
Teaching ideas

A-level English Language and Literature 7707

Writing about society: Characterisation

Introduction

These teaching ideas can be used with students when beginning re-creative writing tasks oriented towards characterisation. They offer students the opportunity to explore gaps and traces in texts, and to creatively flesh out characters with sensitivity to the schematic means by which readers imaginatively build upon textual cues. They encourage students to think about the many different linguistic constituents of characterisation and how these can work together to achieve a coherent figure in the text with a distinct perspective and voice.

The suggested activities are intended to span two lessons lasting one hour each.

Learning objectives

Students will:

- consider different kinds of character significance
- explore the ways in which even minimal textual cues evoke character construction
- explore the different linguistic means by which characterisation is developed
- evaluate the significance of specific language choices used and their likely interpretative effects.

Prior knowledge needed

Students should have some knowledge of the following:

- body language
- plot
- foregrounding
- schematic (background) knowledge
- language levels.

Lesson preparation

Teachers will need the following resources:

- some examples of interview questions (from magazines, recordings, etc)
- for the final activity, chairs arranged in pairs facing each other.

Activities

Lesson 1

This lesson begins with some work as a whole class, then moves on to some individual work.

- Ask students to identify some of the minor characters in the set text (either a minor role in one scene or in the text as a whole). This could evoke discussion of a scale of prominence/significance in terms of:
 - textual presence (in terms of number of times mentioned, amount of text given to descriptions of the character, etc)
 - the impact the character has on other characters/the events of the story
 - the impact the character has on the tone/themes of the story.
- Elicit from the students a mind map around each minor character of two or three episodes in the narrative they are or could be connected with.
- Ask each student to choose one of the minor characters listed to creatively 'flesh out'. Students should construct an episode which would fit into a gap in the narrative, in which this character plays a major role. The re-creative writing should be a 300 word part of this episode, and should portray the character's attitude, behaviour, speech and interaction styles, etc. The episode could be narrated from the character's perspective, or could be from the original narrator's perspective but heavily featuring the character.

Students will need to think about the following (which could be elicited from them):

- an episode related to the character
- textual details in the original text which describe and convey the character
- ways of describing the physical appearance and the body language of the character
- manner of interaction with other characters (eg politeness, power dynamics)
- differences in narratorial modes (homodiegetic vs. heterodiegetic)
- elements of language at different language levels (verb choice, modality, etc) which convey personal point of view and style of speech
- other characters' opinions of the character.

Preparation for next lesson

Students should finish the re-creative writing exercise in preparation for the next lesson. They should also find examples of interview questions from magazines, radio interviews, etc, and bring them into the next class.

Lesson 2

This lesson involves a session of small group or pair work, followed by some work in different pairs.

- Students should get into pairs or groups with other students who chose the same minor character and compare their re-creative writing. They should discuss the following:
 - which textual cues in the original were most significant in shaping their choices in the re-creative writing
 - their motivation in constructing the episode they chose
 - the similarities and differences between different students' version of the character
 - five stylistics choices each student made in constructing the character, and the interpretative effects they intended.

Moving onto the next activity everyone should pool their interview resources and read some of each others' for inspiration for the next exercise. Some brief recorded interviews could be played from the internet.

- Students should then pair up with someone who worked on a different minor character.
- Taking it in turns, each student should interview the other. The interviewer should take the role of a character (not necessarily the one they've been working on), or a journalist or similar; the interviewee should take the role of the minor character they've been working on. Questions could be personal (as if for a biography) or related to a specific episode in the story (as if for a newspaper report).

This should encourage students to:

- improvise responses, drawing on their work and furthering their thinking about their character
- consider what is important to each other's character, in asking questions.

Students could record the interviews (using mobile phones)

- Finally, round off the learning by asking students to write up a more crafted and considered version of the interview, with responses more developed in line with their work in the previous learning activity. This should encourage them to comparatively consider different language choices in the responses.

Further work

- In relation to major characters, students can choose a short extract (about 300-400 words) in which the main character is in conversation or is doing something active. If the protagonist is the narrator, the student can re-creatively re-write that extract from the perspective of a neutral, objective third person narrator outside of the story. If the protagonist is not the narrator, the passage can be re-creatively re-cast from their perspective, as if they were the narrator.

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- Students can create a piece of writing bridging the work on major and minor characters by writing a letter or diary entry in the voice of one of the characters but about the other. Students should consider how language choices might be shaped by the writer's intended addressee (or lack of).

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