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# *Misanthropes and Monsters: Writing the Unlikeable*

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## *Misanthropes and Monsters: Writing the Unlikeable*

人間嫌いに人でなし：魅力的とは言えない登場人物たち

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### Abstract

ジェーン・オースティンは、作品名にもなっている主人公、エマについて、「私以外だれも好きになれそうにないヒロイン」と書いている。このように、文学作品では好感が持てるとは言い難い語り手や人物が登場する場合も多い。『嵐が丘』のヒースクリフ然り、さらには『ジーキル博士とハイド氏の怪事件』のハイド氏、『ロリータ』のハンバート・ハンバート、『華麗なるギャツビー』のジェイ・ギャツビー、『日の名残り』のステューブンス、そして『ソーラー』のマイケル・ピアードもまた然りである。本稿は、2016年10月30日に徳島大学で開催された第9回 Japan Writers Conference (JWC) で発表しており、今回は人から好かれにくい人々が登場する作品がどのように成功をおさめ、主人公が魅力的でないにもかかわらず、なぜ読者が物語に引き込まれるのかを考察する。

“I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like,” wrote Jane Austen of her eponymous protagonist Emma. Literature is populated with narrators and main characters who are not likeable: Heathcliff (*Wuthering Heights*), Mr Hyde (*The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*), Humbert Humbert (*Lolita*), Jay Gatsby (*The Great Gatsby*), Stevens (*Remains of the Day*) and Michael Beard (*Solar*). This paper, originally presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> Japan Writers' Conference at Tokushima University on 30 October 2016, will examine how the novels in which these characters appear achieve success, and why we care what happens, despite the unlikeable protagonists.

Key Words: contemporary novelists, Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great*

*Gatsby*, Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, Ian McEwan, *Solar*, Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, likeability, monster, horror, devil, passion, misanthrope, seduction

‘I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like,’<sup>1)</sup> Jane Austen wrote of her eponymous protagonist Emma. Contemporary novelists, however, are under pressure from agents, publishers and society to create main characters and first person narrators that readers *will* like. The American author Elizabeth Strout, in a BBC Radio 4 interview about her novel *Olive Kitteridge*,<sup>2)</sup> claimed that women authors in particular sometimes feel pressured into making their female characters likeable. Strout argues, however, that *authenticity* of characters is more important than likeability.

Jane Austen clearly did not feel that her readers had to like Emma and sets her up for us to dislike in the opening paragraph of the novel:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her. (*Chapter 1*)

Emma is rich and indulged, vain, snobbish, interfering, used to having her own way, and self-satisfied at the start of the novel. Despite this, we care what happens to her and she is redeemed through the course of the novel by growing self-awareness and recognition of her own faults. These faults are diminished when contrasted with the much greater ones of the ambitious Rev Elton and his appalling wife so that we start to warm to Emma and her bumbling, misguided efforts to find a suitable husband for poor, simple Harriet, and her eventual realization that she is in love with the very man Harriet has set her heart on.

Is it important that a main character or narrator be ‘likeable’? Emma is neither the monster nor misanthrope of the title of this paper, but literature is populated with narrators and main characters who *are*. This paper will deal with some of the novels which, despite their unlikeable characters, have been successful and popular.

### **Heathcliff in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847)**

In 1850, Charlotte Brontë edited a new edition of *Wuthering Heights* and wrote an introduction to her sister’s masterpiece. She says that ‘over much of *Wuthering Heights* there broods “a horror of great darkness”; that, in its storm-heated and electrical atmosphere, we seem at times to breathe lightning.’<sup>3)</sup>

The darkness seems to emanate from the orphan boy Heathcliff. When he first arrives at Wuthering

Heights, he is described as being ‘as dark almost as if it came from the Devil.’ (*Chapter 4*) Thus, on his first appearance, Heathcliff is immediately connected with darkness and evil.

Charlotte says of her sister’s hero, ‘the single link that connects Heathcliff with humanity is his rudely-confessed regard for Hareton Earnshaw – the young man whom he has ruined; and then his half-implied esteem for Nelly Dean. These solitary traits omitted, we should say he was child neither of Lascar nor gipsy, but a man’s shape animated by demon life – a Ghoul – an Afreet.’<sup>4)</sup>

We may forgive Heathcliff’s revenge on Hindley for the way Hindley bullied him as a child. Heathcliff’s demonic character, however, is exhibited in the unforgivably cruel treatment of his poor wife Frances and of the younger Cathy, whom he forces into marriage with his son solely to gain possession of her property.

Forestalling the expected criticism of Heathcliff, Charlotte Brontë excuses her sister in her foreword: ‘Whether it is right or advisable to create beings like Heathcliff, I do not know: I scarcely think it is. But this I know: the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master – something that, at times, strangely wills and works for itself.’<sup>5)</sup>

*Wuthering Heights* centres on the strange, excessive passion between Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw. Charlotte describes Heathcliff’s love for Catherine as a ‘sentiment fierce and inhuman.’<sup>6)</sup> But Catherine’s love for Heathcliff is equally strange. And if we cannot like Heathcliff, neither can we approve of Catherine who, despite her feelings for Heathcliff, chooses to marry Edgar Linton because:

“... he will be rich, and I shall like to be the greatest woman of the neighbourhood, and I shall be proud of having such a husband” (*Chapter 9*)

even though she knows she is making the wrong choice:

“I’ve no more business to marry Edgar Linton than I have to be in heaven; and if the wicked man in there had not brought Heathcliff so low, I shouldn’t have thought of it. It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now; so he shall never know how I love him: and that, not because he’s handsome, Nelly, but because he’s more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same; and Linton’s is as different as a moonbeam from lightning, or frost from fire.” (*Chapter 9*)

Whether we *like* Heathcliff and Cathy or not, ultimately is irrelevant: we cannot fail to be moved by the magnificence of a love that breaks moral and physical boundaries – even death seems not to separate

them. *Wuthering Heights* sweeps us along by the poetry of the language, the passion and the dark drama.

### **Mr Hyde in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886)**

Explaining the popularity of her character Olive Kitteridge, who does reprehensible things, Elizabeth Strout says 'Unlikeable characters can do the things we *want* to.' <sup>7)</sup> In creating Mr Hyde in his novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Robert Louis Stevenson has found the ultimate way in which a character can do that – by separating himself into two personae.

In his statement of the case, Henry Jekyll confesses:

I learned to recognise the thorough and primitive duality of man; I saw that of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both; and from an early date, even before the course of my scientific discoveries had begun to suggest the most naked possibility of such a miracle, I had learned to dwell with pleasure, as a beloved day-dream, on the thought of the separation of these elements. If each, I told myself, could but be housed in separate identities, life would be relieved of all that was unbearable; the unjust might go his way, delivered from the aspirations and remorse of his more upright twin; and the just could walk steadfastly and securely on his upward path, doing the good things in which he found his pleasure, and no longer exposed to disgrace and penitence by the hands of this extraneous evil.

*(Henry Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case, p61)*

Jekyll's experiments with drugs lead him to the discovery that he can separate the two sides of his character. Until things go fatally wrong and the power of the drug wears off, Henry Jekyll, a doctor who labours 'at the furtherance of knowledge or the relief of sorrow and suffering' is able to transform himself into Edward Hyde, repulsive in appearance and the embodiment of pure evil. Thus disguised, he indulges his guilty pleasures – we suspect they involve sex and drink but are not given details – and takes a downward path that leads him to cruelty to children and even murder.

Men have before hired bravos to transact their crimes, while their own person and reputation sat under shelter. I was the first that ever did so for his pleasures. I was the first that could thus plod in the public eye with a load of genial respectability, and in a moment, like a schoolboy, strip off these lendings and spring headlong into the sea of liberty. But for me, in my impenetrable mantle, the safety was complete. Think of it – I did not even exist! *(p65-6)*

There is never any question of us liking Edward Hyde but the book became a sensation and bestseller; the names of Jekyll and Hyde are known throughout the English-speaking world, even to those who have never read the book. We are fascinated by the horror of the evil nature of Hyde and the possibility Stevenson creates of being able to switch completely between the good and bad sides inherent in every human. Is it not a tempting thought to be able to act out our darkest desires with complete impunity?

The book's weakness is not that it is about a man as detestable as Hyde but that Stevenson fails to flesh out the character of Jekyll. This is partly due to the structure which is clumsy and involves unnecessary characters relating stories to each other. Had we a stronger image of Dr Jekyll as a good man, we would have more concern in his fate.

### **Vladimir Nabokov: *Lolita* (1955)**

The fictitious John Ray created by Nabokov to write the 'Foreword' to *Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male* says of Humbert Humbert, the equally fictitious author:

He is abnormal. He is not a gentleman. But how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author! (*Foreword, p5*)

By his own admission, Humbert Humbert is truly a monster with a predilection for young girls:

Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as 'nymphets.'  
(*Part One: 5, p14*)

Although he has relations with numerous women, including two wives and many prostitutes, it is pubescent girls who offer Humbert glimpses of 'an incomparably more poignant bliss.' And so he meets and falls in love with 11-year-old Dolores Haze, the daughter of his landlady and eventual wife, inflicting on the girl, in his own words, his 'foul lust.' At the end of the story, he admits that 'a North American girl-child named Dolores Haze had been deprived of her childhood by a maniac...'

How are we to read the story of this paedophile – 'nympholept' in Humbert's words – with anything but disgust and repulsion? We can not – there is no excuse for him. But the answer to how we can enjoy *Lolita* is in the foreword just quoted: *how magically his singing violin can conjure up a tendresse, a compassion for Lolita that makes us entranced with the book while abhorring its author!*

In other words, Humbert Humbert seduces us with his language – right from the beginning of the novel with the opening lines:

LOLITA, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.

She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita. (*Part One: 1, p7*)

The brilliant, magical, original mastery of language continues throughout the novel. Moreover, Humbert is funny. We can hate *what* he does, hate *him* for what he does, but he seduces us, as Michael Beard in *Solar* (dealt with later) does not.

There are two other factors that contribute to the success of this monster-narrated novel. One is that Lolita is far from innocent. She has already lost her virginity at the age of 11 and it is *she* who consummates the relationship with Humbert:

I had thought that months, perhaps years, would elapse before I dared to reveal myself to Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me. (*Part One: 29, p124*)

The second is that, despite everything, Humbert Humbert really does love Lolita:

I loved you. I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you. I was despicable and brutal, and turpid, and everything, *mais je t'aimais, je t'aimais!* (*Part Two: 32, p268*)

### **Jay Gatsby in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925)**

If Humbert Humbert seduces us with his language, Jay Gatsby in Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* seduces us, as he does Nick, the narrator, with his glamour and wealth. The sheer scale of his extravagance, of his enormous house and equally enormous parties, dazzles us. Nowhere is this better described than in the scene where Nick and Daisy are taken to Gatsby's dressing room and he displays his wardrobe to them:

He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher – shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange,

with monograms of Indian blue. (*Chapter 5, p80*)

While Baz Luhrmann's 2013 film of the novel may have been a travesty, this scene was memorable and masterfully shot, the shirts floating through the air in slow motion, a riot of colour.

It is debatable whether anyone can attain such wealth without crime or moral turpitude. Is Gatsby a monster? We never really find out, though it is most likely he became rich through bootlegging and organized crime. He is a mystery to the reader as much as he is to the guests at his parties who speculate on how he has become so rich:

‘Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once.’

A thrill passed over all of us. The three Mr Mumbles bent forward and listened eagerly.

‘I don't think it's so much *that*,’ argued Lucille skeptically; ‘it's more that he was a German spy during the war.’

One of the men nodded in confirmation.

‘I heard that from a man who knew all about him, grew up with him in Germany,’ he assured us positively.

‘Oh, no,’ said the first girl, ‘it couldn't be that, because he was in the American army during the war.’ As our credulity switched back to her she leaned forward with enthusiasm. ‘You look at him sometimes when he thinks nobody's looking at him. I'll bet he killed a man.’ (*Chapter 3, p39*)

Gatsby himself almost encourages the speculation because he does not want anyone to know the truth of his modest past, even though it is the past – the time when he and Daisy were in love – that he wants to recover. So he lives and dies an enigma. Whatever his past, we cannot really dislike him because we never get to know him. If there is a monster in this novel, someone we can really dislike, it is Daisy's husband, Tom Buchanan.

### **Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day***

Turning now to the misanthropes, the butler Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* is certainly no monster but, as he first appears, is far from likeable. Maintaining a British stiff upper lip in his pursuit of ‘dignity’, he appears pompous; his lack of humour – as shown in his pathetic attempts to entertain his new employer with ‘banter’ – renders him cold and dull. But our feelings towards him change as we learn the truth about his life – and how it has been wasted.

Stevens always has to pretend – he puts up a façade because of his job, he preserves his dignity and never betrays his emotions. There are professional reasons for this, but also personal ones. He hides the truth about Lord Darlington, his former employer, a man we eventually learn was a misguided Nazi

sympathizer and *not* the 'great' man Stevens would have us believe. Stevens was in the service of Darlington for thirty-five years: his whole life has meaning only in the work he has performed for his master.

Stevens' pretence and cold emotional restraint is also the cause of him losing the woman who loves him. At the end of the story, he meets her again, now married. When Mrs Benn, who had given so many hints while working at Darlington Hall of her feelings towards him, says 'you get to thinking about a different life, a *better* life you might have had. For instance, I get to thinking about a life I may have had with you, Mr Stevens.....' (p239) finally Stevens stops pretending and tells us the truth:

.....I do not think I responded immediately, for it took me a moment or two to fully digest these words of Miss Kenton. Moreover, as you might appreciate, their implications were such as to provoke a certain degree of sorrow within me. Indeed – why should I not admit it? – at that moment, my heart was breaking. (p239)

It is the underlined admission above that makes us re-evaluate a character we have perhaps laughed at, been impatient with or even despised through the novel. At the end of the journey he makes in the novel, Stevens realizes that it is too late to change things and make amends for his wasted life. He admits the truth about his employer, too. As we learn the truth, our impressions of Stevens as a pompous and somewhat comic figure are changed. He becomes a tragic figure – not in the Greek sense, but like Arthur Miller's Willy Loman in his modern-day tragedy *Death of a Salesman*, a little man whose tragedy is that he cannot attain grandeur in escape from the ordinariness of reality:

You see, I *trusted*. I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really – one has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that?' (p244)

In an interview in 2002, Ishiguro explained why he deliberately chose to create a character whom we would not at first warm to:

I like the idea of starting off with somebody who appears quite unsympathetic and then we actually see the humanity beneath all those things that make him rather unattractive. I think that something has been gained if we move in that direction from not liking somebody to actually understanding them.<sup>8)</sup>

### **Michael Beard in Ian McEwan's *Solar***

The characters dealt with so far are not 'likeable' but the novels in which they appear are successful

nonetheless. However, my final example is a novel that, in my opinion, fails because it features a totally unpleasant misanthrope.

In *Solar*'s Michael Beard, Ian McEwan has created a protagonist who is wholly *unlikeable*. A glutton, and an alcoholic, Beard exhibits no redeeming qualities. He's sexually incontinent, arrogant, dull, condescending. Here he is as McEwan introduces him to us in the opening chapter:

He belonged to that class of men – vaguely unprepossessing, often bald, short, fat, clever – who were unaccountably attractive to certain beautiful women. Or he believed he was, and thinking seemed to make it so. And it helped that some women believed he was a genius in need of rescue. But the Michael Beard of this time was a man of narrowed mental condition, anhedonic, monothematic, stricken. His fifth marriage was disintegrating... (p3)

It never gets any better. We learn that he lives on his Nobel Prize-winning scientific discovery and 'had no new ideas' (p15):

... he had no idea what work he could do that was not detached from or eased by his peculiar fame. Must he give forever the same lecture series about his one small contribution... (p72)

His fifth wife leaves him, demanding to know 'how Beard was going to explain away eleven affairs in five years.' (p47) In the messy split up, Beard is accidentally responsible for the death of his wife's new lover and then arranges the evidence so that an innocent, if despicable, man is wrongfully imprisoned for the supposed murder.

According to the book jacket, the novel depicts 'human frailty struggling with the most pressing and complex problem of our time' but Beard, who is 'not wholly skeptical about climate change' (p15), has taken a job at a government research centre because he is 'always on the lookout for an official role with a stipend attached.' (p16) The book is definitely more about human frailty than the most pressing and complex problems of our time.

Critics seem to share my dislike of the book. Walter Kirn, writing in *The New York Times* (April 16, 2010), says 'it's impressive to behold but something of a virtuous pain to read.' His review continues: 'the performance is an exquisite bore, with all the over-choreographed dullness of a touring ice ballet cast with off-season Olympic skaters.'<sup>9)</sup>

Jason Cowley in *The Guardian* (14 March 2010) writes: 'after a while, it feels as if you are locked inside an echo chamber, listening only to the reverberations of the one same sound – the groan of a fat,

selfish man in late middle age eating himself.’<sup>10)</sup>

I found it difficult to maintain any interest in Beard. When he crumples to the floor in a massive heart-attack after another cholesterol-laden meal, following the destruction of his solar-energy panels in the New Mexico desert by the man Beard had wrongfully had imprisoned, as Melissa, the ex-partner who has chosen to bear his child, and Darlene, a Texan waitress with whom he has had a casual fling but who has now decided to marry him, charge towards him, I could not have cared less.

Had *Solar* not been written by a writer who was already famous and prize-winning, I surmise that the manuscript, despite the irreproachable beauty of the author's prose, might have been thrown on the slush pile and Ian McEwan dismissed with a short note from an agent saying it was important that his main character was 'likeable'.

## Summary

In conclusion, I would argue that it is *not* important for us to like the main character of a novel. Authenticity is more important than likeability. Unlikeable characters fascinate us because they do the things we want to do but dare not – or cannot. If the writer is skilful, such characters can provide an insight into and understanding of human flaws and weaknesses.

However, these characters must attract us in other ways – through language, poetry or passion – or through comedy or horror. The scale of their actions can excuse mere unlikeability. They can be redeemed through change (Emma) or by revelation of what has made them unlikeable (Stevens). But on no account can they be dull. And this is the problem with Michael Beard in *Solar*.

## Notes

- 1) Austen-Leigh, James Edward. *A Memoir of Jane Austen*. 1870. Ed. R.W. Chapman. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1967
- 2) Elizabeth Strout, BBC Radio 4, Book Club (7 April 2016)
- 3) Brontë, Charlotte, Editor's Preface to the New (1850) Edition of *Wuthering Heights*, reproduced in *Wuthering Heights*, p441, Oxford University Press, London, 1976.
- 4) *ibid*
- 5) *ibid*
- 6) *ibid*
- 7) Strout, Elizabeth, BBC Radio 4, *Book Club* (7 April 2016)

- 8) Ishiguro, Kazuo, BBC Radio 4, *Book Club* (7 April 2002)
- 9) Kim, Walter, 'Human Orbits', *The New York Times* (April 16, 2010)
- 10) Cowley, Jason, 'Solar by Ian McEwan', *The Guardian* (14 March 2010)

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