

The conscientious character

The conscientious character, in literature as in life, is one who is at peace with his own conscience: he or she does things well and thoroughly, is able to stand up for them, and is unwavering in defending or pursuing his/her beliefs. Literature, not surprisingly, abounds in such characters.

Conscientious women, in modern literature, typically exercise interior virtues: honesty (**Cordelia**), the gift of compromise (**Esther**), self-disciplined insight (**Bérénice; Iphigénie; Sonia**), fidelity (**Cordelia; Fermina; Sonia**). Cordelia refuses to fake her complex and loving attitude toward her father, and in the end proves to be the only person he can rely on. Esther discovers a way to please an alien king, her husband, in such a way that he will spare her people, the Jews. Bérénice willingly withdraws from her love, for the Emperor Titus, so that he can govern his people in peace. Iphigénie grasps the crucial importance of abandoning her love (for Achilles) in sacrifice for the larger mission of the Greek fleet. Sonia follows Raskolnikov to the ends of the earth so that she can redeem him, which in the end she does. Fermina remains true to her fantasy-filled lover, Florentino, throughout the long course of her marriage to another man; in the end she and Florentino join.

Men of high conscience also make their appearance in our character chart. **Luis**, in Azuela's *The Underdogs*, is the intellectual, in the revolutionaries' camp, who tames and inspires Demetrio, and who proves his own integrity by tolerating the brutal initial hazing, which he receives in the camp. **Gregers**, in *The Wild Duck*, is the goading intellectual who—like Bazarov in *Fathers and Sons* by Turgenev—will not let the past alone, but probes into its secrets far enough to make everyone miserable. **Ivan**, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, is mentally unstable enough to generate the Grand Inquisitor's Speech, a brilliant indictment of the Church and its compromises with power, and a theme-establishing underpinning for Dostoyevsky's novel.

What about the pre modern, classical heroes of conscience? Can we see a distinct difference between their moral virtues of conscience and those of the moderns? A glance at some of our ancient candidates may open out the topic: **Prometheus** (if a god counts, here), **Hippolytus, Hector, Oedipus, Aeneas, Penelope, Alcestis, Antigone, Turnus** all struggled toward the virtues of conscience, and, all paid heavily for their devotion. Let's look down the list. Penelope is immortal for her patience, and conscientious loyalty to Odysseus. Alcestis proves as loyal as Penelope, in her willingness to die on behalf of her husband; how conscientious can you be! Antigone is as willing to sacrifice herself her brother, as Alcestis was for her husband. Prometheus vowed that he would help mankind, against the jealousies of the gods, and in consequence closely guarded the secret of who would overthrow the reigning deity, Zeus—a secret for which Zeus, eager to protect his autocracy, punished his stubborn subject. Hippolytus was a devotee of nature, masculine hunting culture, and freedom from the protocols of society, including women's needs. True to his own cult he ultimately provoked the erotic passion of his stepmother, Phaedra, whose sinister attempts to attract him, and his desperate flight from her, led to his death. Hector, the middle classish administrator of the Trojan Forces, in Homer's *Iliad*, proved himself a conscientious father and husband, conspicuously—and uniquely for his time—united to his family unit. Oedipus, King of Thebes, announced from the beginning of *Oedipus King* that he would not rest until he had tracked down the wretch who had brought plague onto the city. He was true to his word, and although the bloodhounds eventually returned to him, as their victim, it was he himself who had brought them there.

Aeneas and **Turnus**, though bitter foes of one another, both serve to illustrate the Roman ideals of conscience, which were strong and rooted in a proud Republican period, in which the Roman ideals of virtue, honor, and true conscience were forged. Aeneas, called *pious* (respectful, honorable), was noteworthy for fidelity to mission and duty. What else would have driven him on to Latium, to found a new Italian state, after his searing encounters with Dido, en route? Aeneas didn't play with destiny. Turnus, the great opponent to Aeneas in Latium, fought the invader with all his heart, knowing that the integrity of his own land, and the hand of his bride to be, were at stake. He was one-pointed and undistractable in pursuit of his (losing) cause.

Discussion questions

The examples of Berenice, Esther, and Iphigenie may suggest that women are especially gifted in the conscientious virtue of compromise. Are these hints, from literary characters, right on when it comes to daily life?

Does conscientious, in literature or life, suggest behavior which you yourself consider virtuous, or can conscientious behavior seem at the same time 'non-virtuous,' say in the case of someone like Gregers, whose conscientious pursuit of personal truth causes disruption to another household?

The western classical age, though often urbane and sophisticated, is closer to the 'age of heroism' than is our often more demystifying modern age. Do you see evidence of that difference, in the conscience-related behaviors of the two ages?

Is the conscientious behavior of women frequently tied to their relationships to men? To what, judging from our examples, do men declare their undying fidelity? About what kind of issues does their conscience form?

Can living readers learn something about conscientious behavior, by reading literature? Give an example from your own life.

Reading thoughts

Bhagavad Gita 5th—2nd cent. B.C.

Epictetus *Enchiridion* 55-135

Gide, André, *Straight is the Gate (La Porte étroite)* (Jerome and Juliette) 1909

Hammarskjöld, Dag *Markings* 1963

Marcus Aurelius, Emperor of Rome, *Meditations* 161-180

Weil, Simone, *The Need for Roots* 1949