Introduction

> We can contact millions of people across the globe, yet we increasingly connect with even our most intimate friends and family via instant messaging, virtual visits, and fleeting meetings that are rescheduled a half dozen times, then punctuated when they do occur by pings and beeps and multitasking. . . . We are nurturing a culture of social diffusion, intellectual fragmentation, sensory detachment. In this new world, something is amiss. And that something is attention.

Maggie Jackson, *Distracted* : *The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (2009)

People who appear within imaginative writing – whether in novels, short stories, or plays – are generally referred to as "characters"; and young readers learn to recognize "character" as a key element of many literary works, one which requires careful observation and various forms of analysis. Our seminar reapproached the familiar topic of the study of literary character partly by exploring connections between that study and the concepts of the "person," "personality," social "image," and "inner self" that we use to navigate our understanding of people – and of ourselves – in daily life. What kinds of techniques or information do we use to "read" the people around us? What kinds of signals do we rely on to shape *their* readings of ourselves? How do our methods of interpreting people whom we know slightly or very well in our own lives compare with the methods we use to interpret characters in novels or stories or plays?

Our seminar was composed of teachers of reading, language arts, visual art, middle school and high school English, creative writing, critical writing, and the advanced study of literature. Collectively, we work with students from the elementary school grades through middle school and freshman English to A. P. English

literature, college, and graduate study. Though our students range widely in age and in levels of academic skill, we found that, as teachers, we share an urgent concern to heighten our students' abilities to make observations, to draw inferences, and to reflect on their understandings of other people, as well to articulate their own inner lives and sense of self. Repeatedly, we exclaimed at the rapidly-changing contexts in which our students engage in communication, and wondered: how have our practices of understanding ourselves and others been altered by the new mediums of expression brought by the digital age? Together, we asked what varied forms of attention could be adequate to the great human interpretive questions posed by our encounters with other people – whether characters in fictional narratives; speakers in lyric poems or in plays; flesh and blood individuals met face to face; or people known primarily or only to us through technologically mediated or virtual means.

Early in the twentieth century, the critic L. C. Knights warned readers and critics away from the misguided enterprise of analysing literary characters as though they were historical persons, whose life events and inner characters are full of determinate features beyond what any account might specify or imply. The question in the title of Knights' essay – "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" – made his point by being impossible to answer. In investigating connections across different arenas for the expression, depiction, and interpretation of character, we have remained mindful of this admonition about the naïvete of discussing a literary character as though he or she were a person in the world. While recognizing the essential difference between a character who exists only in a literary text and one existing in the world, we have ventured to trace connections and important distinctions between the remarkable processes by which human beings interpret and respond, respectively, to real and to represented characters. Of course, we frequently encounter "real" people via representations of one or another kind. Encouraged by recent developments in literary study that draw on the burgeoning field of cognitive studies, we have taken seriously the complex and often intuitive or unconscious processes by which, in everyday life, we posit, imagine, and draw inferences about the inner lives of other human beings. We made reference to those processes and skills, often highly developed in our students, as we considered how we might develop the skills of student-readers in making inferences about and interpreting characters in literary texts.

Literary critics such as Lisa Zunshine offer fresh perspectives on our interpretation of literary characters by connecting that activity to what cognitive scientists call "Theory of Mind": the average person's exercise of limited but essential "mind-reading" abilities, as he or she explains the behavior, words, facial expressions, and body language of others in terms of underlying states of mind. We began our series of readings with selections from detective and mystery stories by A. Conan Doyle, Edgar Allan Poe, and Edward P. Jones, in which characters must draw inferences about others' intentions and actions as they attempt to assign responsibility for an enigmatic crime, even as the reader strives to interpret the motives of the characters about whom she reads. We next brought our questions of how character is directly and indirectly made manifest to other genres, including dramatic monologues by Robert Browning, Sharon Olds, and Langston Hughes as well as Shakespeare's *The Tempest* – where control of others' interpretation of their own identities and pasts is crucial to the relations of power within the play.

The depth of common assumptions about "mind-reading" as a universal human response is revealed by our bafflement at some autistic people's difficulty mastering such normative skills; variations in individuals' cognitive processing of cues about others' feelings and thoughts help us see the complex processes of inference that we generally take for granted. Narrated by a highly intelligent, autistic teenager, Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* brought together our seminar's interests in narrative "voice" and point of view, mystery and detective plots, and the range in individuals' readiness to interpret the facial expressions and indirect verbal expressions of others. We read this fictional work alongside the factual

autobiographical account of an extraordinarily gifted, autistic person, Temple Grandin. Moving finally to one of the classics of English fiction, Jane Austen's *Emma* , we observed the perils that even (especially?) a highly-socially-attuned person is subject to in hypothesizing about others' feelings, intentions, and states of mind. Throughout, we aimed in our seminar meetings to reap the benefits of mindful attention to the words, tones, and physical presence of other human beings, as we puzzled over, argued about, and shared revelations in person about both the texts we read and our own teaching experiences.

The rich and various group of curriculum units that emerged from our work together takes up different facets of the interconnected set of questions that we considered in seminar, bringing them to readings written in several genres and addressed to readers of various ages. With units designed respectively for second-graders, third-graders, and sixth-graders, Melissa McCarty, Waltrina Kirkland-Mullins, and Katharine Magdon Liphardt all strive to develop in their students the skills of observation and inference required to interpret the inner lives of characters in literary texts – whether Marc Brown's popular picture books about Arthur; lyric poems by Ogden Nash, Eloise Greenfield, Langston Hughes, and Arnold Adoff; or Gordon Korman's multi-genre chapter book, *No More Dead Dogs* . Working with elementary age students, both Melissa McCarty and Katharine Magdon Liphardt draw attention to the distinction between character traits and character *feelings* – allowing young readers to conceptualize a dynamic experience of feelings that does not fix a person's character categorically.

The units designed by Sandra K. Friday, Mary Lou Narowski, and Marialuisa Sapienza ask middle-school and high-school students to develop a variety of more sophisticated, specialized skills of readerly inference and interpretation. Friday's unit emphasizes the particular power of "close reading" as a technique for entering into the inner life of another, especially as difficult feelings are only partially and indirectly expressed. Narowski adds a comparative dimension to her students' study, examining different media as a way to think about the "clues" to character variously offered by dialogue, images, tones of voice, and physical expressions. While McCarty's second-graders will examine the *Arthur* stories in picture-book form, in read-aloud recordings, and in videos, Narowski's eighth-graders will embark on a probing comparison and evaluation of the realization of character in the book *The Outsiders* and in its movie adaptation. Sapienza's unit models a high level of literary analysis for her high school students, guiding them to examine structure, setting, images, and symbols as nuanced forms of character revelation both in Shakespeare's drama and in Hardy's fiction.

Several units combine this focus on inference and critical thinking about character with a carefully-scaffolded approach to students' reflection on and creative expression of their own characters. Sean Griffin's unit uses Walter Dean Myers' multi-genre novel, Monster, to encourage students to explore multiple ways to formulate their own experiences and tentative sense of identity. In her unit for the fourth-grade art classroom, Melody Gallagher introduces three strikingly different ways to depict character visually – Hanoch Piven's assemblage portraits, Kara Walker's silhouettes, and Cindy Sherman's photographs – to allow students both to develop their abilities to discuss artworks critically and to make use of these different methods of visual representation to portray themselves and classmates. Judith J. Katz and Timothy Grady both teach creative writing: poetry and fiction-writing, respectively. Katz's unit addresses the essential human experience of mortality and of loss, drawing on the "mentoring" offered by literary models to give students means to memorialize those real-life characters they have known who are no longer in this world – as well as to feel their ways to an understanding of the impact of such losses on their own lives. Grady takes the analysis of literary depiction and construction of character into the creative act: his students will move through a sequence of carefully-designed steps to explore that "magic" by which an author compels us to "believe" in a fictional individual.

Simon Edgett in a sense turns this interest around: his unit offers students opportunities to explore how the

lived experiences of individual authors, as in the dramatic life stories of Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley, might enter into the imaginative works of literature they create. Like Edgett's unit, Tina Marie Manus's unit raises students' level of critical self-awareness and sophistication by asking them to "try on" a range of literary-critical methods – and ultimately to consider how their own aesthetic and critical preferences contribute to a portrait of their intellectual selves.

Finally, Elizabeth Johnson's unit on "Creating Character: Performance, Analysis, and Social Development Using *Romeo and Juliet* ," makes explicit the conviction that underlies another key aspect of the design of all these units: a conviction that not only through the analytical practice of reflection on literary character and its consequences, but also through the social practice of group work in the classroom, disciplined, sustained attention to others' opinions and performances, and constructive collaboration, students may gain important knowledge about their own characters and about their impact on others' inner lives. As Johnson emphasizes, our teaching seeks to foster social and emotional development, even as it sets high goals for the intellectual development of our students of every achievement level and age.

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