feels the glow of social approval in his set. He is for the moment—until he gets mugged and loses his new cloak—at peace with his world. He is the ultimate in the agreeable. That his agreeableness is shallow proves itself when, after the loss of his precious cloak, Akaky desperately seeks to recover it, then shortly after dies, of despair and cold.

Agamemnon and Akakyevitch seek for harmonies with their worlds, and at their happiest find themselves in agreeable harmony with their situations. They reach an 'agreeable midpoint,' at which they are happy. Two of our characters—**Olenka** and **Arkady**—share a natural desire to please, and are agreeable as long as they find supportive harmony around them. Olenka picks up the attitudes and values of whatever man she is at the moment attached to. She agrees with the husband of the time—accountant, business man, veterinary surgeon—and in the end makes do with doting on the son of a former lover, who has been left in her care. She is agreeable, in agreement with whatever partner fate puts on her plate. Arkady is a young man caught in the middle, between the traditional values he was brought up with and the radical new values he has picked up while away at University. As a natural peace maker, Arkady tries to be agreeable to all parties. But it is not easy. His friend Bazarov, who is visiting Arkady's family, insists on challenging the traditional rural values of Arkady's father, which makes Arkady, caught in the middle, miserable. His agreeable nature is torn this way and that.

Miranda, **Ariel**, and **Mr. Pickwick** share 'agreeable' natures, bring happiness with them, and are themselves generally happy. Miranda, waking to life on the magic island of Prospero, isolated from any mortals except her father—and perhaps the oafish Caliban—exults in the beauty of nature, and, when her first non-paternal male (Ferdinand) appears, she is enchanted. All around her is harmony and beauty; she becomes the most agreeable of persons, in the most agreeable imaginable world. The puckish sprite Ariel, who co-inhabits Miranda's world—though as a sprite, not a mortal—is agreeable plus, joyful and mischievous, an amused observer of human foibles. He is proof against the disagreeable, for he is of an aerial sprightly nature which cannot be dampened. Mr. Pickwick, a mature, good-natured midlifer, has a kind word and a bemused smile for all, and is an agreeable man living in an on the whole agreeable world. He is a lover of nature, an antiquarian fascinated with architecture, and a beneficial friend to all. He is agreeable in the fullest modern bourgeois sense.

Discussion questions

From Agamemnon to Mr. Pickwick is a long stretch. Is Agamemnon really ‘agreeable,’ in our contemporary sense? Or is he ‘agreeing with destiny’? In what sense is Pickwick agreeable? In his case, is ‘being agreeable’ the same as ‘being happy’?

Akakyevitch, like Agamemnon, wants harmony around him, for that is his default agreeable condition. How does he strive for harmony? Is it by ‘fitting in’? Is he more pained by his colleagues’ jokes, about his coat, than about the freezing cold winter winds?

Is Mr. Pickwick himself naturally agreeable? Does he like everybody—rather than in a sense fear them, as do Akakyevitch and Agamemnon? What most upsets him about his experience of prison life?

Is being agreeable, in the cases of Olenka and Arkady, a mark of weakness? Or is each of these characters simply searching for a way to be comfortable in life, whatever it takes?

The agreeable is a broad category, as we see from our widely diverse examples of it. Is literature the most effective way to represent the agreeable? How about music or landscape painting? Or philosophy?

Reading thoughts

Aristophanes, *The Lysistrata* 411 B.C.
Fielding, Henry, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* 1749
Grahame, Kenneth, *The Wind in the Willows* 1908
Pater, Walter, *Marius the Epicurean* 1885
Thurber, James, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* 1939
Wodehouse, P.G. *My Man Jeeves* 1919