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.

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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 *agnos* 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
create a bride for the monster, or the Wilcox family’s argument over whether to fulfill the request of Ruth Wilcox’s penciled will in E. M. Forster’s *Howards End*. You might also choose a dilemma that takes place mostly within a character’s mind (such as Hamlet’s reluctance to kill his uncle) or even an important *implicit* textual conflict (such as whether Clarissa Dalloway made the right decision about whom to marry years before).

Identify the debate you wish students to examine. If you like, you can alert students beforehand by asking them to pay especially close attention, as they read the assigned work, to a particular chapter, scene, or section. On the day of the discussion, tell the class that the purpose of the exercise is not to hash out who is “right” in the debate but rather to identify the terms of the debate and, most importantly, to explore why these terms matter.

Prepare a handout with the following eight questions:

1. What are the main positions taken in the debate?
2. What is the main core argument of each position?
3. Is the core argument for your position refuted, and if so, how?
4. Who speaks for your position, and for what reasons?
5. What cultural, social, political, or economic interests does your “side” in the debate represent? Which values are really being debated?
6. Why does the author place the debate where it is within the text? What kinds of structural purposes does this placement serve?
7. If the decision is adjudicated, who acts as judge? What interests does the judge represent?
8. Are there other positions that the debate allows for but that are not pursued or staged?

After circulating the handout, begin with a full-group brainstorming discussion of no more than ten minutes, simply to get the lay of the land. Limit this portion of the exercise to the handout’s first two questions only: what are the main positions in the debate, and what appears to be the main argument behind each position? Quickly sum up the students’ answers on the board, choosing a large column for each of the major positions so everyone can see the general terms of the debate.

Once you have the positions on the board, break the class into small groups—anywhere from three to five students per group. Assign each group a “side” in the debate. (If there are more groups than sides, assign multiple groups the same position.) Give each group no more than twenty minutes to discuss the remaining six questions on the handout. Let them know that, while they might touch on all sides of the debate if they wish, they should attend most closely to the side they have been assigned.

For the next twenty minutes, have each group report back to the larger class. As groups delve more closely into each side of the debate, continue to fill out the information on the board, recording and defining each position.
with the detail and nuance students provide. If you like, you can ask groups to hold off on discussing the last two questions on the handout until each individual position has been more deeply explored. Then, at the end of the exercise, ask students to explain how the conflict is ultimately decided and how the stakes of the conflict might be at play elsewhere within the text. Talking through alternative outcomes also will help students understand why the author structured the text as she or he did, and will clarify the writer’s core thematic or ethical commitments.

REFLECTIONS

This a great exercise for getting students to understand the ethical wagers of literature. The guided questions lead students to grasp more fully the specific underlying beliefs, codes, customs, or ideals that a text analyzes and contests. And the focus on opposing or multiple sides encourages students to explore and examine a real diversity of values, especially in cultures or eras of which they are less informed. Such an approach seeks to attune students historically to the tremendous ethical possibilities for literature as a whole. This exercise highlights why the humanities matter.

Usually, when confronted with an important and difficult conflict within a text, students immediately wish to judge who is “right,” a decision based on their own experiences and emotions. For example, when I did this exercise with Jane Austen’s 
*Mansfield Park* and focused on the debate over whether Edmund Bertram and then Fanny Price should participate in the amateur theatricals, my students initially found it unimaginable that the two should not participate, given how casually such activities are treated today. But asking students to spell out the terms of the debate by rehearsing Fanny’s position against performing *Lovers’ Vows* against Mr. Yates’s position for it, they ultimately were able to see why amateur theatricals might be viewed as dangerously socially destabilizing in late eighteenth-century and Regency society. My students also noted that the challenge to static patriarchal authority represented by the theatricals is mounted later in *Mansfield Park* when Maria Rushworth leaves her husband for Henry Crawford. When I finally asked the class to brainstorm alternative resolutions for the conflict not proposed by the text, they came up with two especially clarifying questions: Could the young people gathered at Mansfield Park have chosen a safer play to perform, or were any theatricals socially dangerous without Sir Thomas Bertram’s explicit permission? And, did the Bertram children and their friends actually need to choose as risqué a play as *Lovers’ Vows* in order to release their pent-up rebellious energies?

Although this exercise works particularly well with novels and with plays, I have also successfully tried it with at least one poem marked by moral conflict, Homer’s great epic *The Iliad*. The heated debate in Book I between
Achilles and Agamemnon before the assembled Achaeans as to who deserves the Trojan woman Briseis as a prize concubine brings out in students strong emotions and a bit of initial confusion. Many don’t fully understand why the warlords are fighting or why this particular conflict should begin Homer’s poem, while others wonder why Briseis should herself be denied a voice in the disagreement entirely. By assuming sides and talking through the actual terms of the debate, my students began to understand more clearly the complex role of women in ancient Greek culture. Students were also able to discover and delve more deeply into competing models of leadership at play in the positions taken by Agamemnon and Achilles. My students, for example, noted that the shame-based warrior ethos is staged most strikingly when Agamemnon publicly tells the mighty warrior Achilles—with nearly fatal consequences—that the latter’s anger and arguments “mean nothing” to him.

Working through this debate, which transpires at the beginning of The Iliad, also prepared the students well for discussing other contesting values elsewhere in the poem, most particularly the two different models of heroism represented by the epic’s major combatants: Achilles (the figure of the older war-based culture) and Hector (the representative of the emerging order that values domestic life). “The Great Debate” proved to be a great way to highlight how ancient Greek culture routinely worked through its cultural values in agonistic form, whether in the Socratic dialogues, in the political debates staged in the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, or in the conflicts enacted in the tragic Greek dramas.

For more exercises that can be used to teach stories, try these:

Specific relevance
Read, Reread, Close Read (Discussions)
Reverse Entropy (Discussions)
The Blow Up (Essentials)
The Cut Up (Essentials)
The One-Liner (Essentials)
Let’s Get Heretical (Poems)
Dramatic Monologue (Poems)
Talk Show Host (Plays)
Introduction to Genre Fiction (Genres)

General relevance
The Sixty Second Game (Discussions)
Fishbowl (Discussions)
Put the Question (Discussions)
It’s Time We Talked (Discussions)
Debate (Discussions)
Leader, Skeptic, Scribe (Discussions)
The New Title (Essentials)
The Descriptive Word (Essentials)
The Common Thread (Essentials)

(CONTINUED...)