

### *The disagreeable character*

Life and literature are inter related. Living people invent and create literature, while literature reflects life as we live it. Just as some people are disagreeable, so their reflections in literature are disagreeable. They may be turned into great literary achievements, but they represent character types we find disagreeable. We can isolate seven disagreeable literary examples, from the material in our character chart.

Significantly enough, all but one of our seven examples, of the disagreeable character in literature, are drawn from nineteenth century texts—Dickens, Gogol, Tolstoy, and Turgenev. (The remaining text, Moliere's *Le Misanthrope*, was first played in 1666). Urbanization, the industrialization of commerce and labor, the onset of Communist political theories, and the new sociological insights stemming from thinkers like Auguste Comte—all these factors were part of a widening awareness of the diversity, complexity, and in many cases dysfunction of personalities in the real life of the 19th century. In this setting, the disagreeable character becomes readily visible as a byproduct of distorting social forces and responses to them. Literature crowds up with newly minted disagreeable types.

Charles Dickens excelled in the observation and portrayal of such types. Estella (in *Great Expectations*), Fagin (in *Oliver Twist*) and Scrooge (in *A Christmas Carol*): each of these characters thrives on a kind of nastiness which reflects their angle of social maladjustment. **Estella** is the victim of growing up with her man-hating spinster guardian, Miss Havisham, who was in her time jilted at the altar, and has never since forgiven the male gender. Estella's own nastiness to Pip is a reflection of this anti-male bias she has grown up with. Estella adds her own sadistic tweaks, as in her rejective kissing flirtations with the innocent Pip, in the early days of their acquaintance. **Fagin** 'the Jew' is a dark force in Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. The first life-changing person Oliver meets, Fagin introduces him to the fine art of pick pocketing, at which Fagin's army of children are experts. It seems a matter of course that Fagin's considerable earnings, taken off the top of the kids' plunder, sit comfortably in his own pocket, and in no way return to the benefit of the youngsters. **Scrooge**, in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, is a miser (like Fagin) who holds his money tightly to himself, and will barely lay out enough for heating logs for the office of his one employee, who virtually shivers to death in the winter.

**Oblonsky**, **Khleshtakov**, and **Bazarov** all derive from the pens of witty and finely sarcastic Russian fiction writers of the 19th century. These characters are all deeply flawed, yet each of them displays sharply attractive traits. Oblonsky, in *Anna Karenina*, is friend of everybody, an easy talker, a charming wit in his club, and yet he is incapable of offering even a word of support or advice to his sister Anna, when most she needs it—at the height of her disastrous affair with Vronsky. He does not care about other people. Khleshtakov is a humorous rogue, whose gradual descent into fraudulent behavior is rendered fascinating by his insouciance in face of the fraud he propagates. Happening to arrive in a small town, at just the moment when the Government Inspector is awaited, he assumes that dignitary's identity, which everyone confers on him anyway, and milks the village power structure for every penny he can get out of it. Bazarov, the modern minded young University graduate from the city, accepts the invitation of his friend Arkady, to visit his friend's family home. Bazarov is scornful of the old-fashioned country ways of his host, and makes it plain to all that the new world of ideas, and modern trends, has no room for the old world of his hosts.

In seventeenth century French classicism literary characters typically represented literary types, 'universal' types. (Each of the six characters mentioned above is distinctively individual, even 'eccentric.') Moliere's *Alceste* is 'disagreeable,' but in a universal sense. With all his annoying insistence on clear thought, rational decisions, unemotional lifestyle, he represents a certain kind of preoccupation common to the world's tedious and unrelenting 'rationalists.' You feel as though you want to kill him, the next time he reminds you that your behavior is out of sync with the demands of good sense.

## Discussion questions

In what sense are our seven disagreeable characters disagreeable? Have they some common trait which renders them 'disagreeable'?

Dickens—in our three examples—seems to target disagreeable characters who have a grudge against society. Have they some single gripe in common? Are they all resentful of mistreatment by others? Do they themselves show signs of having been mistreated?

Can a literary character be both disagreeable and attractive? Would Khlestakov be an example of an attractive rogue? Is Bazarov an attractive snob? Is Oblonsky an attractive non-empathetic aristocrat?

Can the literarily universal character, like Alceste, still be replete with idiosyncratic behaviors? Can the eccentric miser, like Scrooge, still be a universally representative character?

Does Dickens, in creating the character of Estella, move beyond the still rather stereotyping strategies of the literature of his time? Estella is sardonic, sarcastic, flirtatious, and sadistic. Is she not ahead of her time?

## Reading thoughts

Austen, Jane, *Sense and Sensibility* (Willoughby) 1811  
Bronte, Emily, *Wuthering Heights* (Heathcliffe) 1846  
Hawthorne, Nathaniel, *The Scarlet Letter* (Roger Chillingworth) 1850  
Milton, John, *Paradise Lost* (Satan) 1667  
Shakespeare, *Richard II* (Richard II) 1597  
Shakespeare, *Othello* (Iago) 1603