Putting a Face to a Name

Elizabeth Leane

An icebreaker that encourages reflection on the figure of the author.

Genre: any
Course Level: introductory
Student Difficulty: easy
Teacher Preparation: medium
Class Size: small to medium
Semester Time: first day
Writing Component: none
Close Reading: none
Estimated Time: variable, 20 to 40 minutes

EXERCISE

Find online images—artworks or photographs—of well-known writers. These may be writers whose work is to be studied in class; who are identified with the period, nation, or movement being studied; or simply whose names students will likely recognize. The number of images should be half...
the number of students in the class. Print out the images, ideally in color, without any identifying labels. On separate pieces of paper, print out in large type the names of the authors. Depending on what is being studied in your class, you might want to include authors whose images are likely to provoke discussion for several different reasons: because they are particularly iconic (Shakespeare); because they question assumptions students make about identity based on names (George Eliot); because the image reveals well-known contextual associations (a group portrait of the Brontë sisters); because the work of the author in question was or is particularly closely tied to his or her visual image (Byron or Oscar Wilde); or, conversely, because the author is famously private or reclusive (Emily Dickinson, Thomas Pynchon, or J. D. Salinger).

On the first day of class, distribute images and names randomly. Ask the students to find the person holding the name they think belongs to their author’s image, or vice versa, and to introduce themselves. If you have an odd number of students, you can either make this a feature (for example, the label “Percy and Mary Shelley” could be matched up with separate images of the authors) or simply hold an image or name yourself and wait to be approached. Ask each pair to spend a few moments discussing with each other why they think they are the right match of author and image. It should take no more than ten minutes to complete this matchmaking portion of the exercise.

Then ask each pair to introduce one another to the class and, together, to explain why they think the name and image match. When all pairs are done, identify any mismatches and ask the class as a whole to suggest solutions. The class can then discuss what they have learned in the process, particularly through the mismatches. Why were some images easy to connect with names and others not? What factors did students use in making their identification? All told, this exercise can take as little as twenty minutes or as long as forty minutes, depending on class size.

REFLECTIONS

This exercise works best for classes focusing on canonical literature. It is intended as an icebreaker activity on the first day of the semester and is most suitable for classes that cover not just the literary text but the literary author as well.

As an icebreaker, the exercise is effective because the students usually require several encounters before they find their matching image or name. The pairs themselves have a sense of joint achievement (if correct) or joint merriment (if wildly incorrect). In this sense, it is vital that you create a relaxed, lighthearted atmosphere in which mistakes are expected and do not reflect negatively on the students. I have found that a good way to do this is to
confess to a mistaken assumption I have made in the past about an author based only on his or her name—the more embarrassing, the better.

“Putting a Face to a Name” requires that students reflect on the construction of authorial identity and the role of celebrity in literary culture. In thinking about the factors that led to their pairing, students usually point to clues such as their own cultural capital (they will probably recognize images of Shakespeare); automatic connections they make between the author’s person (gender, dress, pose), their name, and their work (a seemingly demure mobcapped Jane Austen); or historical context, including the medium (photograph or painting, the style of a period).

By carefully selecting images, the instructor can nudge the class toward a particular issue. A good example comes from a recent class in an introductory literature unit that I regularly teach as part of a team. One of the images provided was Cecil Beaton’s 1956 photograph of T. S. Eliot, in which three slightly different exposures are superimposed. The students did not automatically identify Eliot, but once the match between image and name had been made, they were intrigued by what the multiple exposures might signify. Those who had already read the assigned text, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” tentatively pointed to the sense of an incoherent, fragmented self the poem evokes, which piqued the other students’ interest. This led to discussion of the use of poetic personae and the extent to which a poetic voice can be identified with the author. The students also raised the question of age, pointing out that in the photograph provided, Eliot is an elderly man, although some of his best-known poems, including “Prufrock,” were written when he was in his twenties and thirties.

This exercise, then, can stimulate discussion of how particular authorial images come to be circulated and perpetuated and how such portraits relate to the reception of an author’s work. You can ask questions that encourage students to go beyond face value in their understanding of literary celebrity: for example, whether reclusiveness is a refusal to create an authorial image or merely another means of doing so. For classes focusing on a particular period, movement, or national context, you can lead discussion toward the assumptions students bring to the class, how they have been formed, and how they might be questioned. Depending on the level at which the class is working and the time available, you may like to introduce the notions of the “intentional fallacy” and the “death of the author” and to explain why they do not make the figure of the author redundant in analysis of literary texts and cultures. You could distinguish between the author as the assumed source of meaning in a text and the author as an important paratextual and epitextual consideration (while avoiding these technical terms). In my experience, the conflation of these things is a common source of confusion for beginning students.

Because this is an icebreaker at an introductory level, however, you should not try too hard to direct the class toward a particular end. The exercise
should be generative of questions rather than answers and above all should be fun, allowing students to relax and shed inhibitions about the texts and authors they will encounter in their studies.

Literature Class Band
Claire Cothren

A first-day exercise that encourages students to think critically about literary canonization.

- Genre: any
- Course Level: introductory
- Student Difficulty: easy
- Teacher Preparation: medium
- Class Size: any
- Semester Time: first day
- Writing Component: none
- Close Reading: none
- Estimated Time: 45 minutes

EXERCISE

On the first day of class, show students the iconic cover art for the Beatles’ album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which pictures the band members in front of a collage of more than fifty other artists, actors, athletes, philosophers, celebrities, and various historical figures. (Copies of the album sleeve can be found in many places online, including the Beatles’ official website, http://thebeatles.com.)

Explain that the collage features images of individuals the band members liked and admired—figures they would enjoy having in attendance at one of their concerts. After identifying a few of these individuals and commenting briefly on their various credentials, ask the students to imagine that they have the opportunity to create a “literature class band.” They should consider whose work they would most like to study in a literature class and then select a dozen or more of these figures for inclusion on a class “album cover.”

Allow students five to ten minutes to discuss their ideas in small groups. Encourage them to share their favorite authors or works, and then reconvene