



Professional Development Webinar #5: Assigning Character Studies

Principles

1. Important question: how best to approach literature (and specifically character studies) in pursuit of virtue? Two general approaches may be called the didactic, or direct approach, and the Socratic, or indirect approach.
2. The Socratic or indirect approach is preferred for a variety of reasons, most of which stem from weaknesses in the didactic approach.
3. Character as a cog in the wheel of the story (protagonist or antagonist, catalyst of plot or element of setting, etc.) helps us understand the story's structure and themes. This is the initial or primary role of characterization.
 - a. Discussion of character in this first sense should rely on the circumstances of the story: physical descriptions, elements of plot and setting, goals and obstacles, turning points and consequences.
4. Character as artistic rumination on human nature is somewhat distinct from #1 above, and provides another angle for discussion, thinking, and writing. The secondary role of characterization.
 - a. Strangeness and likeness, individuality and universality, the one and the many – these are the two tracks that discussions of character in this second sense should run on.
5. Look for a combination of description and analysis as students grow. In later stages, a link between physical characteristics and thematic significance is more and more the proper subject of character study. Our technique of study should thus mirror the nature of the thing studied.
6. Form and format should provide a link to composition. A good character study can form the heart of a broader interpretive essay on a work of literature.

Practices

1. At the grammar stage, sentence- and paragraph-length studies should be required, with attention to structural and mechanical issues of sentences and paragraphs.
2. At the logic stage, students should deliver paragraph- and page-length studies, with similar attention to the mechanical issues involved.
3. At the rhetoric stage, the two- to three-page essay with bibliographic citations is appropriate.
4. Secondary sources are unnecessary and can be confusing or distracting.

Grammar-level Application:

G7.7 – Creative writing assignment: imagine character x lost in the woods.

G9.6 – Describe the protagonist. At the early grammar stages, this can be a simple description of the character’s appearance or surroundings/situation. At the later grammar stages, students can also address the thematic significance of such descriptions.

Logic-level Application:

L2.3 – Thematic significance of protagonist as a symbol of the story itself.

Rhetoric-level Application:

R6.4 – Thematic significance of character development.

Suggested additional assignment template:

“Discuss the tension between singularity and universality in (character x). How is the character strange and unique? In what ways does the character exemplify human nature generally?”