“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.
He answered the same questions again when he was twenty (both questionnaires survive today). The Proust Questionnaire later became popular for interviews in magazines and on television shows, and today *Vanity Fair* regularly asks celebrities to respond to a modified version.

The “Proust Questionnaire” exercise works well with almost any type of novel: realism or romance, historical fiction or metafiction, even crime thrillers and graphic novels. Any work with a roster of multidimensional characters will do. Some good candidates include Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (with hidden connections among characters who at first appear very different); Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (with Jane’s first-person narration contouring the depiction of every other character in the novel); and Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* (with characters’ inner lives coordinated according to a handful of repeating ideas about Thatcher-era Britain). The “Proust Questionnaire” also works brilliantly with any volume of Proust’s own *In Search of Lost Time*, with its density of personalities and a narrator who is himself a constellation of selves.

To begin the exercise, distribute copies of the Proust Questionnaire (see the end of this chapter for an example with selected answers from the young Proust) to each member of the class and explain its origin. Next, hand out a template of the questionnaire with Proust’s answers removed. Ask your students to fill out the questionnaire from the point of view of one of the characters in the text you are reading. But here’s the crucial step: ask students to craft their answers in such a way that they could plausibly have come from *more than one character*. Challenge your students to perplex both you as the instructor and their classmates. Offer an example. Let’s say you are doing the exercise with Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, and the character in question is Mrs. Bennet. For the question “What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?” ask students not to write “Failing to marry off my daughters to rich men” but to craft a less obvious answer, one that could apply to other characters, perhaps something like “To have no control over whom people marry.” You can see how, in these more abstract terms, the answer could plausibly have come from other characters in *Pride and Prejudice* (Lady Catherine de Burgh, for instance). Give students about fifteen minutes to complete the quiz on behalf of their character.

When they are done, break up the class into groups of about five students each. Have each group switch questionnaires with one other group. (If you have an odd number, just ask each group to hand off its quizzes to the group next to them.) Instruct groups to determine together which literary character filled out each questionnaire and to prepare justifications for their answers. This portion of the exercise takes roughly twenty minutes. Afterward, reconvene for a full-class discussion. Invite each group to share their best guesses and the reasons for those guesses, before the author of each questionnaire confirms if they got it right. (As a variant for this exercise, you can also split it across two class periods. In the first class, ask students to fill out the
questionnaires before they leave. Make copies of the five questionnaires that are most difficult to figure out, and then distribute these in the following class, a complete set to each group.)

Once all the guesses have been made, use some of the following questions to lead discussion toward the real purpose of the exercise: discovering the structural logic of characterization. It can be useful to move from queries specific to their individual answers to those that address broader issues:

- What made the characters seem different from each other before we did this exercise? (Social status? Age?)
- What makes them seem similar after doing this exercise? (Internal motivations? Emotional states? Attachments to particular people or things?)
- Were there any characters who simply couldn’t be mistaken for anyone else in the text, no matter how craftily you disguised their answers? What are their unique qualities? What is their role in the novel? Did this tend to happen with major or minor characters?
- Was any one question especially useful for illuminating underlying similarities or differences among the characters?
- Was any question particularly difficult to answer for your character? Was this because you didn’t know the answer or because you didn’t know how to disguise that it belonged to your character?
- What did this difficulty reveal about your character or about how the novelist characterizes this figure?
- Which characters were most frequently mistaken for each other? Why do you think these confusions happened? Did they tend to happen between characters you already associated with each other or between those that seemed to have little in common at first glance? What does this confusion reveal?

Bring things to a close by asking students to expand from what they learned about specific characters and the relationships among them to what they learned about the technique of literary characterization.

**REFLECTIONS**

The quiz format of this exercise is inviting, and students enjoy the challenge of “fooling” everyone with their answers. But as students craft their responses, something counterintuitive happens: rather than becoming immersed in intense psychological profiles of their favorite characters, students begin to think about characterization in structural terms. Because the aim in filling out the questionnaire is precisely not to pretend to be one character but to hold two or more characters in mind at the same time (through the process of disguising their answers), students come to recognize the
craftedness of character delineation, so often a transparent part of the reading experience. In other words, the larger aim of the exercise is to help students pull back from an uncritical absorption in the novel or too close an identification with any one character.

I often use this exercise when teaching Jane Austen’s *Emma*. It gets students talking about how Austen delineates character and about the importance of differentiation in this process. Are characters in novels knowable only by their difference from one another, or are they knowable in other ways? What might it mean if we can’t tell whether the questionnaire has been filled out by Emma Woodhouse or Robert Martin? We ran into this very question when one student filled out the questionnaire so cleverly that the class was evenly split on “whose” answers we were reading. In response to the question about “the lowest depth of misery,” for instance, the student wrote that it would be “to lose the respect of Mr. Knightley.” Everyone assumed that this answer must have come from Emma, and there was great surprise when it turned out to be Robert Martin.

Before doing the exercise, students had never considered the possibility that these two characters have qualities in common or that they might serve a similar structural role in the novel: to establish Mr. Knightley’s status as community mentor. This led us to an interesting recognition of some of the other things these characters might have in common. Students mentioned their mutual interest in creating and maintaining a stable household, caring for the spectrum of social life that makes up Highbury, an attachment to Harriet Smith, and, more complexly, a relationship to social striving that can be difficult to define. Ultimately the questionnaire led us to think about how, for Emma, antipathy might be masking similarity, which brought us in turn to a broader discussion of a recurring dynamic in Austen: her characters tend to dislike those who share certain qualities that they also possess.

I have also used this exercise successfully with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Here, discussion often leads to the recognition that Walton, Frankenstein, and the Creature are startlingly similar. Several questions on the questionnaire bring these similarities to light. For instance, for the questions “What is your idea of earthly happiness?” and “What is your favorite occupation?,” the answers given from the point of view of Walton, Frankenstein, or the Creature tend to emphasize a desire for learning. Before doing this exercise, students had not noticed how strongly all three characters were driven by the common motivation to acquire knowledge. But when we used the disguised “Proust Questionnaire” answers to explore what each character valued most, students often simply could not distinguish the novel’s central male characters from one another. This conversation led to a larger discussion about how the genre of science fiction (for which *Frankenstein* is an important source text) tends to function through a nonrealist, mythological, or archetypal logic of doubling and mirroring.
Proust Questionnaire

What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?
— To be separated from Mama.

Where would you like to live?
— In the country of the Ideal, or, rather, of my ideal.

What is your idea of earthly happiness?
— To live in contact with those I love, with the beauties of nature, with a quantity of books and music, and to have, within easy distance, a French theater.

To what faults do you feel most indulgent?
— To a life deprived of the works of genius.

Who are your favorite heroes of fiction?
— Those of romance and poetry, those who are the expression of an ideal rather than an imitation of the real.

Who are your favorite characters in history?
— A mixture of Socrates, Pericles, Mahomet, Pliny the Younger and Augustin Thierry.

Who are your favorite heroines in real life?
— A woman of genius leading an ordinary life.

Who are your favorite heroines of fiction?
— Those who are more than women without ceasing to be womanly; everything that is tender, poetic, pure and in every way beautiful.

Your favorite painter?
— Meissonier.

Your favorite musician?
— Mozart.

The quality you most admire in a man?
— Intelligence, moral sense.

The quality you most admire in a woman?
— Gentleness, naturalness, intelligence.

Your favorite virtue?
— All virtues that are not limited to a sect: the universal virtues.

Your favorite occupation?
— Reading, dreaming, and writing verse.

Who would you have liked to be?
— Since the question does not arise, I prefer not to answer it. All the same, I should very much have liked to be Pliny the Younger.