

Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1958) has given us a term for what the OED defines as 'a sexually precocious schoolgirl', as well as a word which especially through the Internet has acquired an association with the sexual abuse of children. What is the relationship between a person in a literary text and a person outside it? *Great Expectations* (1860–1) opens with the orphan-hero, Pip, examining the writing on his parents' gravestones in order to attempt to determine the 'character' of his mother and father: As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. But this very uncertainty makes the novels particularly intriguing for a discussion of character since they tend both to exploit and to explode 'realist' conventions of characterization. There is even a day named after a fictional character, 'Bloomsday' (16th June), after Leopold Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). (35) The comedy of this passage is partly produced by the double sense of 'character' – as the shape of an inscribed letter on a tombstone and as the personality of a human being. How do writers construct characters and produce the illusion of living beings? From the character and turn of the inscription, 'Also Georgiana Wife of the Above', I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. As we shall try to demonstrate, these are questions that books themselves – in particular plays, novels and short stories – consistently explore. And it is against such preconceptions that modernist and postmodernist texts tend to work. Charles Dickens's novels are indisputably from the nineteenth century. It is, we suggest, this tradition which has culminated in the kinds of assumptions that we often hold about people and characters today. Whether or not they can be described as 'realist', though, is very definitely a matter of dispute. In this chapter, we shall focus, in particular, on the nineteenth-century realist tradition.