

### *The **unconscientious** character*

Our list of unconscientious characters is diverse: we range from scoundrels and scalliwags—**Davos; Sganarelle**—by way of veritable beasts—**Caliban**—past commonplace fraudsters—the **Miller; the Pardoner; Artemio** (on a large criminal scale)—past schemers and tricksters—**Nicholas; Willoughby; Tartuffe; Mastakovich**—to high flying and ambitious villains who play with other people's lives—**Mephisto, Lady Macbeth; the Banker** (in Chekhov's *The Bet*).

Davos and Sganarelle, though the one is ancient, and the other a Renaissance creation, belong to the age old tradition of the trickster, the rascal who serves his master, but scrounges a good living on the side, by trade, deals, and well placed flattery.

Caliban, lumbering through his primitive world on Prospero's island, is unconscientious in the archaic sense, unaware of the norms that make society possible, bestial.

The Miller and the Pardoner both carry the rough hewn indifference to others which Chaucer is such a master of portraying. The Miller specializes in theft of grain supplies,

while the Pardoner sells fake relics and gewgaws, and talks widows out of their inheritance. Artemio Cruz, in the novel by Garcia Marquez, reflects throughout the tale on the unscrupulous life of pleasure and accumulation which are crushing him as he lies on his deathbed. Every sort of dirty land deal and investment fraud has brought him to the murky wealth he has by now accumulated.

Nicholas is a naughty boy, who calculates a brilliant scheme for bedding the daughter of his gulled host, the carpenter. Tricky, in his case, is blended with robust lust. Willoughby is equally fascinated by the world within the skirt, and, when he has roused Marianne to a fine tizzy of longing for him, he forgets her. Out of sight out of mind applies to Willoughby's romantic life, and Marianne learns the adage the hard way. Tartuffe, while pretending a high level of religious piety, invades Orgon's home with sharply focused intent: to make love to his wife, and to cheat him financially. Mastakovich is a wealthy and cunning money seeker, who spots a young girl whose inheritance to be, in a few years, is precisely what he wants to get his hands on. Age difference matters not. Julian Mastakovich marries the young lady—no love transacted here—and walks away with an additional fortune.

Mephisto, diabolical as ever, takes Faust's fairly innocent hand in his, and teaches him the secret of winning his lustful heart's desire. The world of goods, baubles, and sweethearts is laid open before the formerly withdrawn scholar, who sells his soul to the ultimate cynic, Mephisto. Lady MacBeth ups her husband's normal ambition by inspiring him to attempt the murder of the King. Working through this surrogate puppy, her husband, this most cynical and self-seeking of women brings massive havoc onto a court well settled and prosperous. The banker literally plays with the young lawyer's life, in *The Bet*, and yet he has much to learn from the skeletal lawyer about the twists and turns of human persistence.

### **Discussion questions**

Is unconscientious a wider category than conscientious? Don't you find more diversity of types under the heading of the unconscientious? Review our texts on both of these conditions!

You will note that only one female character, Lady MacBeth, appears in our list of unconscientious figures. Is that because women are more conscientious than men?

Do you see any connection between unconsciousness and unconscientiousness? Is there, in unconscientious behavior, an element of self-occlusion, of willful prevention of one's own seeing (or clear seeing)? Please illustrate from our examples.

Is the unconscientious literary figure by nature hateful? Or is being unconscientious inherently more interesting and provocative than hateful? Illustrate please!

Is the root of unconscientious behavior—in either life or literature—ignorance of oneself, or is it inability to see into other people?

### **Reading thoughts**

Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno* 1472

Euripides, *Medea* 431 B.

Faulkner, William *As I lay Dying* 1930

Macchiavelli, Niccolo, *The Prince* 1513

Marlowe, Christopher *The Jew of Malta* 1589

O'Connor, Flannery *A Good Man is Hard to Find, and other stories* 1955