

## *The emotional character*

Not surprisingly, the emotions drive literary characters more than do any other conditions of mind or soul. We founder under the weight of our emotions, both in life and in literature.

Our extensive list, *twenty one literary characters*, opens with seven drawn from classical literature, of which it can be argued that the emotions expressed there tend to the theatrical and often to the violent. Something close to that will be borne out by our current examples, of whom six are in fact best known to us from drama. The seventh, Dido, is chiefly known to us from Virgil's epic *Aeneid*.

The emotions, as Jean Paul Sartre put it almost a century ago, come into being to relieve the pressure created by conflicts. The emotions are relief mechanisms. **Achilles, Orestes, Medea, Dionysus, Ajax, Electra, and Dido** all exist around a bundle of emotions which conflict has generated. The wrath of Achilles, which follows the killing of his beloved Patroclus, is unleashed by Agamemnon's haughty dissing, and the fury that awoke. Orestes is dominated by the hatred he feels for the murderers of his father, and his emotions vent themselves in murderous action. Medea, driven to madness by the infidelity of her husband, Jason, erupts into the fury of hell, kills her children and flies off into the blue, raging. Dionysus—in Euripides' *Bacchae*—is driven by a cold scorn for bourgeois morality, and especially by the fumbling prurience of Pentheus, ruler of Thebes; there result the orgies and mayhem that are Dionysus' emotional expression of his powers. Ajax, mortally offended by the gift of the armor of Achilles to Odysseus, clings pathically to one power symbol, the bow the Greek forces need; the emotions generated by this bind drive him to the unusual honor-saving gesture of self-disembowelment. Electra (in Sophocles' play), like her brother Orestes, is driven mad by the murder of her father, Agamemnon, and expresses her desperation in hatred leading to murder. Finally there is Dido, the ultimate theatrical expression of the boiling point of emotion; she is ready to add her name, too, to the list of suicides for love.

The literary-emotional lives of modern characters—we begin with Chaucer—are on the whole more diverse, less intense, and more complex than the literary-emotional lives of ancient mythical figures. The figure of **Palamon**, in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, might do as an intro to this issue. Palamon's love at first sight, conceived from his prison detention, leads him to an imagined, and consequence full, jealousy of Arcita, who gets out of jail first, and whom Palamon suspects of stealing Emily away. The inner pains of Palamon's mind would not have been there, to slow the pace of an ancient drama.

For sake of order, we can divide our remaining emotional characters into those who drive forward on the power of their emotions, and those who are driven by, and victims of, their emotions.

**Lear, Phaedra, Hedda Gabler** in Ibsen's play of the same name, and **Nora**, in Ibsen's *The Doll's House*: each of these characters carries a heavy and volatile bag of emotions. Lear, maddened by Cordelia's refusal to say she loves him, follows his despair out onto the heath, and into irrecoverable madness. Phaedra's thwarted passion for Hippolytus drives her to blackmail him, humiliate him in the eyes of his father, and lead him to his death. Hedda Gabler and Nora are two of Ibsen's major introductions to the emotionally charged female, at her point of maximum danger. Hedda trails old loves behind her, and suicidally lives her contempt for her academic husband; Nora, no more enchanted with her husband than Hedda is with hers, slams the door in the guy's face, after he has called her 'my little plaything' one time too many.

Most of our remaining characters, though literary, live as driven by their emotions. They blow in the wind. **MacBeth**, though ambitious, is not driven toward the top, but simply lets himself be vaulted toward regicide by a wife who is ruthless and out of control. **Marianne**, in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, is full of zest and innocent young lady romance, until Willoughby's unkind treatment of her awakens her to the dark patches that lie ahead of untrained emotion. Goethe's **Werther**, a young man hopelessly under love's spell, cannot long survive the intensity of a passion which is forbidden him by the marriage of his beloved to another. Like Hedda Gabler, Werther finds final refuge in a gunshot. As young in life as Werther, Ibsen's **Oswald** is haunted by the dreams of becoming a great painter, and tortured by the threats of inheriting the family madness. **Dmitri Karamazov** grows crazed—with love for Grushenka—before our eyes, and in the end submits to threatening mental unbalance. **Anna Karenina** lets the emotion of passionate love sweep her off her feet, out of her environment, into a hostile world which never cares

for her nor loves her. **Johnny**, a totally absorbed jazz musician, belongs to his art before all, abandoning the rest of himself to drugs and highs; he is in the end torn apart by this recipe. **Florentino**, in *Love in the Time of Cholera*, is driven by a lifetime passion for the female, but in the end that passion is totally directed to the faithful love of Fermina, who though married to another has been waiting for him all along.

### Discussion questions

Emotion as a response, or exit from, conflictual situations? Does this idea made sense to you? Are there any of our emotional characters to whom this explanation does not apply?

Is the emotionality of male literary characters different from that of female literary characters? Is the comparative emotionality of the two genders equally apparent in 'real life'? Examples, please!

Contrast Dostoyevsky, Ibsen, and Shakespeare as creators of powerfully emotional characters. Choose some characters from these three authors, and analyze their authors' literary strategies for creating them.

What strikes you as the difference between emotionality among Greco-Roman literary characters, and the emotionality of the moderns, starting with Palamon? Can you further distinguish traits of emotionality from characters at diverse stages of *modern* literary development?

Does the kind of emotionality an author portrays correlate with the genre in which he/she is writing? Does the genre an author chooses stipulate something about the nature of the emotionalities he will create.

### Reading thoughts

Bronte, Charlotte *Jane Eyre* 1847

Didereot, Denis, *Le Paradoxe sur le comédien (The Paradox of the Actor)* 1773

Kazantzakis, Nikos *The Greek Passion* 1959

Grillparzer, Franz *Des Meeres und der Liebe Wellen (The Waves of the Ocean and of Love)* 1831

Shelley, P. B., *Prometheus Unbound* 1820