

The closed character

The closed character in literature, is a category as wide as the open character, its twin and complement. As literature mirrors the wide world of personalities—here we follow representations of the ten major personality types—it is evident that within each type there will be a wide range of characters. Thus with the ‘closed character in literature; the type abounds, the range is vast. Closed characters screened before us, in this study, include ingénues, inverts, sulkers, the over-cautious, the chicken-hearted, the sensual, the strategic, and the self-pitying.

Among our characters, interestingly, all but one are male, and the female, **Helen**, is hard to classify as closed. Elements of her are *unconscientious* and *emotional*, though the prevailing bent seems to support classifying her as closed, given her deadly reluctance to admit guilt, and her seeming inability to view herself from the moral standpoint. She is closed in a distinctive sense—as the possessor over a great power (her beauty) which she caresses and manipulates inside herself. Helen brings to mind other characters—**Philoktetes**, **Halvard**, **Karsten**—who like her live closed over great secret power. Philoktetes possesses a mighty bow which the Greeks desperately need, in order to complete their conquest of Troy; though wounded, and gangrenous, Philoktetes is powerful enough to bring the great Odysseus in search of him, in a vain effort to cheat him of his power-source. Halvard, Ibsen’s Master-BUILDER has in him a gift of architectural vision which drives him, and which is the source of his influence, pride, and identity. He is as it were closed over this secret power, through which, as it were, he holds himself aloof from others, family and lovers, convinced that in some sense he will in the end hold the trump card. Karsten, the protagonist of Ibsen’s *Pillars of Society*, an extended study of the dirty little secrets which underlie the power of provincial businessman cliques, jealously closes within himself those family secrets by which he has bought respectability for himself, but which, if disclosed, could quickly blow the top off his comfortable house of cards.

Three of our closed characters are cautious guardians of public order. I think of **Agamemnon**, a bureaucrat-custodian of the main Greek force at the siege of Troy, and the underdog to the free spirited, semi-divine Achilles; of **Creon**, the bureaucrat administrator of the city of Thebes, who is terrified by Antigone’s reckless disregard of the city’s rules; and of **Pentheus**, also a ruler of Thebes, whose prurient—and well covered over—fascination with women’s orgies, leads him onto the mountains where the adherents of Dionysus are dancing and drinking, and eventually tear him to pieces. Each of these three rulers is closed over a sense of his own limitations, and fearful that if in any way he *opens*, support will be withdrawn from him.

Two major creations of Russian imagination, the noblemen Count **Vronsky** (in *Anna Karenina*) and Prince **Volkonsky** (in *War and Peace*), seem ‘by nature’ closed, capable and attractive and urbane, but in the end closed in on themselves. Vronsky is a handsome, elegant military man, much sought over by the ladies, yet basically unable to love, and therefore insecure about others’ (Anna Karenina’s) affections, and so, in the end, vulnerable and insecure. Prince Volkonsky is far more complex than Vronsky. He is inherently withdrawn, has few friends, spends much time in thought and reflection, and is in short ‘an intellectual,’ closed in on his observations of the world.

Telemachus, like Helen, is by nature closed in on himself, but through youthfulness rather than appearance. Telemachus is an ingenu, surrounded by carousing suitors of his mother, awed by the vast world, out there, in which his heroic dad has for twenty years been absent; he is still in the cocoon of youth, and though sensing some inherent demands to get out and travel, is still locked into the world made by women, his mother and the goddess Athena.

Discussion questions

We have remarked on the fact that only one of our closed characters is female, Helen. Is this a significant point? Can you name many closed female literary characters? Lady Macbeth? Eleanor, in Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*? Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*?

Does the closed literary character typically suffer from his condition of closure? Isn’t there a condition of sadness, withdrawal, or underdevelopment at the root of the character closures we have observed?

As it happens, more than half of our closed literary characters are drawn from ancient Greek literature. It is frequently thought that introspection and interiority feature more prominently in the modern than the ancient mind. Are our classical literary characters closed through introspection, brooding, or inner distress? Or simply through their condition or situation in life?

Do closed characters, in literature, display traits which, among closed characters in life, might now be called 'neurotic' or 'dysfunctional'? That is, is literature, in this instance of closed characters, a window into psychological issues, and can literature be a guide to studying 'psychological problems'?

Do closed characters, in literature, represent closed personalities (or aspects of personality) in their authors? (The same question could be posed, concerning any of the ten personality types we study here.) This is a question to think about: the relation of the author's psyche to the character types he/she creates.

Readings

Browning, Robert 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Courtyard', 1842
Dickens, Charles, *A Christmas Carol*, 1843
Greene, Graham, *The Power and the Glory*, 1940
Hesse, Herman, *Steppenwolf*, 1927
Lowry, Malcolm, *Under the Volcano*, 1947
Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 1599