

CHARACTER

Character in the Corpus
Approaches and Resources

Introduction

Each of the 'Character in the Corpus' discussions is supplemented by suggested questions based on previous character education pedagogical practice. These are inspired by resources created by the Jubilee Centre and those devised by teachers and by other teachers' reflections on effective teaching techniques.

Skills developed in literature require critical thinking that can be employed as a means to cultivate practical wisdom. Beyond the general benefit that character education has to educational attainment, teachers see character education and curriculum subjects as potentially mutually beneficial. Literature has a particular part to play here as a cornerstone of the humanities, one that explores human behaviour, demands critical, close analysis, and pays particular attention to literacy.

The aim is to offer teachers an introduction those virtues evident in the prose fiction of the A-level English Literature corpus.

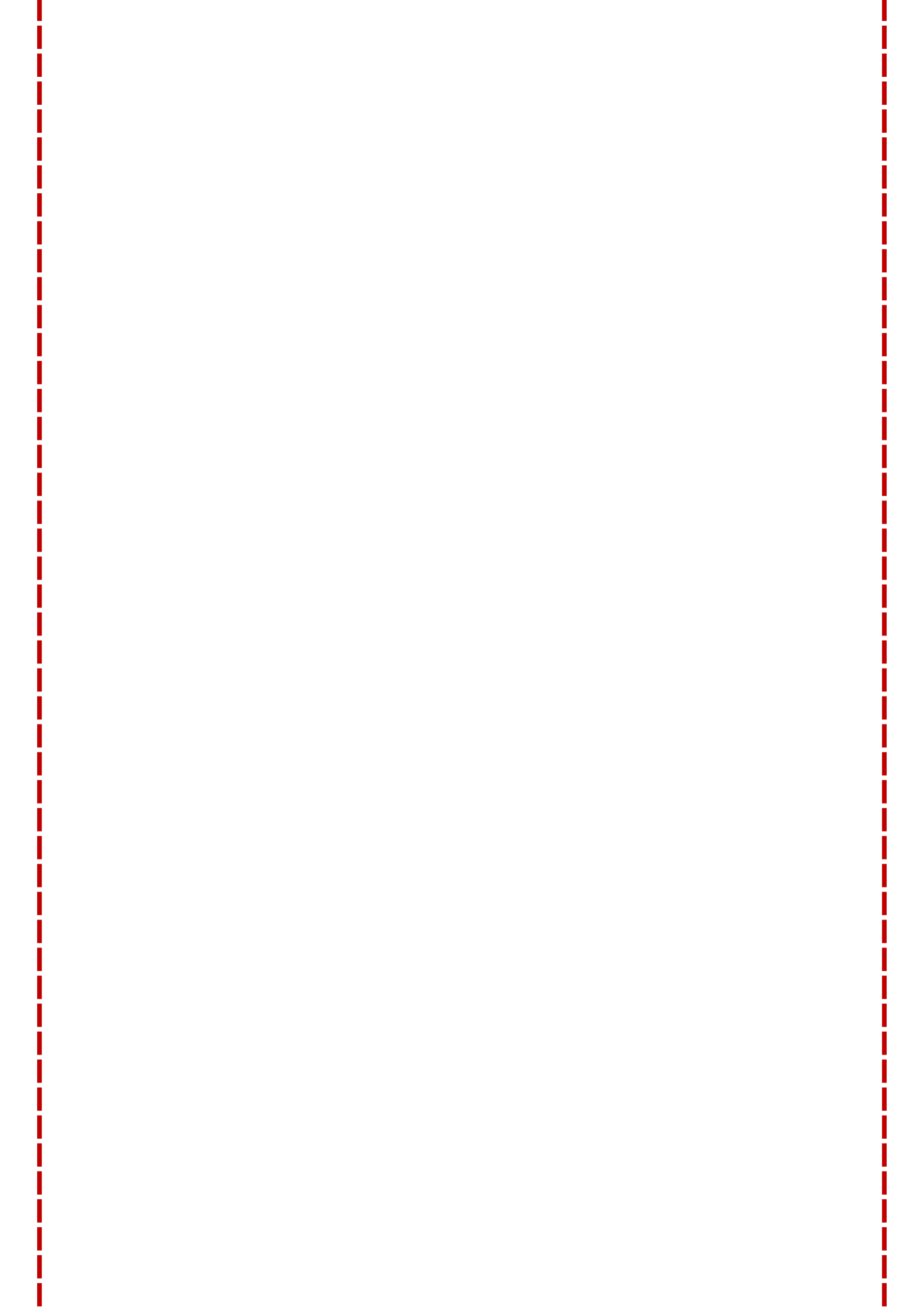
This set of resources includes five different approaches to 'character' and how it is treated within literature, alongside touchstone passages drawn from the A-Level set texts with associated commentary detailing how character may be discussed in relation to pupils' literary studies.

Teachers may wish to use the selected touchstone passages for close critical analysis exercises that look at character. Alternatively, teachers are encouraged to seek out such passages within their own selected set text and use the commentaries as guides to frame their own approach to character education and virtue literacy.

The approaches focus on close textual analysis but point towards discussions of character as a theme throughout the text as a whole. The commentaries therefore highlight the stylistic techniques used in relation to character to satisfy A-level requirements that pupils understand how writers create certain effects. This 'critical' approach has the advantage of embedding reflection and reasoning alongside comprehension; all key components of virtue literacy.

Definition

Character is a set of personal traits or dispositions that produce specific moral emotions, inform motivation and guide conduct (JCCV Framework, 2017, p.2)



Touchstones

The classroom resources and associated commentary are centred around a selection of 'touchstone' passages.

With regards to literary studies, the term 'touchstone' was coined by Matthew Arnold in 1853. The term was conferred on literary passages of significance in relation to their role in the development of literature or their affective qualities. The application of the term here therefore adopts Arnold's definition to the extent that it refers to selected short passages and their comparison but translates his method of evaluation to considering a passage's utility in the study of virtue. In this, it is meant rather in the Shakespearean sense of Touchstone as providing a degree of insight.

The touchstone passages below allow students to look at a particular virtue in its moral sense and also look at its stylistic features. For A-level students, the touchstones offer a way by which to navigate these different instantiations of a virtue via a set of five topics, around which the passages are organised.

Because character is a foundational concept, the exercises, approaches and passages here are focussed more on the primary elements of virtue literacy – virtue knowledge and understanding.

I. Defining character

One of the issues that a teacher will encounter is the many meanings that the word *character* entails (its polysemy). Of course, within the English classroom, *character* is a term that is used frequently, albeit in principally describing a fictional person, it has a meaning different to that of character in character education. Perhaps surprisingly for a corpus of literature, however, there are very few uses of the word *character* in the literary sense, with most using it as shorthand for *moral character* that aligns it with the definition found in character education.

The tendency is for virtue (or lack of virtue) language to appear in proximity to mentions of the word character. For teachers this means that instantiations of the word are good indicators of passages that concern virtue and the processes entailed in assessing one another's character. Overwhelmingly then, when authors in fiction use the word *character*, they do so in a sense that is aligned to (and therefore is useful to) its definition in virtue literacy.

The first set of touchstones look at the literary definition of character. Key here are the ways in which this aligns with the virtue-literacy conception of character in its focus on the individual, the capacity for change, and its decidedly moral function. One of the few uses of *character* in its literary sense comes from Briony Tallis, Ian McEwan's writer character in *Atonement*, who reflects on her 'sketches':

Touchstone passage I

What excited her about her achievement was its design, the pure geometry and the defining uncertainty which reflected, she thought, a modern sensibility. The age of clear answers was over.

So was the age of characters and plots. Despite her journal sketches, she no longer really believed in characters. They were quaint devices that belonged to the nineteenth century. The very concept of character was founded on errors that modern psychology had exposed. Plots too were like rusted machinery whose wheels would no longer turn. A modern novelist could no more write characters and plots than a modern composer could a Mozart symphony. It was thought, perception, sensations that interested her, the conscious mind as a river through time, and how to represent its onward roll, as well as all the tributaries that would swell it, and the obstacles that would divert it. If

only she could reproduce the clear light of a summer's morning, the sensations of a child standing at a window, the curve and dip of a swallow's flight over a pool of water. The novel of the future would be unlike anything in the past. She had read Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* three times and thought that a great transformation was being worked in human nature itself, and that only fiction, a new kind of fiction, could capture the essence of the change. To enter a mind and show it at work, or being worked on, and to do this within a symmetrical design—this would be an artistic triumph. So thought Nurse Tallis as she lingered near the dispensary, waiting for the pharmacist to return, and gazing across the Thames, oblivious to the danger she was in, of being discovered standing on one leg by Sister Drummond.

(Part Three, *Atonement*, Ian McEwan)

What this passage reflects is a diachronic change whereby the literary meaning of *character* has gradually crept into the novel. Well, almost. As far as the A-level corpus is concerned, these literary uses are confined to paratextual aspects of the text (prefaces, epilogues, etc.) with the exception of *Atonement*, but which is itself a work of metafiction. As such, it is ambivalent about the abilities of literature to capture the essence of character and changes in human nature:

Capturing change, as discussed, is one of the areas in which moral education and narrative discourse practices align. *Atonement*, as its title suggests, offers not only a narrative of moral failing, education, and penance, but a commentary on how fiction actually participates in such activities.

Touchstone passage 2

Trying to recover here, for recognition, the germ of my idea, I see that it must have consisted not at all in any conceit of a “plot,” nefarious name, in any flash, upon the fancy, of a set of relations, or in any one of those situations that, by a logic of their own, immediately fall, for the fabulist, into movement, into a march or a rush, a patter of quick steps; but altogether in the sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young woman, to which all the usual elements of a “subject,” certainly of a setting, were to need to be super added. Quite as interesting as the young woman herself at her best, do I find, I must again repeat, this projection of memory upon the whole matter of the growth, in one's imagination, of some such apology for a

motive. These are the fascinations of the fabulist's art, these lurking forces of expansion, these necessities of upspringing in the seed, these beautiful determinations, on the part of the idea entertained, to grow as tall as possible, to push into the light and the air and thickly flower there; and, quite as much, these fine possibilities of recovering, from some good standpoint on the ground gained, the intimate history of the business—of retracing and reconstructing its steps and stages. I have always fondly remembered a remark that I heard fall years ago from the lips of Ivan Turgeneff in regard to his own experience of the usual origin of the fictive picture. It began for him almost always with the vision of some person or persons, who hovered before him, soliciting him, as the active or passive figure, interesting him and appealing to him just as they were and by what they were. He saw them, in that fashion, as *disponibles*, saw them subject to the chances, the complications of existence, and saw them vividly, but then had to find for them the right relations, those that would most bring them out; to imagine, to invent and select and piece together the situations most useful and favourable to the sense of the creatures themselves, the complications they would be most likely to produce and to feel.

“To arrive at these things is to arrive at my story,” he said, “and that’s the way I look for it. The result is that I’m often accused of not having ‘story’ enough. I seem to myself to have as much as I need—to show my people, to exhibit their relations with each other; for that is all my measure. If I watch them long enough I see them come together, I see them placed, I see them engaged in this or that act and in this or that difficulty. How they look and move and speak and behave, always in the setting I have found for them, is my account of them—of which I dare say, alas, *que cela manque souvent d’architecture*. But I would rather, I think, have too little architecture than too much—when there’s danger of its interfering with my measure of the truth.

(Preface, *The Portrait of a Lady*, Henry James)

Not all writers are so explicit in their exploration of the idea that fiction is a medium for character. This is evident in the use of portraiture imagery (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Sketches by Boz*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, etc.) that align portraiture as the task of fiction. Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* begins with a Preface that discusses the difficulties associated with character portrayal. In accounting for the writing process, he discards ‘plot’ or ‘situations’ which “by a logic of their own, immediately fall, for the fabulist, into movement, into a march or a rush, a patter of quick steps”. Rather, he says,

the 'germ' of his idea was "altogether in the sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young woman."

In literary terms, James is a proto-modernist, considering plot to be subservient to character. In this, James was engaging in a specifically philosophical debate, one in which his brother William James was involved, that considered the nature of perception. William's discussion of the stream of consciousness (1890) is just one example of where literary criticism has borrowed a term from another field and applied it to literary form, an early antecedent of which was *The Portrait of a Lady* (Abrams, 1999: 299).

James's discussion in his Preface is therefore one of the few that considers *character* as a literary rather than a moral concept. But this does not preclude its usefulness in virtue literacy as it gets students to think about the ways in which we might empathise with and recognise virtue in others.

The novel becomes a kind of crucible in which characters' actions and emotions are put to the test. Consequently, this text, and James's other text in the A-level corpus, *What Maisie Knew*, are particularly fruitful in providing episodes in which dilemmas arise and character is tested.

What James recognises here is the partiality of the philosophical pursuit of truth. In 'showing' people, as James puts it, his fiction dedicates much of its space to character thought and feeling, entities not necessarily easily structured in terms of event sequences. From a practical perspective, cognitive studies into the reading process would seem to validate James erring away from plot, in that too much plot quickens the pace of a story to such an extent that it can leave little room for critical reflection (Keen, 2007: 94), for characters and readers alike. Such character interiority is a defining feature of fictional prose that sets it apart from drama and poetry, making it a hybrid of action and critical reflection on those actions that is particularly suited to the demands of virtue literacy, which requires materials that are not only exemplars of virtue terms but also prompt critical reflection.

This highlights a distinctive role for fiction in character education, that properly accommodates considerations of plot and character change. Anthony Burgess, also in a preface, sees character change as critical to narrative.

Touchstone passage 3

There is, in fact, not much point in writing a novel unless you can show the possibility of moral transformation, or an increase in wisdom, operating in your chief character or characters. Even trashy best-sellers show people changing. When a fictional work fails to show change, when it merely indicates that human character is set, stony, unregenerable, then you are out of the field of the novel and into that of the fable or the allegory. The American or Kubrickian *Orange* is a fable; the British or world one is a novel.

But my New York publisher believed that my twenty-first chapter was a sellout. It was veddy veddy British, don't you know. It was bland and it showed a Pelagian unwillingness to accept that a human being could be a model for unregenerable evil. The Americans, he said in effect, were tougher than the British and could face up to reality. Soon they would be facing up to it in Vietnam. My book was Kennedyan and accepted the notion of moral progress. What was really wanted was a Nixonian book with no shred of optimism in it. Let us have evil prancing on the page and, up to the very last line, sneering in the face of all the inherited beliefs, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Holy Roller, about people being able to make themselves better. Such a book would be sensational, and so it is. But I do not think it is a fair picture of human life.

I do not think so because, by definition, a human being is endowed with free will. He can use this to choose between good and evil. If he can only perform good or only perform evil, then he is a clockwork orange—meaning that he has the appearance of an organism lovely with colour and juice but is in fact only a clockwork toy to be wound up by God or the Devil or (since this is increasingly replacing both) the Almighty State. It is as inhuman to be totally good as it is to be totally evil. The important thing is moral choice. Evil has to exist along with good, in order that moral choice may operate. Life is sustained by the grinding opposition of moral entities. This is what the television news is about. Unfortunately there is so much original sin in us all that we find evil rather attractive. To devastate is easier and more spectacular than to create. We like to have the pants scared off us by visions of cosmic destruction.

morality, and specifically moral change, is embedded in the very definition of a novel. This may seem odd to readers of *A Clockwork Orange*, but its dystopian vision, like all dystopian visions, succeed because they are a negative impression of an ideal; that is, they presuppose a hoped-for Utopia from which they deviate.

One of the most challenging tasks in literacy exercises can be to get students to identify the virtues exhibited but not explicitly mentioned in the text. This draws on their abilities to comprehend a passage through close reading and can be made particularly taxing in texts that portray characters and actions, even entire worlds, radically different from our own. But the power of using such texts lies not only in the deep level of engagement required, but also their ability to outsource moral exploration to a safe, abstracted space.

Suggested questions

- Looking at the passages above, how do writers understand the notion of *character*?
- What are the differences between the ways we use the word *character* in relation to literature and with regards to a 'moral character'?
- Are there similarities in the way we 'read' people's characters in the real world and those in fictional texts?
- In what ways are the novels above (*Atonement*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *A Clockwork Orange*) moral? Do their characters confront particular moral dilemmas?

2. Character study

Character studies are an effective tool by which literary studies and virtue reflection can be combined. Identifying key virtues that are identified or inferred by the actions of a character can be a useful way of structuring such character discussions and considering a novel's themes or moral message.

The character study is a staple opening shot of the Victorian novel. As a literary trope, it is evident in the opening invocations of classical literature of exemplary heroes and many works of fiction are in fact extended character studies – just think of how many novels share their name with that of their protagonist. What this does is place 'up front' a character as the novel's subject.

Jane Austen's *Persuasion* opens with character study of Sir Walter Elliott. It tells the reader that the only book he reads is *Baronetage*; a text that evokes in him feelings of respect and pity.

Touchstone passage 4

Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch Hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the *Baronetage*; there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect, by contemplating the limited remnant of the earliest patents; there any unwelcome sensations, arising from domestic affairs changed naturally into pity and contempt as he turned over the almost endless creations of the last century; and there, if every other leaf were powerless, he could read his own history with an interest which never failed. This was the page at which the favourite volume always opened:

"ELLIOT OF KELLYNCH HALL.

"Walter Elliot, born March 1, 1760, married, July 15, 1784, Elizabeth, daughter of James Stevenson, Esq. of South Park, in the county of Gloucester, by which lady (who died 1800) he has issue Elizabeth, born June 1, 1785; Anne, born August 9, 1787; a still-born son, November 5, 1789; Mary, born November 20, 1791."

Precisely such had the paragraph originally stood from the printer's hands; but Sir Walter had improved it by adding, for the information of himself and his family, these words, after the date of Mary's birth-- "Married, December 16, 1810, Charles, son and heir of Charles Musgrove, Esq. of Uppercross, in the county of Somerset," and by inserting most accurately the day of the month on which he had lost his wife.

Then followed the history and rise of the ancient and respectable family, in the usual terms; how it had been first settled in Cheshire; how mentioned in Dugdale, serving the office of high sheriff, representing a borough in three successive parliaments, exertions of loyalty, and dignity of baronet, in the first year of Charles II, with all the Marys and Elizabeths they had married; forming altogether two handsome duodecimo pages, and concluding with the arms and motto:--"Principal seat, Kellynch Hall, in the county of Somerset," and Sir Walter's handwriting again in this finale:--

"Heir presumptive, William Walter Elliot, Esq., great grandson of the second Sir Walter."

Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character; vanity of person and of situation. He had been remarkably handsome in his youth; and, at fifty-four, was still a very fine man. Few women could think more of their personal appearance than he did, nor could the valet of any new made lord be more delighted with the place he held in society. He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion.

His good looks and his rank had one fair claim on his attachment; since to them he must have owed a wife of very superior character to any thing deserved by his own. Lady Elliot had been an excellent woman, sensible and amiable; whose judgement and conduct, if they might be pardoned the youthful infatuation which made her Lady Elliot, had never required indulgence afterwards.--She had humoured, or softened, or concealed his failings, and promoted his real respectability for seventeen years; and though not the very happiest being in the world herself, had found enough in her duties, her friends, and her children, to attach her to life, and make it no matter of indifference to her when she was called on to quit them.--Three girls, the two eldest sixteen and fourteen, was an awful legacy for a

mother to bequeath, an awful charge rather, to confide to the authority and guidance of a conceited, silly father. She had, however, one very intimate friend, a sensible, deserving woman, who had been brought, by strong attachment to herself, to settle close by her, in the village of Kellynch; and on her kindness and advice, Lady Elliot mainly relied for the best help and maintenance of the good principles and instruction which she had been anxiously giving her daughters.

(Chapter I, *Persuasion*, Jane Austen)

This is a particularly unfavourable first impression for readers – it parodies the capacity for reading to provoke feelings that are then glossed by Austen as vanity. *Character* is understood and summarised in terms of virtue/vice. In moving from evidence to analysis, the passage adopts a philosophical deductive reasoning; one that mirrors the deductive operations at play in everyday behaviours that apply to our own analysis, or rather assessment, of others' characters. As a metacommentary on text, it examines how the written word captures character,

The following passage is the from *Far From the Madding Crowd*, which opens with a study of Gabriel Oak.

Touchstone passage 5

When Farmer Oak smiled, the corners of his mouth spread till they were within an unimportant distance of his ears, his eyes were reduced to chinks, and diverging wrinkles appeared round them, extending upon his countenance like the rays in a rudimentary sketch of the rising sun.

His Christian name was Gabriel, and on working days he was a young man of sound judgment, easy motions, proper dress, and general good character. On Sundays he was a man of misty views, rather given to postponing, and hampered by his best clothes and umbrella: upon the whole, one who felt himself to occupy morally that vast middle space of Laodicean neutrality which lay between the Communion people of the parish and the drunken section,—that is, he went to church, but yawned privately by the time the congregation reached the Nicene creed, and thought of what there would be for dinner when he meant to be listening to the sermon. Or, to state his character as it stood in the scale of public opinion, when his friends and critics were in tantrums, he was

considered rather a bad man; when they were pleased, he was rather a good man; when they were neither, he was a man whose moral colour was a kind of pepper-and-salt mixture.

Since he lived six times as many working-days as Sundays, Oak's appearance in his old clothes was most peculiarly his own—the mental picture formed by his neighbours in imagining him being always dressed in that way. He wore a low-crowned felt hat, spread out at the base by tight jamming upon the head for security in high winds, and a coat like Dr. Johnson's; his lower extremities being encased in ordinary leather leggings and boots emphatically large, affording to each foot a roomy apartment so constructed that any wearer might stand in a river all day long and know nothing of damp—their maker being a conscientious man who endeavoured to compensate for any weakness in his cut by unstinted dimension and solidity.

Mr. Oak carried about him, by way of watch, what may be called a small silver clock; in other words, it was a watch as to shape and intention, and a small clock as to size. This instrument being several years older than Oak's grandfather, had the peculiarity of going either too fast or not at all. The smaller of its hands, too, occasionally slipped round on the pivot, and thus, though the minutes were told with precision, nobody could be quite certain of the hour they belonged to. The stopping peculiarity of his watch Oak remedied by thumps and shakes, and he escaped any evil consequences from the other two defects by constant comparisons with and observations of the sun and stars, and by pressing his face close to the glass of his neighbours' windows, till he could discern the hour marked by the green-faced timekeepers within. It may be mentioned that Oak's fob being difficult of access, by reason of its somewhat high situation in the waistband of his trousers (which also lay at a remote height under his waistcoat), the watch was as a necessity pulled out by throwing the body to one side, compressing the mouth and face to a mere mass of ruddy flesh on account of the exertion required, and drawing up the watch by its chain, like a bucket from a well.

But some thoughtful persons, who had seen him walking across one of his fields on a certain December morning—sunny and exceedingly mild—might have regarded Gabriel Oak in other aspects than these. In his face one might notice that many of the hues and

curves of youth had tarried on to manhood: there even remained in his remoter crannies some relics of the boy. His height and breadth would have been sufficient to make his presence imposing, had they been exhibited with due consideration. But there is a way some men have, rural and urban alike, for which the mind is more responsible than flesh and sinew: it is a way of curtailing their dimensions by their manner of showing them. And from a quiet modesty that would have become a vestal, which seemed continually to impress upon him that he had no great claim on the world's room, Oak walked unassumingly and with a faintly perceptible bend, yet distinct from a bowing of the shoulders. This may be said to be a defect in an individual if he depends for his valuation more upon his appearance than upon his capacity to wear well, which Oak did not.

He had just reached the time of life at which "young" is ceasing to be the prefix of "man" in speaking of one. He was at the brightest period of masculine growth, for his intellect and his emotions were clearly separated: he had passed the time during which the influence of youth indiscriminately mingles them in the character of impulse, and he had not yet arrived at the stage wherein they become united again, in the character of prejudice, by the influence of a wife and family. In short, he was twenty-eight, and a bachelor.

(Chapter I, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Thomas Hardy)

Good character is ultimately conferred by the judgement of others –but the reader is given evidence to see Gabriel as virtuous, having paid the toll for Bathsheba, albeit his judgement of her as vain renders him pious. Gabriel is a character that highlights how virtue can be nuanced and complex; a concern that Aristotle, in his discussions of the excess of virtue and the golden mean, highlights. Consequently, characters like Gabriel Oak not only offer contextual definitions of virtue but allow readers to calibrate that understanding with specific reference to their moderation.

Suggested questions

- What are some of the ways by which we judge other's characters?
- Think about the names of characters in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. What does this tell us about their characters?
- How do we use the skills of judging people in the real world when we read fiction?

- How does Gabriel demonstrate an 'excess' of virtue?

3. Character and judgement

Studying character in fiction necessarily demands judgement on behalf of the reader. The pitfalls of this task are often thematised by fiction writers who explore the difficulty of accurately evaluating others, offering cautionary tales as to the golden mean of character judgement.

Again, Austen is a useful author to study in respect to this. *Sense and Sensibility's* plot turns on a series of erroneous character studies made by sisters Marianne and Elinor. The ways in which Austen crafts her prose so as to predispose the reader (and the sisters) to a favourable assessment of Captain Willoughby over a unfavourable one of Colonel Brandon, provide suite of material for an exploration of character, virtue, and language. Here, we shall look at the moment at which all of those various (erroneous) presumptions about character come to a head.

Chapter 31 narrates a pivotal moment at which Colonel Brandon reveals his history and directly contrasts with Willoughby. Content-wise, the chapter is full of virtue terminology by which he glosses these two differing histories. For its form, it adopts Direct Speech. Direct Speech has a particularly interesting relationship to honesty, particularly in Austen. This is because the mode for which Austen is celebrated is Free Indirect Discourse. This form of narration allows a writer to present the speech and thoughts of characters in ways that merge narratorial and character. With Direct Speech, the (apparently, at least) he unmediated voices of the characters are put before the reader. As such, form mirrors content as the revelation of Brandon and Willoughby's pasts are laid bare.

Touchstone passage 6

"This is beyond every thing!" exclaimed Elinor.

"His character is now before you; expensive, dissipated, and worse than both. Knowing all this, as I have now known it many weeks, guess what I must have felt on seeing your sister as fond of him as ever, and on being assured that she was to marry him: guess what I must have felt for all your sakes. When I came to you last week and found you alone, I came determined to know the truth; though irresolute what to do when it WAS known. My behaviour must have seemed strange to you then; but now you will comprehend it. To suffer you all to be so deceived; to see your sister—but what could I do? I had no hope of interfering with success; and sometimes I thought your sister's influence might yet reclaim him. But now, after such dishonorable usage, who can tell what were his designs on her.

Whatever they may have been, however, she may now, and hereafter doubtless WILL turn with gratitude towards her own condition, when she compares it with that of my poor Eliza, when she considers the wretched and hopeless situation of this poor girl, and pictures her to herself, with an affection for him so strong, still as strong as her own, and with a mind tormented by self-reproach, which must attend her through life. Surely this comparison must have its use with her. She will feel her own sufferings to be nothing. They proceed from no misconduct, and can bring no disgrace. On the contrary, every friend must be made still more her friend by them. Concern for her unhappiness, and respect for her fortitude under it, must strengthen every attachment. Use your own discretion, however, in communicating to her what I have told you. You must know best what will be its effect; but had I not seriously, and from my heart believed it might be of service, might lessen her regrets, I would not have suffered myself to trouble you with this account of my family afflictions, with a recital which may seem to have been intended to raise myself at the expense of others."

Elinor's thanks followed this speech with grateful earnestness; attended too with the assurance of her expecting material advantage to Marianne, from the communication of what had passed.

"I have been more pained," said she, "by her endeavors to acquit him than by all the rest; for it irritates her mind more than the most perfect conviction of his unworthiness can do. Now, though at first she will suffer much, I am sure she will soon become easier. Have you," she continued, after a short silence, "ever seen Mr. Willoughby since you left him at Barton?"

"Yes," he replied gravely, "once I have. One meeting was unavoidable."

Elinor, startled by his manner, looked at him anxiously, saying,

"What? have you met him to—"

"I could meet him no other way. Eliza had confessed to me, though most reluctantly, the name of her lover; and when he returned to town, which was within a fortnight after

myself, we met by appointment, he to defend, I to punish his conduct. We returned unwounded, and the meeting, therefore, never got abroad."

Elinor sighed over the fancied necessity of this; but to a man and a soldier she presumed not to censure it.

"Such," said Colonel Brandon, after a pause, "has been the unhappy resemblance between the fate of mother and daughter! and so imperfectly have I discharged my trust!"

"Is she still in town?"

"No; as soon as she recovered from her lying-in, for I found her near her delivery, I removed her and her child into the country, and there she remains."

Recollecting, soon afterwards, that he was probably dividing Elinor from her sister, he put an end to his visit, receiving from her again the same grateful acknowledgments, and leaving her full of compassion and esteem for him.

(Chapter 31, *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen)

The line "his character is now before you" speaks directly to the reader as Brandon uses the metaphor of character as physical object to be viewed, in much the same way as a book lays bare character in front of the reader. The word *character* can mean a complete history, much like character names provide titles for their histories or authors' names are used to represent their works, but there is also no divorcing it from its overtly moral connotation.

To some extent, *Sense and Sensibility* is a cautionary tale of judging others' characters. Accordingly, Brandon, sensitive to Marianne's impressionable nature, cautions Elinor: "Use your own discretion, however, in communicating to her what I have told you." Again, it is moderation that frames the discussion of character.

At the end of the chapter, the reader is left in no doubt as to Brandon's virtue in a way that speaks directly to his ability to empathise with Elinor, leaving her "full of compassion and esteem". Its placement at the end of the passage concludes it in distinctly moral terms. Judgement and feelings are crucial throughout the text and offer two distinct motivations that characters must juggle in deciding on their course of behaviour.

Likewise, in *Mill on the Floss*, Eliot explores the tension between judgement and feeling in respect of character. In the following passage, Tom rejects his sister, because 'good character' has been ruined by her behaviour.

Touchstone passage 7

Tom did not hear the gate; he was just then close upon the roaring dam; but he presently turned, and lifting up his eyes, saw the figure whose worn look and loneliness seemed to him a confirmation of his worst conjectures. He paused, trembling and white with disgust and indignation.

Maggie paused too, three yards before him. She felt the hatred in his face, felt it rushing through her fibres; but she must speak.

"Tom," she began faintly, "I am come back to you,—I am come back home—for refuge—to tell you everything."

"You will find no home with me," he answered, with tremulous rage. "You have disgraced us all. You have disgraced my father's name. You have been a curse to your best friends. You have been base, deceitful; no motives are strong enough to restrain you. I wash my hands of you forever. You don't belong to me."

Their mother had come to the door now. She stood paralyzed by the double shock of seeing Maggie and hearing Tom's words.

"Tom," said Maggie, with more courage, "I am perhaps not so guilty as you believe me to be. I never meant to give way to my feelings. I struggled against them. I was carried too far in the boat to come back on Tuesday. I came back as soon as I could."

"I can't believe in you any more," said Tom, gradually passing from the tremulous excitement of the first moment to cold inflexibility. "You have been carrying on a clandestine relation with Stephen Guest,—as you did before with another. He went to see you at my aunt Moss's; you walked alone with him in the lanes; you must have behaved as no modest girl would have done to her cousin's lover, else that could never

have happened. The people at Luckreth saw you pass; you passed all the other places; you knew what you were doing. You have been using Philip Wakem as a screen to deceive Lucy,—the kindest friend you ever had. Go and see the return you have made her. She's ill; unable to speak. My mother can't go near her, lest she should remind her of you."

Maggie was half stunned,—too heavily pressed upon by her anguish even to discern any difference between her actual guilt and her brother's accusations, still less to vindicate herself.

"Tom," she said, crushing her hands together under her cloak, in the effort to speak again, "whatever I have done, I repent it bitterly. I want to make amends. I will endure anything. I want to be kept from doing wrong again."

"What will keep you?" said Tom, with cruel bitterness. "Not religion; not your natural feelings of gratitude and honour. And he—he would deserve to be shot, if it were not—
—But you are ten times worse than he is. I loathe your character and your conduct. You struggled with your feelings, you say. Yes! I have had feelings to struggle with; but I conquered them. I have had a harder life than you have had; but I have found my comfort in doing my duty. But I will sanction no such character as yours; the world shall know that I feel the difference between right and wrong. If you are in want, I will provide for you; let my mother know. But you shall not come under my roof. It is enough that I have to bear the thought of your disgrace; the sight of you is hateful to me."

Slowly Maggie was turning away with despair in her heart. But the poor frightened mother's love leaped out now, stronger than all dread.

"My child! I'll go with you. You've got a mother."

Oh, the sweet rest of that embrace to the heart-stricken Maggie! More helpful than all wisdom is one draught of simple human pity that will not forsake us.

Tom turned and walked into the house.

(Book VII, Chapter 1, *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot)

Eliot similarly opens *Middlemarch* by ruminating on the fact that Dorothea's unmarried state relates to "such elements of character" and it is worth noting the different gender-specific ways in which the term 'good character' is applied to men and women. Character invariably co-occurs with judgement and texts like *A Passage to India*, where characters are literally put on trial, are considered in the resources that discuss 'justice'.

Suggested questions

- How do we judge the character of others?
- What kinds of preconceptions does the Austen passage dispel with regards to Colonel Brandon and is Austen making a broader point about how we judge character?
- What virtues do Colonel Brandon and Elinor display in this passage and what literary techniques does Austen use to make character and virtue central themes of the passage/novel?
- How would Tom define 'good character'? Is this a definition that is different for men and women?
- In what way do the characters above exercise good judgement?

4. Character and metaphor (I)

Within virtue literacy there is a way of understanding of character that is specifically metaphorical. One might even argue that in its talk of *acquiring* and *possessing* virtues, the very strategies underpinning character education are metaphorical. Similarly, when we speak of character in its virtue sense, we often use the same metaphorical schema: thus, 'to have character' construes character as a possession. Unpacking metaphors important literary-critical skill that assists virtue literacy that can enrich understanding and establish links between how fiction reflects the conceptual schema and language of the real world.

A number of texts render character as something that is possessed and signal the construal of character in specifically moral terms. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain adopts a moral and metaphorical use of the word *character*.

Touchstone passage 8

Here was a boy that was respectable and well brung up; and had a character to lose; and folks at home that had characters; and he was bright and not leather-headed; and knowing and not ignorant; and not mean, but kind; and yet here he was, without any more pride, or rightness, or feeling, than to stoop to this business, and make himself a shame, and his family a shame, before everybody. I *couldn't* understand it no way at all. It was outrageous, and I knowed I ought to just up and tell him so; and so be his true friend, and let him quit the thing right where he was and save himself.

(Chapter 34, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain)

The power of this metaphor (that character is something to be lost, a possession) derives from the context, in which Tom Sawyer is committing to helping Jim, a slave, escape. Twain is thereby exploiting the common understanding that character is a thing possessed through his thematic treatment of slavery.

The notion of character here is therefore one linked more to the social reputation than a moral one, although for many writers it is the loss of moral and social character that is of keen interest (e.g., providing the tragic arc of classical drama). For further exploration of the idea of character as a metaphor of possession, *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley contains similar imagery (see e.g., Justine's trial in Chapter 8), again, made all the more resonant through the thematic concern with how human life is created, character cultivated, and possessed.

A common linguistic cluster ‘of character’ (e.g., ‘a man of character’) flips the metaphor, suggesting it is character that possesses the individual. When used alone as a positive evaluation; *character* in itself is virtuous without the need of qualification. The following touchstones are taken from Andrea Levy’s *Small Island*, in which she repeats the ‘of character’ cluster. In the first two extracts, Hortense fondly recollects her father; in the third she uses her father to try to attain a teaching appointment, and in the final extract she applies the description to her husband, Gilbert.

Touchstone passage 9

My father was a man of class. A man of character. A man of intelligence. Noble in a way that made him a legend. ‘Lovell Roberts,’ they whispered. ‘Have you heard about Lovell Roberts?’

When you are the child of someone such as he, there are things that are expected that may not be expected of someone of a more lowly persuasion. And so it was with I.

(Chapter 3, *Small Island*, Andrea Levy)

He shook Mr Philip by the hand and bowed his head politely, like a man of class, a man of character, a man of intelligence. Noble in a way that made me want to shout, ‘Michael Roberts! Have you seen Michael Roberts?’ Or perhaps it was the way he looked at me then. Over my curves, across my breasts, up and around my lips as he said, ‘But, Hortense, you are all grown-up.’ Whatever it was, I knew – from the moment my eyes first beheld this handsome, dapper, newly made man – I knew that I loved him.

(Chapter 3, *Small Island*, Andrea Levy)

My dream was and always had been that I should find employment teaching at the Church of England school in Kingston, for it was there that light-skinned girls in pristine uniforms gathered to drink from the fountain of an English curriculum. But my interview for a position saw the headmaster of that school frowning, concerned not with my acquired qualifications but only with the facts of my upbringing. I evoked my father’s cousins and told him of Lovell Roberts, my father, a man of character, a man of intelligence, noble in a way that made him a legend. The headmaster unwittingly shook his head as he asked me of my mother, my grandmother. His conclusion – although no word on the matter passed between us – was that my breeding was not legitimate

enough for him to consider me worthy of standing in their elegant classrooms before their high-class girls.

(Chapter 6, *Small Island*, Andrea Levy)

Gilbert had hushed the room. It was not only Mr Bligh whose mouth gaped in wonder. Even the baby had fallen silent. For at that moment as Gilbert stood, his chest panting with the passion from his words, I realised that Gilbert Joseph, my husband, was a man of class, a man of character, a man of intelligence. Noble in a way that would some day make him a legend. 'Gilbert Joseph,' everyone would shout. 'Have you heard about Gilbert Joseph?'

And Mr Bligh, blinking straight in Gilbert's eye once more, said softly, 'I'm sorry.' Of course, I thought, of course. Who would not be chastened by those fine words from my smart, handsome and noble husband? But this Englishman just carried on, 'I'm sorry ... but I just can't understand a single word that you're saying.'

(Chapter 59, *Small Island*, Andrea Levy)

Of course, Levy does qualify what it means to be a 'man of character' (whether that be class, intelligence, or nobleness). Stylistically, the exact repetition raises the question as to whether such repetition reinforces or interrogates this definition of *character*. Whilst the first two are a direct gloss of what attributes constitute a man of character, the third extract interrogates her judgement. In it, Hortense tries to get a job, but cannot, owing to the fact that she is an illegitimate child, which prompts readers to first question how accurate a description Hortense gives of her father and secondly how fair the social moral code being applied is.

Fictional texts are particularly adept at such ironising, and a particular consideration when applying them to virtue literacy programmes is how far such wordplay reinforces or undermines virtue language when applied to specific characters.

The last repetition transposes to her husband Gilbert, after he has eloquently challenged Bernard on his racism. Repetition therefore functions as an invitation for the reader to make a comparison between the two. This chapter represents an explicit modelling of several virtues, including courage, honesty, humility, and reason (amongst others). Gilbert also provides an opportunity for a complete character study by which to consider his exemplary, virtuous behaviour. This chapter, treating as it does racial tensions, also offers another useful character comparison as Gilbert reacts to Bligh's racism. Note that stylistically, Levy undercuts Gilbert's eloquence with Bligh's dismissiveness. The passage

deftly deploys irony to explore how virtuous character is based on action albeit still informed by issues of ethnicity and class.

As stated above, seeing as character and virtues as possession means can be acquired, a specific thematic concern of *David Copperfield*. To an extent, this makes them particularly transferrable.

Touchstone passage 10

Mr. Micawber then delivered a warm eulogy on Traddles. He said Traddles's was a character, to the steady virtues of which he (Mr. Micawber) could lay no claim, but which, he thanked Heaven, he could admire.

(Chapter 28, *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens)

Dickens's attention to language is acute here. His syntactic manipulation even requires clarification of exactly who's virtues are under consideration. The narrator's use of Indirect Speech allows the narrator to manipulate the presentation, to suggest Micawber's appropriation of these virtues.

Part of Dickens's exploration of these metaphors is for humorous effect, but one which underlines a serious point about how their misinterpretation can be an indicator of unvirtuous characters and deleterious to others. Mr Murdstone, a particularly unsympathetic character, has a name that echoes with solidity. His statements below, although purportedly about his wife's character, actually tell us more about his own.

Touchstone passage 11

"Yes, I had a satisfaction in the thought of marrying an inexperienced and artless person, and forming her character, and infusing into it some amount of that firmness and decision of which it stood in need. But when Jane Murdstone is kind enough to come to my assistance in this endeavour, and to assume, for my sake, a condition something like a housekeeper's, and when she meets with a base return –"

(Chapter 4, *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens)

There are several metaphors at play here in the characterisation of both Murdstone and his wife. It again, draws on the idea of character as a container but uses the image of tea (tea-making being the preserve of housekeepers, to which Mrs Murdstone is compared)

to undercut his analogy. Even the use of 'base return' taps into metaphorical understandings of character as (albeit economic) value. Dickens extends these metaphors throughout the text, most notably in Copperfield's name which connotes a base metal and field to be cultivated. The whole of Chapter 4 serves as a discussion of character formation and shows the manipulation of David's mother by the Murdstones with regards to how to raise a child. This is a cynical representation of character formation via submission. His corporal punishment of David represents one of the most compelling episodes in the novel and is a recurrent topic for Dickens who in *Oliver Twist* also criticises the use of such punishment and imprisonment as not conducive to building character.

Character is often understood via complex, and often mixed, metaphors. But their metaphorical value suggests that *character* is something that can be formed. Considering the imagery that underlies these metaphors opens up discussion around the stylistic effects (humour, instruction, etc.) that in turn allow students to discuss what these tell us about the ways writers view character and the ways in which we structure our understanding of character in the language we use in everyday life.

Suggested questions

- What do we mean when we say somebody is a 'person of character'?
- What are the elements of character and how do those elements overlap/differ from how we talk about characters in literature?
- Compare the characters of Gilbert and Lovell Roberts. In what ways were they persons of character?
- In what ways does Gilbert show virtue? How might we consider his language to be virtuous?
- How do you think Mr Murdstone's ideas about character building differs from that of Dickens, and from that of today?

5. Character and metaphor (2)

This second set of approaches take a deeper look at character metaphors as conceptual. These types of discussion are therefore aimed at those pupils who have covered topics such as Conceptual Metaphor, as included on some A-level English Language curricula.

From a virtue literacy perspective, recognising character metaphors can provide a useful means by which students can structure their understanding of character. Literature offers a genre that uses metaphors derived from everyday experience and also relate to other discourses more explicitly dealing with morality. The metaphor CHARACTER IS A BUILDING draws on a tradition of metaphor attested in scripture. This metaphor extends lines of theological thinking across the Bible, for example the parable in Luke (6) that tells of a man building house on poor foundations, through to I Corinthians (3:11) “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” In Ephesians we read of “the household of God”:

Firmly beneath you is the foundation, God's messengers and prophets, the cornerstone being Christ Jesus himself. In him each separate piece of building, properly fitting into its neighbour, grows together into a temple consecrated to the Lord. You are all part of this building in which God himself lives by his Spirit.

Likewise, Peter says to followers “you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house” and is himself the foundational ‘rock’ on which the Church is built. These examples illuminate the parabolic power of metaphors, the use of metaphor and narrative as explicitly educational tools.

Metaphor is itself a way of ‘constructing’ knowledge. The JCCV Framework (*framework* itself being a building metaphor) talks of *reinforcing* character virtues, character *building*, *developing* knowledge, *underpinned* by *foundational* elements *fundamental* to acquiring virtues, around the *building blocks* of character. Its practice is similarly defined in terms of *plans*, *outlines*, and *tools*. What this does is draw on an existing metaphorical schema to present a vision and strategy that is cohesive and relatable.

Because literature also sees character in this way, means that it provides an additional discourse that compliments the study of character. What’s more, it means that such discussions can be synthesised with those students studying religious language, with its emphasis on symbol and analogy, in A-level Religious Education courses.

In the passage from the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* above, James explores the relationship between character and plot via a building metaphor, but such metaphors also structure the understanding of character within the texts’ very narratives. Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* uses similar building and container images:

Touchstone passage 12

But the truth was, Mr. Thornton was hard pressed. He felt it acutely in his vulnerable point--his pride in the commercial character which he had established for himself. Architect of his own fortunes, he attributed this to no special merit or qualities of his own, but to the power, which he believed that commerce gave to every brave, honest, and persevering man, to raise himself to a level from which he might see and read the great game of worldly success, and honestly, by such far-sightedness, command more power and influence than in any other mode of life. Far away, in the East and in the West, where his person would never be known, his name was to be regarded, and his wishes to be fulfilled, and his word pass like gold. That was the idea of merchant-life with which Mr. Thornton had started. "Her merchants be like princes," said his mother, reading the text aloud, as if it were a trumpet-call to invite her boy to the struggle. He was but like many others--men, women, and children--alive to distant, and dead to near things. He sought to possess the influence of a name in foreign countries and far-away seas,--to become the head of a firm that should be known for generations; and it had taken him long silent years to come even to a glimmering of what he might be now, to-day, here in his own town, his own factory, among his own people. He and they had led parallel lives--very close, but never touching--till the accident (or so it seemed) of his acquaintance with Higgins. Once brought face to face, man to man, with an individual of the masses around him, and (take notice) out of the character of master and workman, in the first instance, they had each begun to recognise that "we have all of us one human heart." It was the fine point of the wedge; and until now, when the apprehension of losing his connection with two or three of the workmen whom he had so lately begun to know as men,--of having a plan or two, which were experiments lying very close to his heart, roughly nipped off without trial,--gave a new poignancy to the subtle fear that came over him from time to time; until now, he had never recognised how much and how deep was the interest he had grown of late to feel in his position of manufacturer, simply because it led him into such close contact, and gave him the opportunity of so much power, among a race of people strange, shrewd, ignorant; but, above all, full of character and strong human feeling.

(Chapter 50, *North and South*, Elizabeth Gaskell)

This passage comes at point when Thornton is financially worse off for sticking to his principles, displaying virtue over financial gain. The metaphor “Architect of his own fortunes” as well as map imagery has similarities with the ways in which we talk about character. It is a field of associations that includes the idea of a moral ‘compass’ and tethers character virtue to the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY. The metaphorical image of a destination is of course helpful in a goal-driven pedagogy as well as to the novelist, for whom journeys have structured their narratives from the earliest texts of the Western canon, for example, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Stylistically, the passage is in Indirect Thought, which, owing to its often blurry distinction between the narrator and character voice, can offer a useful basis for discussing monetary and moral conflicts and how the author’s, narrator’s, character’s and reader’s stance may differ.

Such differences are often used by writers for ironic treatments of character. The following passage is one such treatment, one that centres on the line “the character of Vivaldi lay before him as a map.”

Touchstone passage 13

Schedoni almost instantly recovered himself; his features relaxed from their first expression, and that portentous darkness passed away from his countenance; but with a look that was still stern and haughty, he said, "Signor, however ignorant I may be of the subject of your discontent, I cannot misunderstand that your resentment is, to some extent or other, directed against myself as the cause of it. Yet I will not suppose, Signor; I say I will not suppose," raising his voice significantly, "that you have dared to brand me with the ignominious titles you have just uttered; but"—

"I have applied them to the author of my injuries," interrupted Vivaldi; "you, father, can best inform me whether they applied to yourself."

"I have then nothing to complain of," said Schedoni, adroitly, and with a sudden calmness, that surprised Vivaldi. "If you directed them against the author of your injuries, whatever they may be, I am satisfied."

The cheerful complacency, with which he spoke this, renewed the doubts of Vivaldi, who thought it nearly impossible that a man conscious of guilt could assume, under the very charge of it, the tranquil and dignified air which the confessor now displayed. He

began to accuse himself of having condemned him with passionate rashness, and gradually became shocked at the indecorum of his conduct towards a man of Schedoni's age and sacred profession. Those expressions of countenance, which had so much alarmed him, he was now inclined to think the effects of a jealous and haughty honour, and he almost forgot the malignity, which had mingled with Schedoni's pride, in sorrow for the offence that had provoked it. Thus, not less precipitate in his pity than his anger, and credulous alike to the passion of the moment, he was now as eager to apologize for his error, as he had been hasty in committing it. The frankness, with which he apologized and lamented the impropriety of his conduct would have won an easy forgiveness from a generous heart. Schedoni listened with apparent complacency and secret contempt. He regarded Vivaldi as a rash boy, who was swayed only by his passions; but while he suffered deep resentment for the evil in his character, he felt neither respect nor kindness for the good, for the sincerity, the love of justice, the generosity, which threw a brilliancy even on his foibles. Schedoni, indeed, saw only evil in human nature.

Had the heart of Vivaldi been less generous, he would now have distrusted the satisfaction, which the confessor assumed, and have discovered the contempt and malignity, that lurked behind the smile thus imperfectly masking his countenance. The confessor perceived his power, and the character of Vivaldi lay before him as a map. He saw, or fancied he saw every line and feature of its plan, and the relative proportions of every energy and weakness of its nature. He believed, also, he could turn the very virtues of this young man against himself, and he exulted, even while the smile of goodwill was yet upon his countenance, in anticipating the moment that should avenge him for the past outrage, and which, while Vivaldi was ingenuously lamenting it, he had apparently forgotten.

Schedoni was thus ruminating evil against Vivaldi, and Vivaldi was considering how he might possibly make Schedoni atonement for the affront he had offered him, when the Marchesa returned to the apartment; and perceived in the honest countenance of Vivaldi some symptoms of the agitation which had passed over it; his complexion was flushed, and his brow was slightly contracted. The face of Schedoni told nothing but

complacency, except that now and then when he looked at Vivaldi, it was with half shut eyes, that indicated treachery, or, at least, cunning, trying to conceal exasperated pride.

(Chapter 4, *The Italian*, Ann Radcliffe)

What is striking here is the overtly moral vocabulary being deployed. Thus, from the central metaphor of character as a 'map', individual separate words act as points of reference by which the characters assess each other. It is important to note here that the actions of neither of these characters is virtuous. Because such villainy is prevalent in literary fiction, it is hard to avoid their use in virtue literacy discussions. Nevertheless, such characters can provide foils by which to discuss undesirable behaviours and by which to calibrate an understanding of comparable virtuous behaviours. Crucial in establishing this critical view of character is attending to the stylistic tricks (irony, humour, judgement, etc.) by which authors themselves expose such behaviours and in doing so take a decidedly moral standpoint.

Suggested questions

- What are some of the most common metaphors we use to describe character?
- How can conceptual metaphors help structure our own understanding of character?
- What does Thornton mean when he describes the workers as 'full of character'? What does this tell us about what he has learned about judging character?
- Highlight all of the words that Radcliffe uses to describe virtuous characteristics and those that relate to non-virtuous characteristics. Does she use more virtuous than unvirtuous language? What does this tell us about the characters of Schedoni and Vivaldi?