As this example intimates, the exercise can also work progressively. For courses that arrange the readings chronologically, like mine, instructors can revise the exercise and heighten its level of difficulty when they get to later texts: by asking students to connect three consecutive sections in one work or by requiring them to make thematic pairings across texts (for example, a race-gender-place juxtaposition in Faulkner might echo yet complicate one from Toomer). I like this cumulative, more advanced version of “Bridges” because it goes beyond a single day and can yield for students deeper critical insights about both period (the avant-garde form of modernist texts) and genre (the forms of fictional works). In my experience, these kinds of fictional texts have worked particularly well because we often approach modernist works in nontraditional ways, while uncovering how fiction can be distinctive in its embrace of nonlinear structure and reading practices.

Intersectional Reading

Maureen Meharg Kentoff

A comparative exercise that examines character through the theory of intersectionality.

Genre: fiction
Course Level: any
Student Difficulty: moderate
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: small to medium
Semester Time: any
Writing Component: none
Close Reading: high
Estimated Time: 45 to 50 minutes

EXERCISE

Intersectionality is an approach to literary analysis that invites students to consider how a range of identity factors, such as gender, race, nationality, class, sexuality, age, physical ability, corporeality, role, or setting, interact to shape character. Novels with richly rendered social worlds—texts like Kate Chopin’s The Awakening, Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth, Nella
Larsen’s *Passing*, or Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, for example—are particularly good candidates for this comparative exercise in intersectional reading.

Before class, choose two characters from the assigned text that make a good pair for comparison across a range of factors like the ones listed above. Decide on the scope of material you want your students to analyze: the entire text, a particular chapter or section, or a specific selection of passages that provide rich character detail. Then prepare two handouts, each with three columns and four rows. Orient these two handouts in landscape mode and maximize the size of the chart so that there is ample space in each box.

On the first handout, label the first column header “Subjectivity Factor” and the remaining two column headers with the names of the characters. Then, under the first column header, label each of the three remaining rows with a particular subjectivity factor pertinent to the characters you’ve selected, such as “gender,” “class,” and “race.” Title this handout “Close Character Reading.”

On the second handout, keep the character names the same but change the first column header to “Intersecting Factors.” Under this header, list the factors from the first handout as intersecting pairs: for example, “gender and class”; “gender and race”; “class and race.” Title this handout “Intersectional Reading,” and copy it on a different color paper, so the forms are easy to differentiate. If you were asking students to compare main characters Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield in Larsen’s *Passing*, for example, your handouts might look something like this:

**Handout #1: Close Character Reading**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjectivity Factor</th>
<th>Clare Kendry</th>
<th>Irene Redfield</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Handout #2: Intersectional Reading**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intersecting Factors</th>
<th>Clare Kendry</th>
<th>Irene Redfield</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender and Class</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender and Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class and Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In class, spend the first few minutes briefly reviewing the concept of intersectionality and its potential for a more complete analysis of a character’s lived experience. Then divide the class into groups of three or four and
distribute copies of handout #1. Ask each group to spend fifteen to twenty minutes completing the boxes on the chart as they consider how each subjectivity factor is addressed in the text for each character. (If you like, you can offer an example for each factor to get them started.) Tell the groups to be specific in recalling character descriptions and events, including direct references to words, phrases, scenes, interactions, dialogue, and plot trajectory; remind them to cite page numbers when possible. (Be sure to specify what portion of the text they are responsible for.) At this point the groups should not compare characters but simply consider each individual character in terms of the factors listed. If they discover overlap between categories, tell them to place each detail in the box that seems most appropriate.

After the students have completed the first handout, pass out copies of handout #2. Ask each group to spend the next fifteen to twenty minutes completing the boxes on the new chart by considering how the two subjectivity factors that are listed intersect with each other. Encourage the groups to refer to the first handout for specific details and to note how these factors differ when compared across characters. Remind the groups again to list direct references, with page numbers. As with the first handout, you can offer examples to help them get started. During the group work, it can also be helpful to move around the room, listening in on the deliberations and posing questions or offering suggestions for fine-tuning ideas.

Once the groups have completed the second handout, bring the class as a whole back together and spend the remaining class time discussing each intersection. Invite groups to share their findings on how a particular set of intersecting factors shapes, enriches, or constrains each character’s lived experience. In what ways do these intersections reveal similarities and differences across characters? Ask the groups to cite specific language used by the author and to acknowledge both literal and figurative descriptions within the text. If possible, list the group responses on a shared chart in the front of the room, either on the board or a projection screen. Given the “messiness” of intersectionality, your discussion will likely not be an orderly process. Encourage students to embrace this quality, and underscore how it is evidence of the complexity of characters (and humans!). Also note that intersectional reading will help students recognize and tease out this messiness as they conduct literary analyses in formal and informal written assignments.

**REFLECTIONS**

The goal of this exercise is to help students develop a more tangible and profound understanding of the complex theory of intersectionality. (For a further overview of intersectionality, I have found Michele Tracy Berger and Kathleen Guidroz’s edited volume *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy through Race, Class, and Gender* particularly helpful.) The
Intersectional Reading

process achieves a number of objectives: students practice close reading of the text in general and close reading of characters in particular; they generate concrete ways in which to explicate a character’s intersectionality; and they are given additional opportunities to “unpack” the author’s language and various literary devices (imagery, symbolism, dialect, and so on) that elicit multiple interpretations across characters.

My favorite text for teaching intersectionality is Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. I typically ask students to compare siblings Jimmie and Maggie Johnson, or Maggie and her lover Pete across such factors as “gender,” “class,” and “setting.” Sometimes I offer a few examples to help the class get started, but students usually need only a little prompting before tackling the handout. In completing the first chart for the character of Maggie, for example, my students have cited allusions to “gender” in her family position (she is a daughter, an older and younger sister, a caretaker, and a family domestic), in her appearance (she is described as a pretty girl “who blossomed in a mud puddle”), and in her changing roles throughout the story (initially a romantic who desires marriage and feminine finery, she ends up a scorned lover and finally a prostitute). When we move to the second chart, the conversation quickly focuses on the impact of gender difference, as the life trajectories and even physical spaces available to Maggie contrast sharply with those available to the male characters Jimmie or Pete, despite their shared class status. This intersectional comparison helps students develop a multilayered analysis of Crane’s commentary on “how the other half lives” (to borrow a phrase from Jacob Riis) rather than simply focus on a single characteristic such as class.

“Intersectional Reading” can be adapted to any course level and tailored in multiple ways. For an introductory class, you might focus on only two subjectivity factors or only one character (but note that the act of comparing characters can elicit a more complete understanding of intersectionality). For an advanced class, you can delve into subjectivity factors that are more tacitly implied by the author. In *Maggie*, for example, I have used such factors as capitalism, urban geography, and domestic abuse. In Larsen’s *Passing*, I have asked students to explore the themes of sexuality or miscegenation by comparing Irene and Clare across various intersections of race, gender, family, and marriage. Another option is to choose topics specific to a particular course: for example, consumer culture, vernacular speech, or religion. You can also assign less fully drawn characters (in *Passing*, try Brian Redfield or Jack Bellew). I have also invited students to compare characters from two different texts, such as an intersectional analysis of class, gender, and setting focused on Edna Pontellier from Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Lily Bart from Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*.

Regardless of the course level, it can be helpful to offer examples of concepts that might fall under a given factor. For example, for “class,” tell the students that they might consider depictions of work, income, liquid assets, possessions, attire, education, language, home life, or financial future. For
“setting,” they might focus on location, landscape, weather, home, material surroundings, public venues, corporeal space, architecture, workplace, street life, transportation, or mobility. You can also list these concepts on the board or even print them on the first handout.

My students react with great enthusiasm to “Intersectional Reading.” They enjoy the challenge of tackling what is often perceived as a very abstract and difficult theoretical model. After the exercise, they report feeling more confident in their ability to generate specific and complex analyses not just of the characters but also of various themes and literary devices throughout the text. Some requested that we schedule the activity a few times throughout the semester. Given the growing prominence of intersectional interpretations across the humanities, this exercise also offers insight into how intersectional reading can be applied to a variety of literary genres. In sum, students are grateful for the practice and the open forum in which they are challenged to explore more fully and concretely how a key concept of lived experience affects literary representation.

Proust Questionnaire

John Bugg

An exercise that encourages critical distance in the study of characterization.

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

EXERCISE

This exercise uses a version of the famous Proust Questionnaire as a springboard for a discussion of characterization. When French author Marcel Proust was a teenager, a friend asked him to answer a series of questions.