languidly out to sea. While students usually wish to debate the meaning of Edna Pontellier’s ambiguous act (choice or fate? action or passivity? triumph or tragedy?), an exercise like this can yield much fresher results. The alternate endings students imagined were notably diverse: Edna returning to the beach, Edna swimming across the channel, Edna washing up on shore, Edna dreaming of swimming, Edna painting the scene. But the one thing every doctored script had in common was the return of Edna’s body (dead or alive) to land.

This strong desire to put the body back on terra firma, and back into the text, returned us to what we had not yet understood about the body of the novel itself—namely, its gradual dematerialization of language, its wavelike and oceanic structure, and its subtle narrative drift. An ending that at first seemed so disappointingly vague suddenly made perfect sense. And the novel’s narrative problems actually appeared more like literary strategies—a fitting finale to an exercise all about endings.

There are several variations for a script-doctoring exercise like this one. For longer classes or seminars with an emphasis on in-class writing exercises, you can really kick things up a notch. Consider asking students to rewrite the text’s final paragraph. Or invite them to craft a short epilogue to the tale. Or, if you have already spent some time on narrative exposition, invite them to draft the first paragraph of a proposed sequel. Once again, be sure to allow enough time for students to read their efforts aloud and to comment on one another’s literary imaginations. The point of this exercise is to augment and amplify the method of close reading with the practice of creative revision.

Alternate Endings

Melina Moe

A comparative exercise for thinking about endings.

Genre: fiction
Course Level: any
Student Difficulty: moderate
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: small to medium
Semester Time: midterm or late

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EXERCISE

Choose the closing passage of a short story or novel whose ending exists in multiple forms, either in print or manuscript. The selection could be a couple of paragraphs or up to a chapter in length, depending on how much time you allot for the exercise. Good candidates for this exercise include any fictional work for which the author drafted more than one ending: Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (focusing on the “shadow of parting,” compare the original ending to the 1863 edition), Julio Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* (with multiple scripted endings, this novel facilitates a good discussion about what Cortázar meant when he called it a “counter-novel”), Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (compare the first British edition to the first American edition), Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (he wrote forty-seven different endings!).

After a first day of discussion about the published version of your fictional work, surprise students by circulating the alternate ending. Ask them, as they read it for the next class meeting, to attend to how the two endings affect their interpretation of the narrative as a whole. Let them know that when class reconvenes, you will be inviting them to choose which ending they prefer. If the alternate ending is not very long, and if there is sufficient time, you can also perform this exercise in the same class period, without sending them home first.

Frame the ensuing discussion according to your needs. If your primary focus is narrative plotting or structure, divide the class into two (or more) groups, assign each a different ending, and give the groups ten minutes to work together to generate arguments in defense of their endings. Then reconvene and let each side argue why their ending may (or may not) be suggestive, successful, or otherwise suitable. For texts with multiple endings, like *A Farewell to Arms*, use multiple groups to collaboratively argue for (or, if they like, against) their particular assigned ending. Allow ten minutes for the actual group debates.

If your primary focus is the precise stylistic techniques of narrative closure, consider using pairs instead. Have students study more closely the language and tone of the two different endings, being sure to list the precise ways the wording or mood of the ending changes from version to version. Then have each pair choose their most interesting finding to report back to the class as a whole. The pair version of this exercise also takes roughly twenty minutes of class time.
To wind up this exercise, take a bit more time to pose some larger questions: What kinds of problems does each of the endings resolve? What uncertainties do they raise? Why do you think the author finally settled on the ending he or she did? Did he or she make the best decision?

**REFLECTIONS**

“Alternate Endings” presents narrative as a site of interpretive complexity, for both readers and authors. While it emphasizes close reading, it also shows students how a single passage (or the omission of a single passage) can change the meaning of the entire narrative. For example, my students have been genuinely surprised by the ending to the first British printing of *Moby-Dick*, in which it remains a mystery how Ishmael, and thus the story of the *Pequod* itself, escapes the whirlpool. This exercise introduces students to various techniques of narrative closure and facilitates discussion about how endings can focus and guide our interpretation of works that can in other ways be quite imposing.

For works that have been the subject of editorial controversy, this exercise works particularly well for thinking about the circulation of a text from author to printer to reader. For example, I frequently teach the two different published endings of Nella Larsen’s *Passing*. Larsen’s modernist novella describes the social and psychological upheaval following an unexpected meeting between two friends whose paths had diverged many years before when one of them left the black community to “pass” as a white woman. One version ends with the ambiguous breakdown of one of the story’s main protagonists, Irene Redfield, after her friend Clare falls to her death from a Harlem apartment building; the other concludes with an anonymous police officer offering the closing words about the accident. Both endings were printed in the same year (the text changed between the second and third editions), and the surviving paratextual archives provide few clues as to who, or what, is responsible for the change. It is unclear if Larsen oversaw the alteration, if the editorial staff pushed for a different ending, or if the change was the product of contingency in the typesetting or publishing process. I always provide students with details of the manuscript’s preparation and tell them that Larsen’s original ending was on a single plate of stereotype that might have been accidentally dropped in the third edition.

The American Women Writers paperback edition of *Passing*, from Rutgers University Press (packaged with Larsen’s *Quicksand*), includes an editorial footnote that claims the change of endings makes little difference, so I begin there, separating students into small groups and asking them if they agree or disagree. To give students a flavor of what it is like to edit a text, I ask each group to generate their own footnote: if they were editing an edition of the novel, what would they say about the two endings? In one of my classes,
one group focused on narrative style, arguing that the original version of Larson’s ending was an experiment in using first-person perspective to alert us to unreliable narrators. Another group defended the revised ending and described how the appearance of a police officer at the conclusion of the book framed what was otherwise an intensely psychological tale in a specific historical moment of urbanization and American racial conflict. Both groups said that whatever footnote they wrote about Larson’s ending would color their interpretation of the novel as a whole. It is a short leap for them from writing editorial footnotes to talking about how these interpretive claims can guide a reading of major themes in the novel.

The Great Debate

Jay Dickson

An exercise that analyzes the wider ethical and cultural stakes of crucial conflicts in literary texts.

Genre: fiction or drama
Course Level: introductory or intermediate
Student Difficulty: moderate
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: any
Semester Time: any
Writing Component: none
Close Reading: medium
Estimated Time: 50 minutes

EXERCISE

Choose an extended, complex, structurally important debate from a fictional or dramatic literary text, a debate in which choosing sides or determining the eventual resolution is neither simple nor immediately clear. Examples might include the famous agons of the Greek tragedies (the disagreement over Polynices’s burial in Sophocles’s Antigone, or the Carpet Scene in Aeschylus’s Agamemnon, wherein the title character argues with his wife Clytemnestra about whether he is as despotic as she would make out), the debate in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein between Victor and his creature over whether to...