created. How is it that both groups of terms can be equally relevant to the study of modernism? Does modernism still cohere as a movement or a period if it is grounded in such contradictory aesthetics? Such complex questions, generated from the students’ own insights, provide a rich entry into the semester’s reading.

Student feedback may also prompt questions that move beyond aesthetic complication, addressing the social and cultural circumstances of literary production as well. For example, in one course students offered the terms “avant-garde” and “democratic” in response to my query about modernism. Again, both ideas are relevant, since modernist writing frequently finds itself answering to charges of exclusivity or elitism while, at times, advocating a radically egalitarian social renewal. We continued to address this apparent contradiction throughout the semester. Indeed, the efficacy of this exercise lies, I believe, in foregrounding contradiction rather than ignoring it. Our definitions of literary periods and genres only remain “true” if they also remain open to complexity and revision, and so soliciting and discussing students’ preexisting definitions helps set an agenda for literary study as a continued act of discovery.

The Common Thread

Simon Grote

A versatile exercise in comparative thinking that enables students to analyze multiple texts when time is short.

Genre: any
Course Level: any
Student Difficulty: moderate
Teacher Preparation: medium
Class Size: any
Semester Time: early, midterm, last day
Writing Component: in class
Close Reading: low to medium
Estimated Time: 20 to 60 minutes
EXERCISE

Choose some theme, subject, formal quality, generic category, or other characteristic that you want students to analyze across several texts (the “common thread”): the elegiac qualities in a set of poems, for example, or demagoguery exhibited in a variety of speeches, or the relative impartiality of several historical narratives. Concepts such as *elegy*, *demagoguery*, and *impartiality*, which admit of degrees, tend to work best, since the exercise eventually involves asking students to assess the degree to which the common thread is present in each text.

In class, after listing the relevant assigned texts on the blackboard, announce the common thread and ask students to describe its essential qualities in the abstract, so that they can approach the texts with a shared set of criteria. As you write their responses on the blackboard, you may wish to prime them to notice particular features of individual texts by asking them about relevant essential qualities they may have overlooked.

When the students seem to have a reasonably robust understanding of the common thread, ask each student to list the texts on a piece of paper in rank order, according to the degree to which the common thread is present in each. This may take them longer than a few minutes. As they make their lists, encourage them to keep the shared criteria in mind and to write a few notes justifying each text’s placement in the list. (Naturally, the ranking process goes more smoothly when students have read carefully in advance. I sometimes find it helpful to announce the common thread before class or even ask students to read with it in mind.)

Once everyone has finished writing, tally the results on the blackboard. Now the stage is set for discussion of the texts. Begin by proposing that the class try to agree about the correct ranking. Whether or not the students ultimately reach a consensus, the difficulties they encounter along the way should produce vigorous and inclusive discussion. As students defend their choices and get drawn into a comparative analysis of the texts, their movement from text to text may become too fast for comfort, in which case I usually insist that they anchor their judgments in particular passages from each text and test those passages against the criteria they established together at the outset.

REFLECTIONS

In many courses, especially survey courses, multiple texts often need to be discussed in a single class meeting. In such situations, when time is short and the agenda is long, this exercise ensures that no text—and no student—gets left out.

The exercise is also designed to help students practice several skills: comparative analysis, attention to nuance, definition of key terms, and the
application of general concepts to concrete cases. Ranking all the texts in a specific order requires students to pay attention to small differences in degree rather than comparing in broad strokes. Discussing the meaning of the common thread, and then returning to the results of that discussion when the students’ rankings are up for debate, can illustrate the value of defining analytic categories precisely and in a way that others, after perhaps a little persuasion, are willing to accept.

This exercise works particularly well after students have built up a repertoire of readings suitable for comparison, and it can help them identify important course themes, such as in preparation for a test or final exam. A more time-consuming variation of the exercise, in which you solicit a common thread from the students instead of determining it yourself, can also serve this purpose.

That said, the exercise can also be useful early in the semester, especially when the concepts or key terms that students are asked to define at the outset provide them with a common thread not only through the texts up for discussion during that particular session but also through the rest of the course. As the semester continues and students move on to other texts, they can be encouraged to add those texts to their initial ranking and progressively refine their understanding of the common thread.

For this reason, if you use this exercise early in the semester, the common thread is worth choosing carefully, with a view to its usefulness later in the course. I discovered this after asking students in the second week of a Western civilization class to rank a group of four texts (Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*, Hesiod’s *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, and the first four chapters of the Book of Genesis) by the degree to which each text portrays God or the gods as just. We spent a good fifteen minutes constructing a pair of definitions and descriptions for the two terms I thought most relevant: *justice* and (in order to clarify *justice* by contrast with its opposite) *tyranny*. As students volunteered elements for our description of each term, prompted sometimes by my questions about issues I knew might come up in our future readings and discussions (Is nepotism necessarily characteristic of a tyrant? Is mercy necessarily at odds with justice?), I wrote their contributions on the blackboard and observed most students copying my blackboard scrawls into their own notebooks. Justice and tyranny proved to be frequently recurrent themes in our course, and throughout the semester I noticed students flipping back to these original notes to defend their use of the terms in class discussion. Sometimes they even made new annotations in the margins of those old pages on occasions when, I imagine, discussing new texts had expanded or otherwise changed their understanding of the old terms.