

Title: A Slumbering Power: *Oblomov*'s Expanding (and Contracting) Minor Characters
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Scholarship on *Oblomov* has often focused either on the titular character's inability to become the hero of his own novel or, more recently, on "the intriguing heroic and heroinic alternatives [the novel] sometimes explores" (Holmgren 87), the housewives, independent young women and businessmen that receive a degree of narrative attention almost unheard of in other 19th-century Russian novels. In this paper I will argue that, in fact, these two phenomena are intimately related. Drawing on Alex Woloch's concepts of "character system" and "character space," as well as Goncharov's own writings on literary type, I will suggest that as Oblomov increasingly fails to command his own story, the characters that surround him increasingly "expand" to fill the narrative space he has left behind. As Oblomov sinks back into his couch, Agafya Matveevna, who initially exists only as a pair of plump elbows, and the servant Anisya (described earlier as nothing but nose) develop a genuine friendship, independent both of the novel's hero and its plot. The leech Tarantyev, initially painted as purely negative type, provides a radically different interpretation of the novel's *dénouement* that threatens to overturn both Oblomov's, and the narrator's, own. Yet, as I will argue, the novel is profoundly uncomfortable with the narrative autonomy it (temporarily) grants its marginal female and lower class characters. Anisya quickly turns back into a "talking nose" (336), and Agafya Matveevna is soon compared to a horse. In fact, the re-introduction of Stoltz in the last chapters of the novel as the new, and "real" hero, the strong unifying (and, naturally, *male*) center of the novel, could be interpreted as an attempt to reign in the strong secondary characters.

- Goncharov, I.A. *Sobranie sochinений в восемь томах*. Vol 4. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe isdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literature, 1953.
Holmgren, Beth. "Questions of Heroism in Goncharov's *Oblomov*." *Goncharov's Oblomov: A critical companion*. Evanston: Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988.