COURAGE

Character in the Corpus
Approaches and Resources

Introduction

Each of the 'Character in the Corpus' discussions in the Virtue Insight blog 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

Courage means having the strength and will to know what you should do even though you may be afraid. (Jubilee Centre)

Touchstones

The classroom resources and associated commentary are centred on 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.

1. War

Soldiers and war frequent the literary canon and act as narrators and subject matter for the most famous of our classical texts. It is therefore unsurprising to find this legacy in the more recent canonical texts and its thematic focus in A-level syllabi. That focus is perhaps most apparent in the poetry selections for A-level (Brooke, Owen, and Sassoon) but is also evident in the prose list, notably:

- Pat Barker *Regeneration*
- Sebastian Faulks *Birdsong*
- Michael Frayn *Spies*
- Robert Graves *Goodbye to All That*
- Eric Maria Remarque *All Quiet on the Western Front*
- Rebecca West *The Return of the Soldier*

Yet to simply classify these as war texts neglects the reason for their inclusion as often painful commentaries on the consequences of war. In this light, courage becomes an illuminating concept by which to study these texts.

The diachronic fortunes of courage were already changing within nineteenth-century literature. In *Vanity Fair* (1848), Thackeray offers a metacommentary of courage's place in literary texts:

Touchstone passage 1

At last, George took Emmy's hand, and led her back into the bedroom, from whence he came out alone. The parting had taken place in that moment, and he was gone. "Thank Heaven that is over," George thought, bounding down the stair, his sword under his arm, as he ran swiftly to the alarm ground, where the regiment was mustered, and whither trooped men and officers hurrying from their billets; his pulse was throbbing and his cheeks flushed: the great game of war was going to be played, and he one of the players. What a fierce excitement of doubt, hope, and pleasure! What tremendous hazards of loss or gain! What were all the games of chance he had ever played compared to this one? Into all contests requiring athletic skill and courage, the young man, from his boyhood upwards, had flung himself with all his might. The champion of his school and his regiment, the bravos of his companions had followed him everywhere; from the boys' cricket-match to the garrison-races, he had won a hundred of triumphs; and wherever he went women and men had admired and envied him. What qualities are there for which a man gets so speedy a return of applause, as those of bodily superiority,

activity, and valour? Time out of mind strength and courage have been the theme of bards and romances; and from the story of Troy down to to-day, poetry has always chosen a soldier for a hero. I wonder is it because men are cowards in heart that they admire bravery so much, and place military valour so far beyond every other quality for reward and worship?

So, at the sound of that stirring call to battle, George jumped away from the gentle arms in which he had been dallying; not without a feeling of shame (although his wife's hold on him had been but feeble), that he should have been detained there so long. The same feeling of eagerness and excitement was amongst all those friends of his of whom we have had occasional glimpses, from the stout senior Major, who led the regiment into action, to little Stubble, the Ensign, who was to bear its colours on that day.

(William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Chapter 30)

The passage above displays the way Thackeray exploits characterisation and narration, using George as a foil by which to satirise enthusiasm for war. Specifically, the passage uses the form of a rhetorical question to offer a metacommentary on the role of literature in the exploration of courage.

It turns the question of whether readers identify with characters on its head, proposing that as readers we seek characters who are *not* like us, that this is not so much emulation but admiration, based on a vicarious admission of our own shortcomings. Virtue is not so much a model as a space circumscribing courage as an ideal only possible in fiction, not in reality. As such, Thackeray's perspective may be seen as more Platonic than Aristotelian. It presents a counterargument to the idea that fiction motivates emulation, suggesting rather the reverse.

But Thackeray's criticism is broader, more socially concerned as the text interrogates the notion of courage as being one that necessarily pertains to military prowess. Chapter 32, for example, details the end of the war; despite courage of the regiment, they are overwhelmed by French forces. Against the character of Jos, a lampooned as a deserting officer, he compares the courage of woman, Mrs O'Dowd and in so doing, Thackeray broadens the understanding of courage and satirises it with respect to military personnel.

2. Gender

Thackeray thereby illustrates a feature of courage that recurs in canonical fiction that sets it apart from other texts in its association with female characters. In *North and South*, Gaskell narrates how Margaret summons courage to respond to a worker's strike:

Touchstone passage 2

> The women gathered round the windows, fascinated to look on the scene which terrified them. Mrs. Thornton, the women-servants, Margaret,--all were there. Fanny had returned, screaming upstairs as if pursued at every step, and had thrown herself in hysterical sobbing on the sofa. Mrs. Thornton watched for her son, who was still in the mill. He came out, looked up at them--the pale cluster of faces--and smiled good courage to them, before he locked the factory door. Then he called to one of the women to come down and undo his own door, which Fanny had fastened behind her in her mad flight. Mrs. Thornton herself went. And the sound of his well-known and commanding voice, seemed to have been like the taste of blood to the infuriated multitude outside. Hitherto they had been voiceless, wordless, needing all their breath for their hard-laboured efforts to break down the gates. But now, hearing him speak inside, they set up such a fierce, unearthly groan, that even Mrs. Thornton was white with fear as she preceded him into the room. He came in a little flushed, but his eyes gleamed, as in answer to the trumpet-call of danger, and with a proud look of defiance on his face, that made him a noble, if not a handsome man. Margaret had always dreaded lest her courage should fail her in any emergency, and she should be proved to be, what she dreaded lest she was--a coward. But now, in this real great time of reasonable fear and nearness of terror, she forgot herself, and felt only an intense sympathy--intense to painfulness--in the interests of the moment.
>
> (Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, Chapter 22)

This broader conceptualisation of courage is particularly useful to virtue literacy, because it underscores its universality. The passage above not only opens up discussion to include courage with respect to women but also with respect to adversity beyond a warring enemy. It conceives courage as a civic virtue and one that, in encompassing different activity and actors, provides a provocative springboard from which to discuss the differing definitions of courage. Its association with another (often gendered) virtue 'sympathy', also provides material for considering its relationship to a broader constellation of virtues.

Touchstone passage 3

The plan which had now occurred to me was to get out at my sitting-room window on to this roof, to creep along noiselessly till I reached that part of it which was immediately over the library window, and to crouch down between the flower-pots, with my ear against the outer railing. If Sir Percival and the Count sat and smoked to-night, as I had seen them sitting and smoking many nights before, with their chairs close at the open window, and their feet stretched on the zinc garden seats which were placed under the verandah, every word they said to each other above a whisper (and no long conversation, as we all know by experience, can be carried on IN a whisper) must inevitably reach my ears. If, on the other hand, they chose to-night to sit far back inside the room, then the chances were that I should hear little or nothing--and in that case, I must run the far more serious risk of trying to outwit them downstairs.

Strongly as I was fortified in my resolution by the desperate nature of our situation, I hoped most fervently that I might escape this last emergency. My courage was only a woman's courage after all, and it was very near to failing me when I thought of trusting myself on the ground floor, at the dead of night, within reach of Sir Percival and the Count.

(Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, Chapter 9)

In *The Woman in White*, Marian spies on Count Fosco and Percival in what may be interpreted as a negative construal of women's courage but upends this cultural convention– the fear being that courage overspills into danger.

It also exploits courage for literary effect of suspense – it rests on a top-down assumption by the reader that a female character will be more vulnerable, thus it is not so much a display of courage as a conceit that raises the danger stakes. As such, readers empathically share the feelings of a characters' fear in ways that may be more vicarious than virtuous. In essence, courage is used as a literary conceit for the whole novel is built on spying (Charlotte Bronte had used this conceit to great effect in her novel *Villette* six years earlier). That these strong women involved in secretive machinations provided the ingredients for the Sensation novels of the 1860s and 1870s suggests the popular impact that courage had as a poetic conceit.

Nevertheless, portrayals of female courage are more often celebratory. Walker's introduction to *The Color Purple* states the "book's intent":

Touchstone passage 4

WHATEVER ELSE *The Color Purple* has been taken for during the years since its publication, it remains for me the theological work examining the journey from the religious back to the spiritual that I spent much of my adult life, prior to writing it, seeking to avoid. Having recognized myself as a worshiper of Nature by the age of eleven, because my spirit resolutely wandered out the window to find trees and wind during Sunday sermons, I saw no reason why, once free, I should bother with religious matters at all.

I would have thought that a book that begins 'Dear God' would immediately have been identified as a book about the desire to encounter, to hear from, the Ultimate Ancestor. Perhaps it is a sign of our times that this was infrequently the case. Or perhaps it is the pagan transformation of God from patriarchal male supremacist into trees, stars, wind, and everything else, that camouflaged for many readers the book's intent: to explore the difficult path of someone who starts out in life already a spiritual captive, but who, through her own courage and the help of others, breaks free into the realization that she, like Nature itself, is a radiant expression of the heretofore perceived as quite distant Divine.

If it is true that it is what we run from that chases us, then *The Color Purple* (this color that is always a surprise but is everywhere in nature) is the book that ran me down while I sat with my back to it in a field. Without the Great Mystery's word coming from any Sunday sermon or through any human mouth, there I heard and saw it moving in beauty across the grassy hills.

(Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, Preface)

As elsewhere, virtuous language attaches to the paratexts of the novels (that is, the prefaces, introductions, author acknowledgements, etc.) meaning that this has an overall effect of framing the narrative in virtue terms. In essence, this lends weight to the portrayal of courage within the text, a fact that is underscored here by Walker's adoption of religious discourse.

Another aspect of this passage that is relevant to classroom discussion is that it employs the NARRATIVE IS A JOURNEY metaphor. Rather than a literary or poetic conceit, this metaphor is something that informs our everyday conversation and the way we make sense of our lives. For Angelou, courage enables this metaphorical journeying, and a close

analysis on the imagery used to describe courage and life provides the grounds for deep reflection on the way we understand courage.

3. Plot

As an alternative to imagery accounts, perhaps the most effective explorations of courage pertain to plot, particularly those incidents that involve narrative forking paths or moral dilemmas. Hardy, like those writers above, also portrays courageous female protagonists. 'The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion' tells of how Phyllis intends to break a stale engagement to follow a soldier to Germany. At the moment of their elopement however, she overhears her intended (who has returned, apologetic) and is faced with a moral dilemma: should she follow her feelings or stay true to her responsibilities, promises, and commitments?

Touchstone passage 5

Phyllis was so conscience-stricken that she was at first inclined to follow them; but a moment's reflection led her to feel that it would only be bare justice to Matthäus to wait till he arrived, and explain candidly that she had changed her mind—difficult as the struggle would be when she stood face to face with him. She bitterly reproached herself for having believed reports which represented Humphrey Gould as false to his engagement, when, from what she now heard from his own lips, she gathered that he had been living full of trust in her. But she knew well enough who had won her love. Without him her life seemed a dreary prospect, yet the more she looked at his proposal the more she feared to accept it—so wild as it was, so vague, so venturesome. She had promised Humphrey Gould, and it was only his assumed faithlessness which had led her to treat that promise as nought. His solicitude in bringing her these gifts touched her; her promise must be kept, and esteem must take the place of love. She would preserve her self-respect. She would stay at home, and marry him, and suffer.

Phyllis had thus braced herself to an exceptional fortitude.

[…]

For one moment she was sufficiently excited to be on the point of rushing forward and linking her fate with his. But she could not. The courage which at the critical instant failed Cleopatra of Egypt could scarcely be expected of Phyllis Grove.

(Thomas Hardy, 'The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion')

Here, Hardy contrasts fortitude (attributed to Phyllis) but not courage. What is striking is the dramatisation of Phyllis's reflection. In terms of classroom discussion, the key question is does Phyllis choose correctly? The plot makes the answer to this question ambivalent. First, her betrothed admits he is married, suggesting her choice was foolish and that her behaviour was strikingly similar to his. But later, there is the narration of the execution of two deserters:

Touchstone passage 6

As the volley resounded there arose a shriek from the wall of Dr. Grove's garden, and some one fell down inside; but nobody among the spectators without noticed it at the time. The two executed Hussars were Matthäus Tina and his friend Christoph. The soldiers on guard placed the bodies in the coffins almost instantly; but the colonel of the regiment, an Englishman, rode up and exclaimed in a stern voice: 'Turn them out—as an example to the men!'

(Thomas Hardy, 'The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion')

The story offers the possibility for a teacher to present the story in two halves, to have pupils speculate on (even do some creative writing around) the possible courses of action and their consequences. What is key here is point of view – Hardy shifts the perspective from that of Phyllis, with whom we have aligned throughout, to an unnamed and disembodied shriek from a pronominal "some one". Examining such shifts in point of view can be an effective way of dovetailing the exploration of narrative techniques and the reflection on action from different perspectives.

4. Society

What many of the A-level set texts do (being more recent than those of classical literature) is to transpose an abstract concept lie courage from the battlefield to the everyday, thereby entailing a meaning perhaps more akin to the understanding of fortitude (meeting adversity with strength).

Sister Carrie is a novel that explores the courage of its titular character. Carrie lacks courage owing to her social situation as a wage-seeker, which leaves her with a "weakening heart" and "overcome with shame". Construing her social situation thus results in her description via terms describing a lack of courage, including "cowardice" and requiring societal mechanisms of encouragement to "restore her courage which had fallen low". Superficially, Carrie would appear to offer an interesting counterpoint to many of the characters in the corpus, but what is notable is Dreiser's novel is a broader social critique of the systems that enable courage to flourish. In other words, these descriptions ironically adopt the prevailing, uncaring society in which she finds herself.

This socio-economic appraisal of courage is evident also in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*:

Touchstone passage 7

He had noticed and picked out these changes within the first days of his return, because he had known the Ilmorog of Nyakinyua, of the mythical Mwathi and of Njuguna and Ruoro. But on looking back on all the places he had been to he could discern the same pattern: rapid in some places, slow in others, but emerging all the time in all of them. There was no other place to which he could turn. Further education? He had lost his chance: besides, what else was there to learn besides what he had experienced with his eyes and hands? Land? There was no land – he was born into a landless home. But even those with land: for how long could it continue to be subdivided into plots and sub-plots so that each son could own a piece? Why, anyway, should soil, any soil, which after all was what was Kenya, be owned by an individual? Kenya, the soil, was the people's common shamba, and there was no way it could be right for a few, or a section, or a single nationality, to inherit for their sole use what was communal, any more than it would be right for a few sons and daughters to own and monopolize their father or mother. It was better for him to get reconciled to his situation: since the only thing that he had now was his two hands, he would somehow sell its creative power to whoever would buy it and then join with all the other hands in ensuring that at least they had a fair share of what their thousand sets of fingers produced.

At least he would not, he could not accept the static vision of Wanja's logic. It was too ruthless, and it could only lead to despair and self- or mutual annihilation. For what was the point of a world in which one could only be clean by wiping his dirt and shit and urine on others? A world in which one could only be healthy by making others carry one's leprosy? A world in which one could only be saintly and moral and upright by prostituting others? Why, anyway, should the victims of a few people's cleanliness and health and saintliness and wealth be expected to always accept their lot? The true lesson of history was this: that the so-called victims, the poor, the downtrodden, the masses, had always struggled with spears and arrows, with their hands and songs of courage and hope, to end their oppression and exploitation: that they would continue struggling until a human kingdom came: a world in which goodness and beauty and strength and courage would be seen not in how cunning one can be, not in how much

power to oppress one possessed, but only in one's contribution in creating a more humane world in which the inherited inventive genius of man in culture and science from all ages and climes would be not the monopoly of a few, but for the use of all, so that all flowers in all their different colours would ripen and bear fruits and seeds. And the seeds would be put into the ground and they would once again sprout and flower in rain and sunshine. If Abdulla could choose a brother, why couldn't they all do the same? Choose brothers and sisters in sweat, in toil, in struggle, and stand by one another and strive for that kingdom?

These thoughts matured as for six months he worked in the Theng'eta Breweries as a counting clerk.

(Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*)

Thiong'o's novel outlines a modern conception of courage closely entwined with issues of social justice, similar to that of Dreiser. Key here is the interior monologue, making explicit the virtue reasoning that Karega undertakes. The repeated rhetorical questions effectively evoke the limits of debate and Karega's own voice. Its scepticism also matches that of Dreiser, and, as such, the passages offer interesting companion pieces to the similar understanding of virtue within different global contexts.

5. Courage and other virtues

A notable feature of virtues in the A-level corpus is their tendency to cluster. This means that the corpus offers a condensed samples by which to explore a number of virtues and, as mentioned above, to explore them in relation to one another.

In *Frankenstein*, courage, tempered with foolhardiness, is discussed in another exploration akin to Aristotle's golden mean. Walton writes of Victor dying but exhorting his men to continue, to display courage in the face of danger:

Touchstone passage 8

"What do you mean? What do you demand of your captain? Are you, then, so easily turned from your design? Did you not call this a glorious expedition?

"And wherefore was it glorious? Not because the way was smooth and placid as a southern sea, but because it was full of dangers and terror, because at every new incident your fortitude was to be called forth and your courage exhibited, because danger and death surrounded it, and these you were to brave and overcome. For this was it a glorious, for this was it an honourable undertaking. You were hereafter to be

hailed as the benefactors of your species, your names adored as belonging to brave men who encountered death for honour and the benefit of mankind. And now, behold, with the first imagination of danger, or, if you will, the first mighty and terrific trial of your courage, you shrink away and are content to be handed down as men who had not strength enough to endure cold and peril; and so, poor souls, they were chilly and returned to their warm firesides. Why, that requires not this preparation; ye need not have come thus far and dragged your captain to the shame of a defeat merely to prove yourselves cowards. Oh! Be men, or be more than men. Be steady to your purposes and firm as a rock. This ice is not made of such stuff as your hearts may be; it is mutable and cannot withstand you if you say that it shall not. Do not return to your families with the stigma of disgrace marked on your brows. Return as heroes who have fought and conquered and who know not what it is to turn their backs on the foe."

He spoke this with a voice so modulated to the different feelings expressed in his speech, with an eye so full of lofty design and heroism, that can you wonder that these men were moved? They looked at one another and were unable to reply. I spoke; I told them to retire and consider of what had been said, that I would not lead them farther north if they strenuously desired the contrary, but that I hoped that, with reflection, their courage would return.

They retired and I turned towards my friend, but he was sunk in languor and almost deprived of life.

How all this will terminate, I know not, but I had rather die than return shamefully, my purpose unfulfilled. Yet I fear such will be my fate; the men, unsupported by ideas of glory and honour, can never willingly continue to endure their present hardships.

(Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, September 5th)

The texture of Shelley's text with its mix of metaphors and its use of repetition make this a fertile passage for close-text analysis. Of particular relevance to virtue literacy would be to pay close attention to all of the words that are synonyms of courage. That the passage is reminiscent of exhortatory battle cries is not accidental. This raises the interesting question of the way in which language itself has been manipulated to bolster courage and provide encouragement.

There is no denying that the diachronic fortunes of courage has been mixed, specifically in its noblesse with respect to war. *Goodbye to All That* offers a critique of patriotism in the trenches and details how the presentation of courage in newspaper reports is resented. Its 'attack', though, seems to be aimed at the disproportionate display

of courage based on class or rank, singling out the lack of courage shown by regimental chaplains compared with doctors. This raises an interesting parallel seen across the literary canon, namely, to whom do we turn as our courageous role models?

Thus, courage inevitably becomes entwined with one virtue in particular: reflection. Towards the end of *David Copperfield*, our titular narrator reflects on past events from abroad:

Touchstone passage 9

I had always felt my weakness, in comparison with her constancy and fortitude; and now I felt it more and more. Whatever I might have been to her, or she to me, if I had been more worthy of her long ago, I was not now, and she was not. The time was past. I had let it go by, and had deservedly lost her.

That I suffered much in these contentions, that they filled me with unhappiness and remorse, and yet that I had a sustaining sense that it was required of me, in right and honour, to keep away from myself, with shame, the thought of turning to the dear girl in the withering of my hopes, from whom I had frivolously turned when they were bright and fresh-which consideration was at the root of every thought I had concerning her-is all equally true. I made no effort to conceal from myself, now, that I loved her, that I was devoted to her; but I brought the assurance home to myself, that it was now too late, and that our long-subsisting relation must be undisturbed.

I had thought, much and often, of my Dora's shadowing out to me what might have happened, in those years that were destined not to try us; I had considered how the things that never happen, are often as much realities to us, in their effects, as those that are accomplished. The very years she spoke of, were realities now, for my correction; and would have been, one day, a little later perhaps, though we had parted in our earliest folly. I endeavoured to convert what might have been between myself and Agnes, into a means of making me more self-denying, more resolved, more conscious of myself, and my defects and errors. Thus, through the reflection that it might have been, I arrived at the conviction that it could never be.

(Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, Chapter 58)

This passage omits any mention of the word courage, opting instead for 'fortitude'. Again, synonyms can provide the basis for classroom discussions of the multiple ways in which courage is talked about, and also, crucially, understood. Of note here is the way in which

the meaning of fortitude has shifted, from that of physical to mental strength – a kind of etymological journey that entails the MIND IS A BODY conceptual metaphor. This shift from physical to mental is a common journey for meanings, perhaps motivated by the fact that embodied experience shapes conceptual understanding. For fortitude, this has resulted in its usage today having lost its 'physical' meaning, in this respect, mirroring the more diffuse meaning of courage today.

Fortitude does, of course, entail another diachronic consideration, in the sense that it has declined in usage. Whilst a decline in usage can present problems in terms of literacy, (i.e., its salience is less broadly understood, its use is marked in ways that, particularly with 'archaic' terms, seems 'stuffy'), such a decline does have one advantage. Its absence from common use means an exclusivity and specificity of meaning. For fortitude, this means it has accrued its particular meaning of courage in the face of adversity.

Finally, the passage underscores how the practice of writing and reflection are also entwined, but with a recognition of the limits of memory as well as the (un)reliability of language to convey truth. Note, for instance, the repetition of 'recall'. Repetition should always arouse suspicion; the narrator is drawing attention to the processes of memory as narrative and that feeling underpins David's reflection. This passage's value to virtue literacy therefore may lie less in its content and more in its form. As one of the main strategies for promoting virtue reflection is writing (for instance, journaling), the passage (and, by extension, the corpus) provides not only examples of virtue in context but also exemplar frameworks for students' own reflective writing.