

The rational character

The rational literary character is one who, like the rational person in life, is careful and thoughtful about what he says, takes time before judging, and thinks as methodically as possible about human situations. Naturally enough, such literary characters are not the most common, nor the most flamboyantly interesting. But they can be robust structural elements in successful narrative. That is, they can be particularly useful reliable recounters of ‘the truth of the fiction.’

An odder pair than Encolpius (in the *Satyricon*) and Elinor (in *Sense and Sensibility*) can hardly be imagined. Each of them, however, has a gift commonplace with the rational figure, the gift of standing back and observing the course of life—rather than, for example, plunging headfirst into life, like the ‘emotional character,’ withdrawing from the rush of life, like the introvert, or remaining open to life, and letting it draw you enthusiastically outward. Elinor, sister of the exuberant and romantic Marianne Dashwood, exercises a cautious brake on her sister’s flights, and manages her own life with great care and consideration for others, without involving herself in compromise or confusion. Encolpius, a gladiator by profession, and the narrator of ‘Trimalchio’s Banquet,’ is a cut up, for sure, and partakes plenty in the banquet itself, yet is always perceptive, knows where he is and what is doing, and accurately observes even the craziest scenes that involve him. He remains the same character we met at the outset of the story, discoursing outside of the University, on styles and trends in rhetoric.

How about Nestor and Cléante? Odd again, but provocative. Both characters are friends of wise saws, big picture arguments, and respectful references to the past. Nestor is too old to act from passion, and too smart to neglect the role of reason, in the intelligent application of old instances to modern military problems. When present strategic challenges arise among the Greek forces, over the best move to take, Nestor frequently pulls a personal example out of his hat, giving clarity and framework to the present crisis. Cléante, verbalizing in a classy aristocratic drawing room, instead of on the field of battle, comes up with a steady flow of perceptions, logical corrections, and moral strictures, in his always clear headed effort to take down the pretensions of Tartuffe.

Litvinov (in Turgenev’s *Smoke*) and Lopakhin (in Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*) are both modern men and intellectuals, who cast a sharp (and fairly bleak) eye on the contemporary scenes around them. Litvinov, observing his fellow expatriate countrymen in a German spa, is rapidly weary of their habits, gossip, and modish quest for the new. His rational analysis of the group would do credit to the best trained of sociologists. Lopakhin, a successful writer who was formerly a serf on the estate where he is visiting, views with distance and some scorn the traditional attitudes and lifestyles in which the present owners of the estate are mired. His eye is cool, and his sense of historical change is of the sharpest.

Discussion questions

Is there a rational-logical element to all major literary creativity? Must the great artist’s imagination be tempered with these rational traits?

Is any of the six characters discussed above a dramatic protagonist in the work in which he appears?

Is what we call ‘common sense’ a major constituent of the rationality of the above characters? Which characters seem to be rational chiefly in the sense of exercising common sense?

Do you know literary works in which academic professionals play important roles? Is the professional intellectual likely to be a valuable ingredient in a literary text?

What do you think can be learned by bringing together, over an issue like rationality, two so different characters as Encolpius and Elinor? Is there something to be learned from this kind of juxtaposition?

Reading thoughts

Croce, Benedetto *Aesthetic* 1902

Dante *The Paradise* (from *The Divine Comedy*) 1472

Freedman, Ralph *The Lyrical Novel* 1963

Goethe *Faust* 1808

Wheelwright, Philip *Metaphor and Reality* 1962

Will, Frederic *Intelligible Beauty in Aesthetic Thought* 1958