“destination”). The exercise helps to show and explore the materiality of the signifier. In my class, our discussions kept turning back, for example, to the sound of the words, to their rhythmic flow. In some instances, the signifier’s satisfying sound (“plop,” “safely solipsized,” “gagged, bursting beast”) aided students’ recall. But we also noticed that certain sentences were so precise and dense that we were defeated in committing them to memory, despite our intense desire to do so (“Lola, the bobby-socker, devouring her immemorial fruit, singing through its juice, losing her slipper, rubbing the heel of her slipperless foot in its sloppy anklet”), making us like Humbert, who can’t keep hold of what he has only momentarily possessed. In addition, you can illustrate how the text inside us (only ever partially there, due to its tendency to drain from us) contributes to meanings being plural and partial but not subjective in the way many students think the text can mean anything they think or say it does. Of course, you don’t need Saussure or Derrida to make such points. You can simply use the exercise itself to stage these questions in ordinary discourse any undergraduate is bound to understand.

Mapmaker

Kenyon Gradert

A cartographic adventure that helps students visualize plot, themes, and literary place.

Genre: fiction
Course Level: any
Student Difficulty: easy
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: small to medium
Semester Time: any
Writing Component: none
Close Reading: medium to high
Estimated Time: 50 minutes

EXERCISE

Choose any extended work of fiction that has a strong element of place. After your students have read the entire work, spend a final discussion day in class by collectively drawing and annotating a map. Begin by drawing a giant rectangle
on the board to serve as your map’s borders—you’ll need lots of space. In a bottom corner, draw a compass with the cardinal directions. Then ask students to recount the four or five most important locations of the plot, starting with the geographically largest and moving to the smallest: In what country does this story take place? What cities? What houses, cafés, or parks? (The size and scope of the locations will of course vary by text.) As students answer, ask them to come up and draw the location, depicted either by its geographic outline or by some clever symbol: a log cabin for Uncle Tom’s cabin, for example. It often helps if you, as the instructor, draw the largest-scale location first and set a relaxed mood by poking fun at your own lack of cartographic precision.

After you have this handful of primary places on your map (this part of the exercise usually takes ten to fifteen minutes), divide the students into small groups and assign each group to a particular place on the map. Give groups ten minutes to convene and discuss their place, focusing on such questions as these: What kind of language does the author use to depict this place? What sort of things tend to happen in this neck of the woods? Which characters are most connected to the place, and how do they feel about it? Does the place change as the plot progresses? What key themes in the work are best expressed here? Could this place be considered, in its own way, a character in the text, and if so, how? What other places on the map is this place connected to? Reconvene the class and allow another ten minutes for groups to present (briefly) key thoughts on their place. Annotate the map with these observations as the groups present their findings.

Finally, devote fifteen to twenty minutes to a conversation about the “big picture” of the map. Ask students, for example, to trace the story’s journey on the map; have them literally draw lines on it for a visual reminder of plot. Ideally, these lines will form a good transition into the concluding discussion of big questions: How do these places work together, or in tension, to form a narrative experience? How are place and plot, in this text, related? In addition, consider how these places inform the author’s vision of the world: how does the Chicago of Dreiser’s Sister Carrie, the Middle East of Melville’s Clarel, or the Rome of Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun, for example, reveal the authors’ beliefs about God, human beings, and society? Bring the journey full circle by tying these authors’ visions to your students’ visions of their own place: Where do they come from, and how does this inform their vision of the world? Does a student’s suburban upbringing chafe against Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County? (See Cowley’s Portable Faulkner for a great model.) Does your university campus stand with or in contrast to the works you’re reading? Ideally, students will reveal their diverse backgrounds and illustrate how it forms the basis for their own unique interaction with the map’s big picture.

If the text under discussion focuses on an actual or metaphorical journey, you might also broaden this closing conversation to discuss the nature of travel more generally. What kind of journey are the characters on? Are they
pilgrims? Aimless wanderers? Gaudy tourists? Imperial conquerors? Are some characters more stationary than others?

As class draws to a close, ask the students if they would change anything on the map—either by addition, subtraction, or reconfiguration—in light of the discussion they’ve just had. Some students may wish to hear more about a certain character; others may think a certain side journey is irrelevant to the main plot; yet others may express frustration with go-nowhere characters. Reactions vary (and opinions may change as discussion progresses), but students tend to enjoy discovering their own agency within the story through expressing opinions about how the work’s world might change.

REFLECTIONS

This mapping exercise is a memorable way to reexamine major characters, plots, and themes one final time before you move on to another work. Students enjoy the visual aspect of the mapmaking and find that tracing connections between places is a helpful way to make vivid the key components of the text. The exercise also can be a springboard for the discussion of critical approaches to literature and space, including postcolonial, ecocritical, feminist, Marxist, new historicist, borderlands, and queer theory interpretations. It can even function as an introduction to GIS and spatial projects in the digital humanities.

“Mapmaker” helps students draw connections not only within the work at hand but also to previously read works, as students perform their own sort of journey within the literature. In my classroom the exercise has worked well to enable this very journey. At the conclusion of Benjamin Franklin’s hectic Autobiography, for example, a map helped our class synthesize the rambling course of the author’s life. By listing all of Franklin’s varied activities in Philadelphia, London, and the frontier, students were able to visualize the marvelous breadth and depth of his life. Noting this spatial rambling, we transitioned smoothly into a discussion of Max Weber’s analysis of Franklin’s restlessness in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and discussed how Franklin’s geography may have informed his famous discussion of morality in Part Two of the autobiography.

In addition, students noted that Franklin, supposedly a quintessentially American figure, was thoroughly transatlantic in his scientific studies and diplomatic missions. (Here I pulled up a digital map comparing Franklin’s transatlantic and Voltaire’s Eurocentric letter correspondences, from the “Visualizing Benjamin Franklin’s Correspondence Network” case study within Stanford University’s wonderful Mapping the Republic of Letters project.) Finally, we discussed how Franklin’s extended descriptions of public spaces (libraries, streets, fire stations) inform his vision of democracy and republicanism. Discussion could have continued long after, reaching into contemporary politics of space and debates about whether Franklin still has...
something to say to the Occupy generation or to postcolonial peoples. At its best, “Mapmaker” poignantly brings the author’s world into contact with students’ own sense of space and place.

This exercise also gives students a new appreciation for narrative structure—the ways stories take (and make) their journeys. One student may note that the journey in The Sound and the Fury is nauseatingly cyclical; another that many works of the American Renaissance feature a movement out from society and back; yet another that Spenser’s The Faerie Queene seems more interested in labyrinthine wandering than in getting anywhere in particular. In discussing and arguing with each other about the nature of the literary journey at hand, students make a collective trip, not unlike Chaucer’s travelers: “In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle.”

Diagram This

Erin G. Carlston

An exercise that asks student to think visually about narrative structures and patterns.

Genre: fiction
Course Level: introductory
Student Difficulty: easy or moderate
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: small to medium
Semester Time: any
Writing Component: in class
Close Reading: medium
Estimated Time: 50 minutes

EXERCISE

This exercise asks students to create a diagram of a work of fiction. The range of structures and patterns you can ask your class to visualize is quite broad. I have used this exercise, for example, to ask students to diagram the relationship between the provinces, the metropole, and the British Empire in Arnold Bennett’s Old Wives’ Tale; the interaction of race and class in Dorothy West’s novel The Living Is Easy; the connections among Dorian Gray, Dorian’s