

VIRTUE

Character in the Corpus
Approaches and Resources

May 2021

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 for Character and Virtues](#) 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.

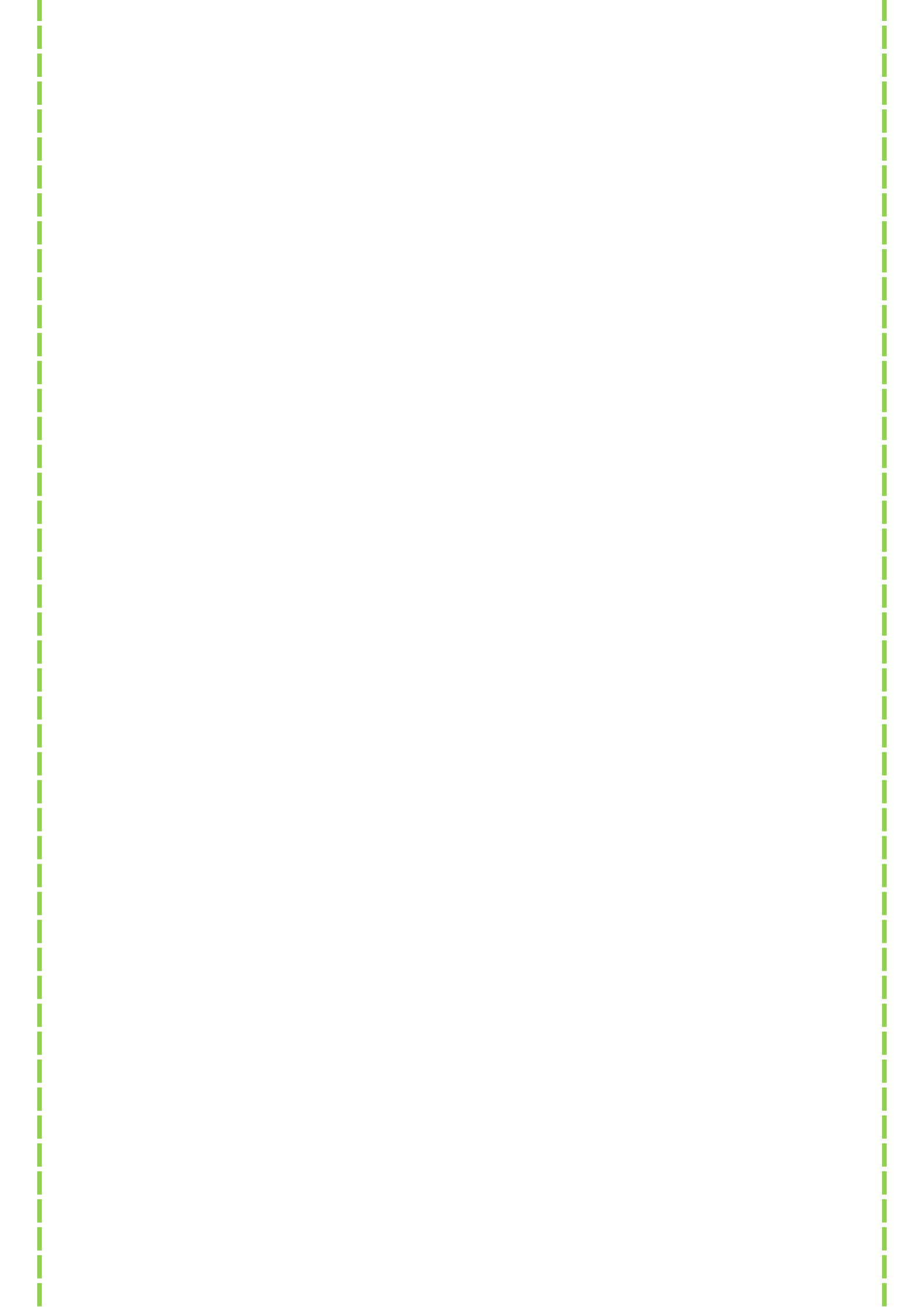
This set of resources includes five different approaches to 'character' and how it is treated within literature, alongside touchstone passages drawn from the A-Level set texts with associated commentary detailing how character may be discussed in relation to pupils' literary studies.

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

Virtues are positive personal strengths that are empowering and are a key to fulfilling an individual's potential. Human flourishing requires the acquisition and development of intellectual, moral, and civic virtues, excellence specific to diverse domains of practice or human endeavour, and generic virtues of self-management (known as enabling or performance virtues) (Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues, 2017, pp.1-4).



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 virtue 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. Commentaries on virtue

Fiction, particularly literary fiction, is prone to reflect on the practice of writing, and many of these commentaries reflect on the purpose of writing in which virtue is a key consideration. At one level, fiction is comprised of characters and actions that present exemplars of moral virtue, often contending with a world of vice. In her Preface to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Bronte rebuffs those critics who take issue with the novel's realistic portrayal of vice.

Touchstone passage I

My object in writing the following pages was not simply to amuse the Reader; neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public: I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it. But as the priceless treasure too frequently hides at the bottom of a well, it needs some courage to dive for it, especially as he that does so will be likely to incur more scorn and obloquy for the mud and water into which he has ventured to plunge, than thanks for the jewel he procures; as, in like manner, she who undertakes the cleansing of a careless bachelor's apartment will be liable to more abuse for the dust she raises than commendation for the clearance she effects. Let it not be imagined, however, that I consider myself competent to reform the errors and abuses of society, but only that I would fain contribute my humble quota towards so good an aim; and if I can gain the public ear at all, I would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense.

As the story of 'Agnes Grey' was accused of extravagant over-colouring in those very parts that were carefully copied from the life, with a most scrupulous avoidance of all exaggeration, so, in the present work, I find myself censured for depicting CON AMORE, with 'a morbid love of the coarse, if not of the brutal,' those scenes which, I will venture to say, have not been more painful for the most fastidious of my critics to read than they were for me to describe. I may have gone too far; in which case I shall be careful not to trouble myself or my readers in the same way again; but when we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear. To represent a bad thing in its least

offensive light is, doubtless, the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue; but is it the most honest, or the safest? Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers? Oh, reader! if there were less of this delicate concealment of facts - this whispering, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace, there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience.

I would not be understood to suppose that the proceedings of the unhappy scapegrace, with his few profligate companions I have here introduced, are a specimen of the common practices of society - the case is an extreme one, as I trusted none would fail to perceive; but I know that such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain. But, at the same time, if any honest reader shall have derived more pain than pleasure from its perusal, and have closed the last volume with a disagreeable impression on his mind, I humbly crave his pardon, for such was far from my intention; and I will endeavour to do better another time, for I love to give innocent pleasure. Yet, be it understood, I shall not limit my ambition to this - or even to producing 'a perfect work of art': time and talents so spent, I should consider wasted and misapplied. Such humble talents as God has given me I will endeavour to put to their greatest use; if I am able to amuse, I will try to benefit too; and when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I WILL speak it, though it be to the prejudice of my name and to the detriment of my reader's immediate pleasure as well as my own.

(Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Preface)

Honesty is a virtue considered critical to fiction, most evident in the Victorian moniker "honest reader". The implication of collocating these two words is that reading and writing are honest. Literary fiction's commitment to truth carves a specifically moral role for the writer. Albeit a concern of writers and commentators from antiquity, it is in the Victorian and modernist novel that it is most fully expressed as an anxiety of the writing process, evident in the commentaries like that of Anne Brontë above.

Underpinning this is the idea that Anne Brontë's own character is on the line, evident in the criticism her novel initially received. One of those critics was her sister Charlotte, who actually prevented further publications after Anne had died. In her Preface to *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë is sceptical of the role of fiction to teach virtue in place of scripture: a good book is not *the* good book.

Touchstone passage 2

Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee, is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns.

These things and deeds are diametrically opposed: they are as distinct as is vice from virtue. Men too often confound them: they should not be confounded: appearance should not be mistaken for truth; narrow human doctrines, that only tend to elate and magnify a few, should not be substituted for the world-redeeming creed of Christ. There is -- I repeat it -- a difference; and it is a good, and not a bad action to mark broadly and clearly the line of separation between them.

The world may not like to see these ideas dissevered, for it has been accustomed to blend them; finding it convenient to make external show pass for sterling worth -- to let white-washed walls vouch for clean shrines. It may hate him who dares to scrutinise and expose -- to rase the gilding, and show base metal under it -- to penetrate the sepulchre, and reveal charnel relics: but hate as it will, it is indebted to him.

Ahab did not like Micaiah, because he never prophesied good concerning him, but evil; probably he liked the sycophant son of Chenaannah better; yet might Ahab have escaped a bloody death, had he but stopped his ears to flattery, and opened them to faithful counsel.

There is a man in our own days whose words are not framed to tickle delicate ears: who, to my thinking, comes before the great ones of society, much as the son of Imlah came before the throned Kings of Judah and Israel; and who speaks truth as deep, with a power as prophet-like and as vital -- a mien as dauntless and as daring. Is the satirist of "Vanity Fair" admired in high places? I cannot tell; but I think if some of those amongst

whom he hurls the Greek fire of his sarcasm, and over whom he flashes the levin-brand of his denunciation, were to take his warnings in time -- they or their seed might yet escape a fatal Rimoth-Gilead.

Why have I alluded to this man? I have alluded to him, Reader, because I think I see in him an intellect profounder and more unique than his contemporaries have yet recognised; because I regard him as the first social regenerator of the day -- as the very master of that working corps who would restore to rectitude the warped system of things; because I think no commentator on his writings has yet found the comparison that suits him, the terms which rightly characterise his talent. They say he is like Fielding: they talk of his wit, humour, comic powers. He resembles Fielding as an eagle does a vulture: Fielding could stoop on carrion, but Thackeray never does. His wit is bright, his humour attractive, but both bear the same relation to his serious genius that the mere lambent sheet-lightning playing under the edge of the summer-cloud does to the electric death-spark hid in its womb. Finally, I have alluded to Mr. Thackeray, because to him -- if he will accept the tribute of a total stranger -- I have dedicated this second edition of "JANE EYRE."

(Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, Preface)

A recurrent feature is an awareness by writers that fiction plays a moral role, but that in the hands of the reader, its educative role may go awry. Despite Oscar Wilde's "Vice and virtue are to the artist materials for an art" and his stated commitment to the aesthetic mantra of art for art's sake, it is hard to escape the implicitly moral tone of a novel like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

What these writers are concerned with is interpretation – a critical component of virtue literacy approaches. A recurrent theme is that textual guides to virtue are insufficient and are thereby often parodied. *A Room with a View* takes for its subject matter a grand tour of Europe, the idea being that such a tour is an education, a rite of passage into adulthood. In the following passage, Lucy Honeychurch is lost, and Forster scrutinises the notions of education, art, interpretation, and virtue by bringing them together.

Touchstone passage 3

Lucy waited for nearly ten minutes. Then she began to get tired. The beggars worried her, the dust blew in her eyes, and she remembered that a young girl ought not to loiter in public places. She descended slowly into the Piazza with the intention of rejoining Miss Lavish, who was really almost too original. But at that moment Miss Lavish and her local-colour box moved also, and disappeared down a side street, both gesticulating largely. Tears of indignation came to Lucy's eyes partly because Miss Lavish had jilted her, partly because she had taken her Baedeker. How could she find her way home? How could she find her way about in Santa Croce? Her first morning was ruined, and she might never be in Florence again. A few minutes ago she had been all high spirits, talking as a woman of culture, and half persuading herself that she was full of originality. Now she entered the church depressed and humiliated, not even able to remember whether it was built by the Franciscans or the Dominicans. Of course, it must be a wonderful building. But how like a barn! And how very cold! Of course, it contained frescoes by Giotto, in the presence of whose tactile values she was capable of feeling what was proper. But who was to tell her which they were? She walked about disdainfully, unwilling to be enthusiastic over monuments of uncertain authorship or date. There was no one even to tell her which, of all the sepulchral slabs that paved the nave and transepts, was the one that was really beautiful, the one that had been most praised by Mr. Ruskin.

Then the pernicious charm of Italy worked on her, and, instead of acquiring information, she began to be happy. She puzzled out the Italian notices; the notices that forbade people to introduce dogs into the church; the notice that prayed people, in the interest of health and out of respect to the sacred edifice in which they found themselves, not to spit. She watched the tourists; their noses were as red as their Baedekers, so cold was Santa Croce. She beheld the horrible fate that overtook three Papists, two he-babies and a she-baby, who began their career by sousing each other with the Holy Water, and then proceeded to the Machiavelli memorial, dripping but hallowed. Advancing towards it very slowly and from immense distances, they touched the stone with their fingers, with their handkerchiefs, with their heads, and then retreated. What could this mean? They did it again and again. Then Lucy realized that they had mistaken

Ruskin, and entangled his feet in the features of a recumbent bishop. Protestant as she was, Lucy darted forward. She was too late. He fell heavily upon the prelate's upturned toes.

(E. M. Forster, *A Room with a View*, Chapter 2)

In this episode, Lucy, without her trusty Baedeker, is lost. Similarly lost, the pilgrims mistake Machiavelli for a saint., Forster offers a comic caution to the foibles of interpretation. That the contrast is between a villain and a saint lampoons tokenistic modes of learning. Such commentaries provide contrasting standpoints as to the ways in which writing itself is a virtuous act, but in so doing, reaffirm the notion that text has the capacity to influence and inform virtuous behaviour.

Suggested questions

- Can fictional texts be virtuous?
- In what ways do fictional texts embody the virtue of honesty?
- What are the differences between the two Brontë sisters' opinions of virtue and literature?
- What similarities are there between Lucy and the pilgrims? What virtues are each displaying and is Forster critiquing any of those virtues?
- Look at the texts' use of adjectives – how many of them relate to virtues?

2. Defining virtue

One of the most effective ways in which to develop pupils' understanding of a term like *virtue* is to look at its use in context. As the discussion above suggests, virtue is a concept at the forefront of the mind of many writers of literary fiction and becomes a concept embedded and scrutinised within the narratives of these texts. In the following extract, the characters of Collins's *The Woman in White* discuss their own understanding of virtue.

Touchstone passage 4

"It is truly wonderful," he said, "how easily Society can console itself for the worst of its shortcomings with a little bit of clap-trap. The machinery it has set up for the detection of crime is miserably ineffective—and yet only invent a moral epigram, saying that it works well, and you blind everybody to its blunders from that moment. Crimes cause their own detection, do they? And murder will out (another moral epigram), will it? Ask Coroners who sit at inquests in large towns if that is true, Lady Glyde. Ask secretaries of life-assurance companies if that is true, Miss Halcombe. Read your own public journals. In the few cases that get into the newspapers, are there not instances of slain bodies found, and no murderers ever discovered? Multiply the cases that are reported by the cases that are NOT reported, and the bodies that are found by the bodies that are NOT found, and what conclusion do you come to? This. That there are foolish criminals who are discovered, and wise criminals who escape. The hiding of a crime, or the detection of a crime, what is it? A trial of skill between the police on one side, and the individual on the other. When the criminal is a brutal, ignorant fool, the police in nine cases out of ten win. When the criminal is a resolute, educated, highly-intelligent man, the police in nine cases out of ten lose. If the police win, you generally hear all about it. If the police lose, you generally hear nothing. And on this tottering foundation you build up your comfortable moral maxim that Crime causes its own detection! Yes—all the crime you know of. And what of the rest?"

"Devilish true, and very well put," cried a voice at the entrance of the boat-house. Sir Percival had recovered his equanimity, and had come back while we were listening to the Count.

“Some of it may be true,” I said, “and all of it may be very well put. But I don’t see why Count Fosco should celebrate the victory of the criminal over Society with so much exultation, or why you, Sir Percival, should applaud him so loudly for doing it.” “Do you hear that, Fosco?” asked Sir Percival. “Take my advice, and make your peace with your audience. Tell them virtue’s a fine thing—they like that, I can promise you.”

The Count laughed inwardly and silently, and two of the white mice in his waistcoat, alarmed by the internal convulsion going on beneath them, darted out in a violent hurry, and scrambled into their cage again.

“The ladies, my good Percival, shall tell me about virtue,” he said. “They are better authorities than I am, for they know what virtue is, and I don’t.” “You hear him?” said Sir Percival. “Isn’t it awful?”

“It is true,” said the Count quietly. “I am a citizen of the world, and I have met, in my time, with so many different sorts of virtue, that I am puzzled, in my old age, to say which is the right sort and which is the wrong.” [...] “Be good enough to go on, Count,” said his wife, with a spiteful reference to myself. “Oblige me by answering Miss Halcombe.” “Miss Halcombe is unanswerable,” replied the polite Italian; “that is to say, so far as she goes. Yes! I agree with her. John Bull does abhor the crimes of John Chinaman. He is the quickest old gentleman at finding out faults that are his neighbours’, and the slowest old gentleman at finding out the faults that are his own, who exists on the face of creation. Is he so very much better in this way than the people whom he condemns in their way? English Society, Miss Halcombe, is as often the accomplice as it is the enemy of crime. Yes! yes! Crime is in this country what crime is in other countries—a good friend to a man and to those about him as often as it is an enemy. A great rascal provides for his wife and family. The worse he is the more he makes them the objects for your sympathy. He often provides also for himself. A profligate spendthrift who is always borrowing money will get more from his friends than the rigidly honest man who only borrows of them once, under pressure of the direst want. In the one case the friends will not be at all surprised, and they will give. In the other case they will be very much surprised, and they will hesitate. Is the prison that Mr. Scoundrel lives in at the end of his career a more uncomfortable place than the workhouse that Mr. Honesty lives in at the end of his career? When John-Howard-Philanthropist wants to relieve misery he goes to find it in prisons, where crime is wretched—not in huts and hovels, where virtue is wretched too. Who is the English poet

who has won the most universal sympathy—who makes the easiest of all subjects for pathetic writing and pathetic painting? That nice young person who began life with a forgery, and ended it by a suicide—your dear, romantic, interesting Chatterton. Which gets on best, do you think, of two poor starving dressmakers—the woman who resists temptation and is honest, or the woman who falls under temptation and steals? You all know that the stealing is the making of that second woman’s fortune—it advertises her from length to breadth of good-humoured, charitable England—and she is relieved, as the breaker of a commandment, when she would have been left to starve, as the keeper of it. Come here, my jolly little Mouse! Hey! presto! pass! I transform you, for the time being, into a respectable lady. Stop there, in the palm of my great big hand, my dear, and listen. You marry the poor man whom you love, Mouse, and one half your friends pity, and the other half blame you. And now, on the contrary, you sell yourself for gold to a man you don’t care for, and all your friends rejoice over you, and a minister of public worship sanctions the base horror of the vilest of all human bargains, and smiles and smirks afterwards at your table, if you are polite enough to ask him to breakfast. Hey! presto! pass! Be a mouse again, and squeak. If you continue to be a lady much longer, I shall have you telling me that Society abhors crime—and then, Mouse, I shall doubt if your own eyes and ears are really of any use to you. Ah! I am a bad man, Lady Glyde, am I not? I say what other people only think, and when all the rest of the world is in a conspiracy to accept the mask for the true face, mine is the rash hand that tears off the plump pasteboard, and shows the bare bones beneath. I will get up on my big elephant’s legs, before I do myself any more harm in your amiable estimations—I will get up and take a little airy walk of my own. Dear ladies, as your excellent Sheridan said, I go—and leave my character behind me.”

(Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White*, Second Epoch, Part III)

Here, the concept of virtue is analysed, but by count Fosco. As the villain of the piece, his words should be viewed with some scepticism. His thoughts on virtue can therefore be lucratively discussed in the context of reliability and the authorities from which we can correctly understand what virtue means.

Because narrative is built on conflict, literary texts seem to revel in moral dilemmas and debates owing to their potential to increase narrative interest. Such passages are useful to character educators in that they not only scrutinise particular moral concepts,

but often examine multiple (and potentially conflicting) virtues and open up debates about moral adjudication. By way of example, the passages below illustrate some of the moral complexities that infuse Ann Radcliffe's Gothic novel *The Italian*.

Touchstone passage 5

"There can be no degradation, my Lord, where there is no vice," replied Vivaldi; "and are instances, pardon me, my Lord, there are some few instances in which it is virtuous to disobey."

"This paradoxical morality," said the Marchese, with passionate displeasure, "and this romantic language, sufficiently explain to me the character of your associates, and the innocence of her, whom you defend with so chivalric an air. Are you to learn, Signor, that you belong to your family, not your family to you; that you are only a guardian of its honour, and not at liberty to dispose of yourself? My patience will endure no more!"

(Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, Chapter 2)

"Pardon me, I am not so certain as to that," said the Confessor; "when justice happens to oppose prejudice, we are apt to believe it virtuous to disobey her. For instance, though the law of justice demands the death of this girl, yet because the law of the land forbears to enforce it, you, my daughter, even you! though possessed of a man's spirit, and his clear perceptions, would think that virtue bade her live, when it was only fear!"

"Ha!" exclaimed the Marchesa, in a low voice, "What is that you mean? You shall find I have a man's courage also."

(Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, Chapter 13)

"The Marchesa has prejudices, father, as you well know; he is a sensible man, but he is sometimes mistaken, and he is incorrigible in error. He has the faults of a mind that is merely well disposed; he is destitute of the discernment and the energy which would make it great. If it is necessary to adopt a conduct, that departs in the smallest degree from those common rules of morality which he has cherished, without examining them,

from his infancy, he is shocked, and shrinks from action. He cannot discriminate the circumstances, that render the same action virtuous or vicious. How then, father, are we to suppose he would approve of the bold inflictions we meditate?"

(Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, Chapter 14)

Radcliffe's novel revels in paradoxes and juxtapositions and many of them are rendered in what often seem to be Socratic dialogues. Such dialogues can provide the material for discussing moral complexities via negotiation as well as the mechanism by which to reflect on skills in arbitrating between conflicting virtues.

As stated, seeing these words in context offers one route to enhancing the comprehension of terms like *virtue*. Yet context can be assessed at a broader, corpus level to show whether there are any patterns in the contexts in which a word like *virtue* occurs. One such is its association (collocation) with the word *pure*. This not only suggests that these two concepts are linked but also indicates a broader meaning of the word *virtue*. Indeed, another contextual feature of *virtue* apparent in the A-level literature corpus is its association with female characters. Thus, the word *virtue* is often used in the sense that it refers specifically to a woman's virginity.

This conception of *virtue* is seen in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. In the following touchstone, *virtue* again becomes the subject for discussion.

Touchstone passage 6

"Cannot you describe her? I am sure she is very pretty, Angel"

"Of that there can be no question!" he said, with a zest which covered its bitterness. "And that she is pure and virtuous goes without question?"

"Pure and virtuous, of course, she is"

"I can see her quite distinctly. You said the other day that she was fine in figure; roundly built; had deep red lips like Cupid's bow; dark eyelashes and brows, an immense rope of hair like a ship's cable; and large eyes violet-blue-blackish."

"I did, mother."

"I quite see her. And living in such seclusion she naturally had scarce ever seen any young man from the world without till she saw you."

"Scarcely."

"You were her first love?"

“Of course.”

“There are worse wives than these simple, rosy-mouthed, robust girls of the farm. Certainly I could have wished—well, since my son is to be an agriculturist, it is perhaps but proper that his wife should have been accustomed to an outdoor life.”

His father was less inquisitive; but when the time came for the chapter from the Bible which was always read before evening prayers, the Vicar observed to Mrs Clare—

“I think, since Angel has come, that it will be more appropriate to read the thirty-first of Proverbs than the chapter which we should have had in the usual course of our reading?”

“Yes, certainly,” said Mrs Clare. “The words of King Lemuel” (she could cite chapter and verse as well as her husband). “My dear son, your father has decided to read us the chapter in Proverbs in praise of a virtuous wife. We shall not need to be reminded to apply the words to the absent one. May Heaven shield her in all her ways!”

A lump rose in Clare’s throat. The portable lectern was taken out from the corner and set in the middle of the fireplace, the two old servants came in, and Angel’s father began to read at the tenth verse of the aforesaid chapter—

“Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. She riseth while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household. She girdeth her loins with strength and strengtheneth her arms. She perceiveth that her merchandise is good; her candle goeth not out by night. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children arise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.”

When prayers were over, his mother said—

“I could not help thinking how very aptly that chapter your dear father read applied, in some of its particulars, to the woman you have chosen. The perfect woman, you see, was a working woman; not an idler; not a fine lady; but one who used her hands and her head and her heart for the good of others. ‘Her children arise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. Many daughters have done virtuously, but she excelleth them all.’ Well, I wish I could have seen her, Angel. Since she is pure and chaste, she would have been refined enough for me.”

Clare could bear this no longer. His eyes were full of tears, which seemed like drops of molten lead. He bade a quick good night to these sincere and simple souls whom he loved so well; who knew neither the world, the flesh, nor the devil in their own hearts, only as something vague and external to themselves. He went to his own chamber.

(Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Chapter 39)

The passage is one that views virtue in specifically scriptural terms. Mr and Mrs Clare imagine Tess in idealistic terms, much to Angel's discomfort. It is worth noting that the novel is subtitled "A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented", indicating an emphasis on purity, femininity as well as the writerly obligation to honesty discussed above. Putting his treatment of virtue into dialogue effectively distances Hardy from wholehearted endorsement, creating an ambivalent attitude towards the type of virtue presented by the Clares. Of course, such examples show not just how the meaning of moral vocabulary has changed over time, but also how these shifts reveal the way in which morality itself has changed.

Suggested questions

- What are some of the difficulties Count Fosco identifies in trying to define virtue?
- How has the definition and understanding of virtue changed over time?
- What are some of the texts from which we get our understanding of virtue?
- Why does Hardy focus the passage on a discussion of Tess's virtue? What do you think Angel's response tells us about his (and Hardy's) feelings towards virtue?

3. Virtue and Irony

One of the reasons that virtue has become an apt subject for literature is that it is a source of irony. Satire, for example, operates by pointing out mankind's failings, for which (in mankind's morality at least) the yardstick is virtue. As in the passages above, it is often the characters who are least virtuous that expound on virtue as a subject most extensively, providing a convenient way for writers to explore virtue in a way that is entertaining rather than moralising. The resulting stylistic effect is irony.

In his satire of nineteenth-century upper and middle-class life, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* is a collection of episodes through which reader wanders with its main character Becky Sharp. The distinctly ironic and moral tone of the novel is established in a preface that frames the entire narrative.

Touchstone passage 7

Yes, this is VANITY FAIR; not a moral place certainly; nor a merry one, though very noisy. Look at the faces of the actors and buffoons when they come off from their business; and Tom Fool washing the paint off his cheeks before he sits down to dinner with his wife and the little Jack Puddings behind the canvas. The curtain will be up presently, and he will be turning over head and heels, and crying, "How are you?"

A man with a reflective turn of mind, walking through an exhibition of this sort, will not be oppressed, I take it, by his own or other people's hilarity. An episode of humour or kindness touches and amuses him here and there—a pretty child looking at a gingerbread stall; a pretty girl blushing whilst her lover talks to her and chooses her fairing; poor Tom Fool, yonder behind the waggon, mumbling his bone with the honest family which lives by his tumbling; but the general impression is one more melancholy than mirthful. When you come home you sit down in a sober, contemplative, not uncharitable frame of mind, and apply yourself to your books or your business.

I have no other moral than this to tag to the present story of "Vanity Fair." Some people consider Fairs immoral altogether, and eschew such, with their servants and families: very likely they are right. But persons who think otherwise, and are of a lazy, or a benevolent, or a sarcastic mood, may perhaps like to step in for half an hour, and look at the performances. There are scenes of all sorts; some dreadful combats, some grand

and lofty horse-riding, some scenes of high life, and some of very middling indeed; some love-making for the sentimental, and some light comic business; the whole accompanied by appropriate scenery and brilliantly illuminated with the Author's own candles.

(William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Preface)

Be cautious then, young ladies; be wary how you engage. Be shy of loving frankly; never tell all you feel, or (a better way still), feel very little. See the consequences of being prematurely honest and confiding, and mistrust yourselves and everybody. Get yourselves married as they do in France, where the lawyers are the bridesmaids and confidantes. At any rate, never have any feelings which may make you uncomfortable, or make any promises which you cannot at any required moment command and withdraw. That is the way to get on, and be respected, and have a virtuous character in *Vanity Fair*.

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

Thackeray's preface draws on the idea that fiction is portraiture and performance, and this is at the heart of the novel's critique of vanity. Not only does he establish virtue as the counterpart to vanity, but because *virtue* can be found on several occasions in close proximity to book's title, he in effect foregrounds virtue as the novel's *raison d'être*.

Naturally, such juxtapositions are also good indicators of irony; take the description of Sir Pitt Crawley: "Great ministers and statesmen courted him; and in *Vanity Fair* he had a higher place than the most brilliant genius or spotless virtue." The text therefore provides a useful resource for close reading as rarely should its treatment of virtue be taken at face value. Even at its most apparently moral (note the second passage's fondness for imperatives), the novel's tone is treating such moralising ironically.

Throughout the A-level corpus, *virtue* often collocates with deceit, and for Thackeray treatment of vanity this is narrated through characters concerned with keeping up appearances contrary to reality. The following passage comes from Chapter 39, subtitled 'A Cynical Chapter'.

Touchstone passage 8

Our duty now takes us back for a brief space to some old Hampshire acquaintances of ours, whose hopes respecting the disposal of their rich kinswoman's property were so woefully disappointed. After counting upon thirty thousand pounds from his sister, it was a heavy blow to Bute Crawley to receive but five; out of which sum, when he had paid his own debts and those of Jim, his son at college, a very small fragment remained to portion off his four plain daughters. Mrs. Bute never knew, or at least never acknowledged, how far her own tyrannous behaviour had tended to ruin her husband. All that woman could do, she vowed and protested she had done. Was it her fault if she did not possess those sycophantic arts which her hypocritical nephew, Pitt Crawley, practised? She wished him all the happiness which he merited out of his ill-gotten gains. "At least the money will remain in the family," she said charitably. "Pitt will never spend it, my dear, that is quite certain; for a greater miser does not exist in England, and he is as odious, though in a different way, as his spendthrift brother, the abandoned Rawdon."

So Mrs. Bute, after the first shock of rage and disappointment, began to accommodate herself as best she could to her altered fortunes and to save and retrench with all her might. She instructed her daughters how to bear poverty cheerfully, and invented a thousand notable methods to conceal or evade it. She took them about to balls and public places in the neighbourhood, with praiseworthy energy; nay, she entertained her friends in a hospitable comfortable manner at the Rectory, and much more frequently than before dear Miss Crawley's legacy had fallen in. From her outward bearing nobody would have supposed that the family had been disappointed in their expectations, or have guessed from her frequent appearance in public how she pinched and starved at home. Her girls had more milliners' furniture than they had ever enjoyed before. They appeared perseveringly at the Winchester and Southampton assemblies; they penetrated to Cowes for the race-balls and regatta-gaieties there; and their carriage, with the horses taken from the plough, was at work perpetually, until it began almost to be believed that the four sisters had had fortunes left them by their aunt, whose name the family never mentioned in public but with the most tender gratitude and regard. I know no sort of lying which is more frequent in Vanity Fair than this, and it may be remarked how people who practise it take credit to themselves for their

hypocrisy, and fancy that they are exceedingly virtuous and praiseworthy, because they are able to deceive the world with regard to the extent of their means.

Mrs. Bute certainly thought herself one of the most virtuous women in England, and the sight of her happy family was an edifying one to strangers. They were so cheerful, so loving, so well-educated, so simple! Martha painted flowers exquisitely and furnished half the charity bazaars in the county. Emma was a regular County Bulbul, and her verses in the Hampshire Telegraph were the glory of its Poet's Corner. Fanny and Matilda sang duets together, Mamma playing the piano, and the other two sisters sitting with their arms round each other's waists and listening affectionately. Nobody saw the poor girls drumming at the duets in private. No one saw Mamma drilling them rigidly hour after hour. In a word, Mrs. Bute put a good face against fortune and kept up appearances in the most virtuous manner.

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

The passage offers an extended example of Thackeray's ironic treatment of virtue, and provides a useful text by which to navigate the ambivalent attitudes that writers display towards it. Mrs Bute and Becky offer useful subject for character studies. The following description comes from a chapter entitled: "In Which the Reader Is Introduced to the Very Best of Company".

Touchstone passage 9

But the finest sport of all after her presentation was to hear her talk virtuously. She had a few female acquaintances, not, it must be owned, of the very highest reputation in *Vanity Fair*. But being made an honest woman of, so to speak, Becky would not consort any longer with these dubious ones.

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

Thackeray's description of "virtuous Becky" render her in similar terms to Hardy's Tess as a "pure woman". Again, there is the overt association of virtue with femininity, which

for Thackeray means he can use Becky as a foil by which to expose the superficial behaviours of those that surround her. This is not to say that Becky is an uncomplicated role model of virtue. Her story is concerned with her own failings as much as her exemplary behaviour amidst a world of vanity.

Suggested questions

- How is Thackeray's treatment of virtue ironic? Does his irony have a moral or educative purpose?
- What specific virtues (or vices) do you think Thackeray is targeting in *Vanity Fair*?
- Compare the characters of Mrs Bute and Becky Sharp. In what ways might each of them be said to display virtue? Are they role models?
- In what ways is *virtue* treated ironically? How can this irony change a reader's understanding of *virtue*?

4. Educating virtue

The point of Thackeray's satire is educative. As his moral exhortations suggest, his expose of *Vanity Fair* and Becky's own journey are instructive. Yet as noted above, this is not an uncomplicated portrayal and more unfavourable characters within literary fiction, whilst definitely not exemplars, can provide useful instruction on the notion of virtue.

The opening of *Terrorist* is a challenging passage that questions the goals of education and its virtuous intent. Whilst the narrator takes aim at the insincerity of virtue, this is an assessment that Updike does not intend his readers to adopt.

Touchstone passage 10

DEVILS, Ahmad thinks. These devils seek to take away my God. All day long, at Central High School, girls sway and sneer and expose their soft bodies and alluring hair. Their bare bellies, adorned with shining navel studs and low-down purple tattoos, ask, What else is there to see? Boys strut and saunter along and look dead-eyed, indicating with their edgy killer gestures and careless scornful laughs that this world is all there is—a noisy varnished hall lined with metal lockers and having at its end a blank wall desecrated by graffiti and roller-painted over so often it feels to be coming closer by millimeters.

The teachers, weak Christians and non-observant Jews, make a show of teaching virtue and righteous self-restraint, but their shifty eyes and hollow voices betray their lack of belief. They are paid to say these things, by the city of New Prospect and the state of New Jersey. They lack true faith; they are not on the Straight Path; they are unclean. Ahmad and the two thousand other students can see them scuttling after school into their cars on the crackling, trash-speckled parking lot like pale crabs or dark ones restored to their shells, and they are men and women like any others, full of lust and fear and infatuation with things that can be bought. Infidels, they think safety lies in accumulation of the things of this world, and in the corrupting diversions of the television set. They are slaves to images, false ones of happiness and affluence. But even true images are sinful imitations of God, who can alone create. Relief at escaping their students unscathed for another day makes the teachers' chatter of farewell in the halls and on the parking lot too loud, like the rising excitement of drunks. The teachers revel

when they are away from the school. Some have the pink lids and bad breaths and puffy bodies of those who habitually drink too much. Some get divorces; some live with others unmarried. Their lives away from the school are disorderly and wanton and self-indulgent. They are paid to instill virtue and democratic values by the state government down in Trenton, and that Satanic government farther down, in Washington, but the values they believe in are Godless: biology and chemistry and physics. On the facts and formulas of these their false voices firmly rest, ringing out into the classroom. They say that all comes out of merciless blind atoms, which cause the cold weight of iron, the transparency of glass, the stillness of clay, the agitation of flesh. Electrons pour through copper threads and computer gates and the air itself when stirred to lightning by the interaction of water droplets. Only what we can measure and deduce from measurement is true. The rest is die passing dream that we call our selves.

(John Updike, *Terrorist*, Chapter 1)

Here we have another set of views about virtue and the superficiality of human behaviour, akin to those seen in the passages above. The difference here is the tone in which they are expressed. Updike foregrounds the narratorial voice as that of a radicalised individual. It is full of imagery that for all its poetry has a fervour that makes a reader suspicious. As such, the passage offers a useful text by which to explore the ways we understand virtue within modern society and from which authorities that conception of virtue is ultimately derived.

This notion of authority is intrinsically linked to those narratives that concern the education of virtue. Of all the texts that wrestle with the notion of educating virtue, *Frankenstein* is perhaps the best known. The monster is presented as a 'blank slate' to be educated, and reflects on his education with specific reference to literature.

Touchstone passage 11

The book from which Felix instructed Safie was Volney's *Ruins of Empires*. I should not have understood the purport of this book had not Felix, in reading it, given very minute explanations. He had chosen this work, he said, because the declamatory style was framed in imitation of the Eastern authors. Through this work I obtained a cursory knowledge of history and a view of the several empires at present existing in the world;

it gave me an insight into the manners, governments, and religions of the different nations of the earth. I heard of the slothful Asiatics, of the stupendous genius and mental activity of the Grecians, of the wars and wonderful virtue of the early Romans—of their subsequent degenerating—of the decline of that mighty empire, of chivalry, Christianity, and kings. I heard of the discovery of the American hemisphere and wept with Safie over the hapless fate of its original inhabitants.

These wonderful narrations inspired me with strange feelings. Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? He appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle and at another as all that can be conceived of noble and godlike. To be a great and virtuous man appeared the highest honour that can befall a sensitive being; to be base and vicious, as many on record have been, appeared the lowest degradation, a condition more abject than that of the blind mole or harmless worm. For a long time I could not conceive how one man could go forth to murder his fellow, or even why there were laws and governments; but when I heard details of vice and bloodshed, my wonder ceased and I turned away with disgust and loathing.

(Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Chapter 13)

The idea of the monster as a blank slate directly engages with the eighteenth-century philosophical debates about education. Here, Western civilisation provides the background for moral education with the fall of Rome providing a cautionary tale of man's virtue and vice. But what is also significant here is the idea that narration can inspire moral feelings.

The monster is undertaking an education into humanity albeit one that is exposed as false. In the novel's last passage, the humanity of the monster and the inhumanity of man suggests how virtue is indeed learnt.

Touchstone passage 12

You, who call Frankenstein your friend, seem to have a knowledge of my crimes and his misfortunes. But in the detail which he gave you of them he could not sum up the hours and months of misery which I endured wasting in impotent passions. For while I destroyed his hopes, I did not satisfy my own desires. They were for ever ardent and craving; still I desired love and fellowship, and I was still spurned. Was there no injustice in this? Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all humankind sinned against me? Why do you not hate Felix, who drove his friend from his door with contumely? Why do you not execrate the rustic who sought to destroy the saviour of his child? Nay, these are virtuous and immaculate beings! I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on. Even now my blood boils at the recollection of this injustice.

(Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, September 13)

This final passage speaks to the moral crux of *Frankenstein*, in which man's pretensions to be gods betray their failing. The obvious question that arises is to what extent the monster's sympathetic portrayal, despite his physical form and misdemeanours, renders him virtuous.

Suggested questions

- What are some of the virtues that Ahmad sees as lacking in society? How do you think Updike intends his readers to understand Ahmad's view of the world?
- Identify some of the adjectives that characterise the monster's view of man in *Frankenstein*. How many of these relate to virtue (or vice)?
- In what ways can stories teach virtue?
- Can we learn to be good from bad characters?

5. Virtue personified

The idea of a character being educated in virtue may account for the fact that virtue is often found in personification constructions. Take for example *The Italian*:

“Never!” replied the Confessor, warmly; “virtue never trembles; it is her glory, and sublimest attribute to be superior to danger, to despise it. The best principle is not virtue till it reaches this elevation.”

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

Such corresponding metaphors neatly fit the idea that virtue is an abstract concept that is embodied and are not restricted to literary fiction. Often, such imagery allows us to comprehend virtue in practicable terms, as Aristotle notes, a virtuous person who does not exercise virtue is like an athlete who sits on the sideline and watches. Similar images extend to individual virtues themselves (such as justice) and provide poets with the tools by which to embody vices (such as Milton in *Paradise Lost*). Indeed, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* we also get a personified vision of virtue feeding and exercising and the following passage uses a collection of metaphors by which the characters navigate their discussion of *virtue*.

Touchstone passage 13

‘But by such means,’ said I, ‘you will never render him virtuous.—What is it that constitutes virtue, Mrs. Graham? Is it the circumstance of being able and willing to resist temptation; or that of having no temptations to resist?—Is he a strong man that overcomes great obstacles and performs surprising achievements, though by dint of great muscular exertion, and at the risk of some subsequent fatigue, or he that sits in his chair all day, with nothing to do more laborious than stirring the fire, and carrying his food to his mouth? If you would have your son to walk honourably through the world, you must not attempt to clear the stones from his path, but teach him to walk firmly over them—not insist upon leading him by the hand, but let him learn to go alone.’

‘I will lead him by the hand, Mr. Markham, till he has strength to go alone; and I will clear as many stones from his path as I can, and teach him to avoid the rest—or walk firmly over them, as you say;—for when I have done my utmost, in the way of clearance, there will still be plenty left to exercise all the agility, steadiness, and circumspection he will ever have.—It is all very well to talk about noble resistance, and trials of virtue; but for fifty—

or five hundred men that have yielded to temptation, show me one that has had virtue to resist. And why should I take it for granted that my son will be one in a thousand?—and not rather prepare for the worst, and suppose he will be like his—like the rest of mankind, unless I take care to prevent it?’

‘You are very complimentary to us all,’ I observed.

‘I know nothing about you—I speak of those I do know—and when I see the whole race of mankind (with a few rare exceptions) stumbling and blundering along the path of life, sinking into every pitfall, and breaking their shins over every impediment that lies in their way, shall I not use all the means in my power to insure for him a smoother and a safer passage?’

‘Yes, but the surest means will be to endeavour to fortify him against temptation, not to remove it out of his way.’

‘I will do both, Mr. Markham. God knows he will have temptations enough to assail him, both from within and without, when I have done all I can to render vice as uninviting to him, as it is abominable in its own nature—I myself have had, indeed, but few incentives to what the world calls vice, but yet I have experienced temptations and trials of another kind, that have required, on many occasions, more watchfulness and firmness to resist than I have hitherto been able to muster against them. And this, I believe, is what most others would acknowledge who are accustomed to reflection, and wishful to strive against their natural corruptions.’

‘Yes,’ said my mother, but half apprehending her drift; ‘but you would not judge of a boy by yourself—and, my dear Mrs. Graham, let me warn you in good time against the error—the fatal error, I may call it—of taking that boy’s education upon yourself. Because you are clever in some things and well informed, you may fancy yourself equal to the task; but indeed you are not; and if you persist in the attempt, believe me you will bitterly repent it when the mischief is done.’

‘I am to send him to school, I suppose, to learn to despise his mother’s authority and affection!’ said the lady, with rather a bitter smile.

‘Oh, no!—But if you would have a boy to despise his mother, let her keep him at home, and spend her life in petting him up, and slaving to indulge his follies and caprices.’

‘I perfectly agree with you, Mrs. Markham; but nothing can be further from my principles and practice than such criminal weakness as that.’

‘Well, but you will treat him like a girl—you’ll spoil his spirit, and make a mere Miss Nancy of him—you will, indeed, Mrs. Graham, whatever you may think. But I’ll get Mr. Millward to talk to you about it:—he’ll tell you the consequences;—he’ll set it before you as plain as the day;—and tell you what you ought to do, and all about it;—and, I don’t doubt, he’ll be able to convince you in a minute.’

‘No occasion to trouble the vicar,’ said Mrs. Graham, glancing at me—I suppose I was smiling at my mother’s unbounded confidence in that worthy gentleman—‘Mr. Markham here thinks his powers of conviction at least equal to Mr. Millward’s. If I hear not him, neither should I be convinced though one rose from the dead, he would tell you. Well, Mr. Markham, you that maintain that a boy should not be shielded from evil, but sent out to battle against it, alone and unassisted—not taught to avoid the snares of life, but boldly to rush into them, or over them, as he may—to seek danger, rather than shun it, and feed his virtue by temptation,—would you—?’

‘I beg your pardon, Mrs. Graham—but you get on too fast. I have not yet said that a boy should be taught to rush into the snares of life,—or even wilfully to seek temptation for the sake of exercising his virtue by overcoming it;—I only say that it is better to arm and strengthen your hero, than to disarm and enfeeble the foe;—and if you were to rear an oak sapling in a hothouse, tending it carefully night and day, and shielding it from every breath of wind, you could not expect it to become a hardy tree, like that which has grown up on the mountain-side, exposed to all the action of the elements, and not even sheltered from the shock of the tempest.’

‘Granted;—but would you use the same argument with regard to a girl?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘No; you would have her to be tenderly and delicately nurtured, like a hot-house plant—taught to cling to others for direction and support, and guarded, as much as possible, from the very knowledge of evil. But will you be so good as to inform me why you make this distinction? Is it that you think she has no virtue?’

‘Assuredly not.’

‘Well, but you affirm that virtue is only elicited by temptation;—and you think that a woman cannot be too little exposed to temptation, or too little acquainted with vice, or anything connected therewith. It must be either that you think she is essentially so vicious, or so feeble-minded, that she cannot withstand temptation,—and though she may be pure and innocent as long as she is kept in ignorance and restraint, yet, being destitute of real virtue,

to teach her how to sin is at once to make her a sinner, and the greater her knowledge, the wider her liberty, the deeper will be her depravity,—whereas, in the nobler sex, there is a natural tendency to goodness, guarded by a superior fortitude, which, the more it is exercised by trials and dangers, is only the further developed—'

'Heaven forbid that I should think so!' I interrupted her at last.

'Well, then, it must be that you think they are both weak and prone to err, and the slightest error, the merest shadow of pollution, will ruin the one, while the character of the other will be strengthened and embellished—his education properly finished by a little practical acquaintance with forbidden things. Such experience, to him (to use a trite simile), will be like the storm to the oak, which, though it may scatter the leaves, and snap the smaller branches, serves but to rivet the roots, and to harden and condense the fibres of the tree. You would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others. Now I would have both so to benefit by the experience of others, and the precepts of a higher authority, that they should know beforehand to refuse the evil and choose the good, and require no experimental proofs to teach them the evil of transgression. I would not send a poor girl into the world, unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path; nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power or the will to watch and guard herself;—and as for my son—if I thought he would grow up to be what you call a man of the world—one that has "seen life," and glories in his experience, even though he should so far profit by it as to sober down, at length, into a useful and respected member of society—I would rather that he died to-morrow!—rather a thousand times!' she earnestly repeated, pressing her darling to her side and kissing his forehead with intense affection. He had already left his new companion, and been standing for some time beside his mother's knee, looking up into her face, and listening in silent wonder to her incomprehensible discourse.

'Well! you ladies must always have the last word, I suppose,' said I, observing her rise, and begin to take leave of my mother.

(Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Chapter 3)

The passage abounds in rich virtue imagery. It replicates a key task of virtue literacy in defining the abstract in concrete ways and in reasoning via the way of example. The start

of passage engages in the NARRATIVE IS A JOURNEY metaphor and personifies virtue as something to be nurtured and fed. It shares some of the concerns with those texts' that treat the education of virtue, and in this, the use of personification can be seen as an appropriate literary trope for portraying the embodiment of *virtue*.

Sister Carrie opens with reflections on the effect that the city can have on virtue. The city is personified: its characteristics are principally vices. As with Brontë, virtue is pitted against temptation and its character's moral progress seen in specifically 'journeying' terms.

Touchstone passage 14

When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility. The city has its cunning wiles, no less than the infinitely smaller and more human tempter. There are large forces which allure with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human. The gleam of a thousand lights is often as effective as the persuasive light in a wooing and fascinating eye. Half the undoing of the unsophisticated and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman. A blare of sound, a roar of life, a vast array of human hives, appeal to the astonished senses in equivocal terms. Without a counsellor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations, what falsehoods may not these things breathe into the unguarded ear! Unrecognised for what they are, their beauty, like music, too often relaxes, then weakens, then perverts the simpler human perceptions.

Caroline, or Sister Carrie, as she had been half affectionately termed by the family, was possessed of a mind rudimentary in its power of observation and analysis. Self-interest with her was high, but not strong. It was, nevertheless, her guiding characteristic. Warm with the fancies of youth, pretty with the insipid prettiness of the formative period, possessed of a figure promising eventual shapeliness and an eye alight with certain native intelligence, she was a fair example of the middle American class--two generations removed from the emigrant. Books were beyond her interest--knowledge a sealed book. In the intuitive graces she was still crude. She could scarcely toss her head gracefully. Her hands were almost ineffectual. The feet, though small, were set flatly.

And yet she was interested in her charms, quick to understand the keener pleasures of life, ambitious to gain in material things. A half-equipped little knight she was, venturing to reconnoitre the mysterious city and dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy, which should make it prey and subject--the proper penitent, grovelling at a woman's slipper.

(Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, Chapter 1)

In the light of the world's attitude toward woman and her duties, the nature of Carrie's mental state deserves consideration. Actions such as hers are measured by an arbitrary scale. Society possesses a conventional standard whereby it judges all things. All men should be good, all women virtuous. Wherefore, villain, hast thou failed?

For all the liberal analysis of Spencer and our modern naturalistic philosophers, we have but an infantile perception of morals. There is more in the subject than mere conformity to a law of evolution. It is yet deeper than conformity to things of earth alone. It is more involved than we, as yet, perceive. Answer, first, why the heart thrills; explain wherefore some plaintive note goes wandering about the world, undying; make clear the rose's subtle alchemy evolving its ruddy lamp in light and rain. In the essence of these facts lie the first principles of morals. "Oh," thought Drouet, "how delicious is my conquest."

"Ah," thought Carrie, with mournful misgivings, "what is it I have lost?"

Before this world-old proposition we stand, serious, interested, confused; endeavouring to evolve the true theory of morals--the true answer to what is right.

(Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*, Chapter 10)

Sister Carrie can be seen as twentieth century consideration of the themes discussed in *Vanity Fair* in that it relates how virtue can be maintained despite societal pressures. As with Victorian literature, this is a concern that is specifically related to women and thereby speaks to broader themes about the shifting role of women in society and the changes brought about by industrialisation stipulated in A-level curricula.

Suggested questions

- What types of imagery does Bronte use in her characters' discussion of virtue?
- What does Dresier's description of Carrie tell us about her virtue and that of the society into which she is moving?
- How does the meaning of *virtue* and *virtuous* differ in Dresier's two passages?
- Think about the ways in which *virtue* is talked about in society (e.g., in the media, in law, in education, etc.). How do these differ and how does it differ from your own definition of *virtue*?