

Media Study in the Classroom: Creative Assignments for Character Analysis¹



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“Did you like yesterday’s episode?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you like about it?”

“Everything.”

“What do you mean—everything?”

“Well, just everything...”

“Well I liked it that Maria didn’t desert
her friend in need. She supported her, and
looked after her, and helped her recover...
What about you?”

“Me too.”

“Cool, isn’t it?”

“Cool, yeah.”

I don’t know about you, reader, but I’ve
often overheard this kind of dull, empty
dialogue between young people discussing
the media—films, TV shows, newspaper
articles... Can we help our students more
perceptively analyze media characters and
media texts as a whole? This question is the
focus of the following article.

The *Russian Pedagogical Encyclopedia*
defines *media education* as a trend in
pedagogy toward teaching students about
“the mechanisms of mass communication
(print, TV, radio, film, video, etc.). The
primary goals of media education are to
prepare the new generation for life in the
current information age and to teach young
people to perceive and understand various
forms of information, to become aware of
the consequences of its psychological

influence, and to master various...nonverbal
means of communication through technolo-
gy” (*Russian Pedagogical Encyclopedia*,
1993, p. 555).

In both high schools and universities,
media education can develop students’
critical thinking through analysis of the
characters featured in various media forms
and genres. Various assignments can be
effectively used to stimulate students’
media awareness, or perception of both (a)
the feelings and ideas conveyed and (b)
the mechanisms by which they are con-
veyed.

The method of media character analysis
described below was employed in various
courses for students of Media Education in
the Social Pedagogy Department of the
Taganrog State Pedagogical Institute.

Concise media glossary

Media awareness is the perception by the audi-
ence of the authors’ attitudes and perspec-
tives, which are conveyed through various
expressive means inherent in a particular form
or genre of media.

Media text is a message expressed in any media
form (print, radio, TV, cinematography, video,
Internet) or genre (article, broadcast, film,
video clip, soundtrack).

Character analysis is the analysis of the character,
motives, values, and behaviors of media
characters.

Media agencies are editorial staffs, TV studio
heads, etc.

Media categories are forms and genres of media.

Media technologies are technologies used in
creating media texts.

Media language is an expressive means used in
creating the images.

Media representation is concepts of the facts of
reality in media texts.

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However, the suggested approaches can also be effectively used by high school teachers, particularly in literature courses, as a supplement and extension to traditional methods of textual analysis. Our method is designed to develop not only critical and creative thinking as applied to particular media texts, but also media competence in a broader sense².

The analysis of media characters is based on a variety of creative assignments outlined here: literary imitation, dramatic role-playing, and graphic representation³. For each of these categories, a “bank” of creative assignments is provided from which a teacher can choose activities best fitting the form, genre, and content of a given media text, as well as the age, level, and needs of their students. The three categories of assignments correspond to stages in the process of creating a media text. The literary imitation assignments are related to the script-writing stage (devising a plot, development of characters, writing screenplays for scenes in well-known literary works). Role-playing assignments, involving games based on plots and characters, help students better understand the processes involved in staging a production. Graphic representation assignments are primarily concerned with the advertising of a media product, its representation in the press, on TV, radio, etc. Based on our experience, we recommend presenting the different types of assignments in the order noted above (although the sequence of particular assignments in each category may vary depending on the given text and students’ needs). All of the suggested assignments are intended to develop the students’ awareness and understanding of media: They help students delve into the inner world of the characters and

better understand their motives, personalities, temperaments, and moral values.

Literary imitation assignments for the analysis of media characters

- Describe and analyze a particular event in a media text, including a description of the characters and an explanation of their actions and statements.
- Make up a story from the perspective of the main character or a minor character in a media text, maintaining the features of the character’s personality and linguistic style.
- Make up a story from the viewpoint of an inanimate object featured in the text, thus shifting the narration towards a paradoxical, imaginary perspective.
- Place a character from a media text in a different situation (by changing the title and genre of the text; the time and setting of the action; composition elements—beginning, climax, denouement, epilogue; or the age, sex, nationality or other characteristics of the hero).
- Invent some original characters. Describe their physical qualities, and create dialogues that reveal their personalities. Incorporate them into a synopsis for an original script (a brief sketch, one or two pages long).
- Think up new physical, emotional, or moral trials that could be encountered by the main character in the text being analyzed.
- Write an original mini-script that demonstrates character development.
- Write an original piece (report or interview) for a newspaper, magazine, or website about a particular character.
- Make up “letters” (to newspapers, magazines, TV, the Ministry of Culture, etc.) from the perspective of readers or viewers of various ages and various social, professional, and educational backgrounds (see the “Monologue by a Woman-Pensioner” below).

Role-playing activities in the classroom can be organized in the form of creative contests, either for individual participants or for groups of two or three. For example, students first become familiar with the characteristics of a particular media text (they may do this at home or, if the text is not too long, during class) and then write a story in the voice of a given character. After

all the students have written and presented their stories, the class engages in discussion about the strengths and shortcomings of each. The winners in this contest would be the stories that, according to the collective judgment, are most faithful to the style and characters of the original text.

Of course, there can be many different approaches to evaluating students’ creative products, all of which will at some point involve the evaluator’s own taste and subjective preferences. Even professional literary and film critics often disagree in their judgment of the same work. Therefore, when organizing such classroom contests it is important to involve students in establishing the criteria by which their work will be evaluated. In our opinion, the best criterion of success for assignments such as “create a story from the viewpoint of a particular character” or “make up a scene placing a character in a different situation” is the ability of participants to identify with the character, to understand the character and reveal his or her psychology through language, and to provide motives for the character’s acts and gestures (including those not described in the original text).

Especially popular with students are the assignments that require them to make up a story from the perspective of an inanimate object or animal featured in the text. Possible examples include a bank note being passed from one person to another; a mirror in the main character’s room; a car used by the hero to pursue criminals, etc. When working on such assignments, students often find parallels with other art forms (for example, many students remember—and draw inspiration from—a song by Vladimir Vysotsky, “I’m a Fighter,” written from the perspective of a fighter plane).

Our students definitely enjoyed composing stories from the viewpoints of inanimate objects such as a revolver in a gangster film, the ocean liner *Titanic*, a feather in the film *Forrest Gump*, Harry Potter’s magic wand, etc. An especially successful example is this story written by Yelena C.:

Hi! First let me introduce myself, I’m the one who played the leading role in the film Perfume. I’m the vial in which my brilliant master first mixed up all the ingredients of the perfume he created. I could feel every drop slowly sliding down my glass sides. Each one was magnificent! When I was filled to the brim I felt very important, I would even say, great! My feelings at that moment were indescribable! At last my master uncorked me at the site where he was to be executed... Well, you know the rest. The effect was amazing!

At that moment I realized that I was a real star! But alas, quite soon I had to come back down to earth: I found myself trampled in the mud, empty and deserted... And I played the entire role without a stunt double—I hope the audience appreciates what I had to go through!

(The same student, Yelena C., even contributed some black humor about popular media characters: *Jean-Baptiste from Perfume comes to visit Hannibal Lecter from The Silence of the Lambs. ‘Will you dine with me?’ Dr. Lecter asks. ‘No thanks,’ Jean-Baptiste answers, ‘I’ll just enjoy the smell.’*)

We believe that such assignments are in line with the teaching methods of V.S. Bibler, a Russian philosopher and author of a comprehensive philosophy of culture: “Students in the classroom recreate possible variants of mankind’s accomplishments, as well as alternative versions of these accomplishments, and, most important, they arrive at a conscious stopping point [to think] through what has already been accomplished, invented, and created by other people” (Bibler, 1993, pp. 13–14).

In a similar way, we use creative assignments to help students better understand the particulars of audience awareness: Students engage in actions that help them experience other people’s reactions through their own. One such assignment is to write letters to various organizations from the viewpoints of filmgoers and TV viewers of various ages, tastes, and education levels. The criterion of success in this assignment is the writer’s ability to identify with the imagined author of the letter or monologue.

The “Monologue by a Woman-Pensioner about a Soap Opera,” by student Irina O. is, in our opinion, a successful example:

Yesterday I even skipped the laundry to watch the next part. Poor girl, so nice and kind-hearted she is, and so many troubles



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² For the statistical analysis of the method’s effectiveness see Fedorov, 2005, pp. 150–181.

³ Some of the assignments were described previously in: BFI, 1990; Semali, 2000, pp. 229–231; Berger, 2005, p. 125; Fedorov, 2004, pp. 43–51; however we considerably supplemented and developed the series of assignments.

raining down on her head! And that rascal, Leoncio, how is he even allowed to live? Never in my life have I seen such cruelty! I'd strangle him with my own two hands if I could... Poor girl, she seems so sincere, she does. I can't look at her without starting to cry. And her eyes are so sad that it breaks your heart! You just feel how miserable her life is... I say she should turn round and bash him right on his mean head, and run away with her boyfriend. Though I guess they'll get together all the same! Such a lovely couple... And look at that Rose, so nasty, mean, and greedy! Where did they find such an ugly mug, I wonder? I hated her the minute I saw her. ... But January, she's something else—so fat and so dark, but so warm-hearted. And always willing to help. Oh my, will I live to see the end of the last series? I really hope everything turns out OK. Our TV people need to learn how to make good shows. The kind that when you watch them, you want to watch more and more!

Creative writing of this type develops students' imaginations, and their ability to identify with the persona of the invented character (the purported author of the letter or monologue). Comparing students' letters and monologues with actual letters from TV viewers and filmgoers in Russian newspapers, we repeatedly observed obvious similarities in both language and ideas. This suggests that the student authors successfully caught certain aspects of the popular perception of the media: an obvious preference for entertaining and "satisfying" media products; a desire on the part of older audience members to return to the ideals of the past; and the desire to find in media texts a rosy view of life.

Our observations have shown, though, that many young people, including the students in Media Education, also tend to

favor an idealized reflection of reality in media texts, as shown in the following example:

This is a story of a juvenile delinquent. Basically his character is clear to me. He grew up without a father so he became hardened and embittered against the whole world... Yes, unfortunately, we often encounter such people in real life. But I don't think we need to show them on the screen. What we should be showing is the accomplishments of the young. We need optimism, and prospects for the future! (Oleg G.)

As seen from the excerpt above, the writer seems ready to give up truthfulness in representation for the sake of uplifting models and positive examples. In our opinion, Oleg G.'s position reflects the naive hopes of a certain part of the audience who believe that life would change for the better if only we would ban negativity from the screen and stick to showing ideal heroes.

However, the majority of today's high school and university students are not inclined to demand ideal heroes from the contemporary media. What they are after is high-grade entertainment. They want lavish melodramas and adventure stories set in the past (or, as a variation, in the imaginary future), preferably about the lives of aristocrats or foreigners—fairy tales for grown-ups, that have nothing to do with the burdens of everyday reality.

Nevertheless, there are some young people who prefer realistic portrayals of characters in media texts:

The film vividly conveys the heroine's psychology: She lost real contact with her mother long ago; she feels deprived and unhappy, and attempts to express herself through scandalous actions. She is sick and tired of her family's constant reproaches and quarrels. She wants to get away from home, to live her own life. She is excitable, nervous, rude, and often cruel. She may even be capable of murder—say, in a street fight... At the same time she is clever in her own way, and she longs for happiness—which, for her, means sex, dancing, and entertainment. She is sick and tired of living among factory smokestacks, and associating with foul-mouthed thugs, and watching her stupefied mother constantly fighting with her drunkard father. It's all a vicious circle for her... I know a lot of girls like this in real life, too. Other girls, their friends, seem to live only for themselves. They are often indifferent to the suffering they cause. (Lyudmila D.)

Lyudmila D.'s description provides a moral evaluation of the characters' behaviors, although it is lacking in nuance and fails to explore the author's intent.

This whole complex of literary imitation assignments expands and supplements the students' available knowledge and skills, at the same time giving them a practical framework: Students have an opportunity to develop their interests, imaginations, associative, creative, critical, and individual thinking, as well as their media competence. Further, the assignments call for the practical application of concepts already familiar to the students from courses in literature (for example, *theme, idea, story*), art (*color, light, composition, perspective*), and music (*tempo, rhythm*).

Dramatic role-playing assignments

- Dramatized interview (or press conference) with various media personalities.
- Dramatized "International Conference of Media Critics" with comprehensive discussion of media figures and their personas.
- "Legal" role-playing sketch, including an investigation of the crimes of a negative protagonist, and his trial.
- Actor sketches: Create and perform a sketch using roles described in the text (e.g., an official and a visitor, children and parents, an investigator and a suspect, a detective and a witness, a teacher and a student, a doctor and a patient). Students work in groups of two or three. Each group prepares and presents a role-playing project, which is recorded on video and shown in class. The teacher acts as an adviser. The projects are discussed and compared. This assignment not only offers the participants an opportunity for creative work, but also provides rich material for discussion. In the course of this discussion students willingly share their viewpoints, explaining how they would behave in a similar situation and why.
- Role-playing game: Create a TV broadcast, working through all the stages of preparation and production, including casting and rehearsals.

Many of our students especially enjoyed role-playing games based on popular media characters (Batman, Cheburashka, Shrek, etc.). Below is the text of "Shrek Visits Radio Station BLOT," a dramatic sketch created by Yekaterina F. and Daria K. (as hosts) and Dmitry S. (as Shrek):



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Hi, dear listeners! Daria and Yekaterina present the weekly program "Guests of the Blot." Today our guest is the well-known animated character Shrek.

"Tell us please, how did you manage to win the hearts of so many millions of girls?"

"First, I don't bathe like ordinary guys do. I only take a mud bath once a month. Second, I have a beautiful suntan all year round. I also have lots of other virtues of course, but I prefer to let my admirers talk about them, rather than recounting them myself."

"Do you have any bad habits?"

"Oh yes! Picking my nose."

"What is your relationship with your friend Donkey off-screen?"

"He talks too much, and it gets on my nerves..."

"What's your favorite food?"

"I'm fond of slugs in their own juice. My wife Fiona is the best cook when it comes to slugs."

"What are your plans for the upcoming animation season?"

"I'd like to star in a good thriller. But mind you, I'd only agree to be a star—supporting roles are out of the question..."

"That's certainly a worthy aspiration. Good luck to you!"

"Ciao, babes!"

"Today our invited guest has been the big, friendly animated character Shrek, with Yekaterina and Daria as your hosts. See you next week!"

Creative role-playing assignments enrich and develop the skills acquired by the students at the previous, literary imitation stage. They also help students become more confident and develop their social and improvisation skills; the actors' speech tends to become more natural and fluent.



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A fantasy photo collage created by a group of Taganrog State Pedagogical Institute students. It is based on the popular reality-show *The Last Hero*.

Graphic representation assignments

- Designing advertising posters, with a focus on presenting media characters
- Making collages based on a media text
- Creating a series of pictures for a comic book based on a media text
- Taking photos of friends for an imaginary glossy magazine, with a focus on the unique personality of the model

This series of assignments focuses students' attention on the graphic aspects of media texts and on visual features of the characters.

In completing the assignments in all three categories, students learn to perceive and critically analyze the character and actions of media figures, looking at them not only from the detached perspective of a reader or viewer, but also from the artistic perspective of their creators.

By learning to perceive, interpret, analyze, and evaluate media texts, and by mastering various forms of self-expression involving technology, young people learn the ways of media culture. In contemporary

society, media competence helps a person take full advantage of the opportunities provided by the information resources of TV, radio, video, cinema, Internet, and the press, and better understand the language and techniques of media culture.

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Questions on how media agencies influence the characteristics of media figures

- Can characteristics of media figures be defined by the thematic/genre/political and other biases of particular media agencies? In what way?

Questions on how media categories influence the characteristics of media personages

- What are the similarities and differences between the characters in a tragedy, drama, and melodrama?

Questions on how media technologies influence the characteristics of media figures

- Does a character's appearance depend on the media technologies used? If so, in what ways?

Questions on how media languages influence the characteristics of media figures

- How are exaggerated gestures and facial expressions of the actors connected to the genres of comedy, musical, or fantasy?
- How can the authors of a media text demonstrate that a certain character has changed?
- Can you think of a scene where the events are seen through the eyes of one of the characters, or reported by one of the characters? Does this perspective help to create a sensation of danger or surprise at certain moments in the scene?
- Why are certain objects (including the clothing of characters or presenters) depicted in a particular way? What do these objects tell us about the characters, their lifestyles, their attitudes to each other? Does the setting indicate anything about the nature of the people living in it? If so, how? How are personalities revealed through dialogue and language?

Questions on how media representations influence the characteristics of media personages

- How are characteristics such as family, social background, gender, and race represented in popular media productions in different genres, and from different countries?
- What political, social, and cultural trends are represented in a given text? Do you see evidence of rebellion, sexism, conformism, anxiety, stereotypical thinking, generational conflict, arrogance, snobbery, isolation, etc.?
- How do the characters in a given text express their viewpoints and ideas?
- What are the relationships between the characters; what are their motives and the consequences of their actions, and how does the media portrayal influence our perception of them?
- How do the characters develop? Do the protagonists change as a result of the events described in the text? How do they change and why?
- What did the characters learn in the course of the story?
- Can you provide examples of texts in which certain characters are portrayed in deliberate contrast to each other?
- How, and in what scenes, are the conflicts between characters in this text revealed?
- Who plays the most active role in the given text, a male or a female protagonist? What actions does this character perform?
- Are there any connections between minor plotlines that help the viewer understand the characters and their ideology, as well as furthering the themes of the text?
- Should the authors of a media text depict negative characters as the embodiment of evil?
- Does the ending logically follow from the characters' personalities and philosophies? If not, how should the story end, considering what is known about the characters? What ending would you propose and why?

Questions on how different characteristics of the media audience—gender, social, psychological and others—influence the perception of media figures

- What is your opinion of the character N.? Do you approve of his/her behavior? Would you do the same thing as N. in a similar situation?
- What makes you sympathize with some characters and pass judgment on others?
- What is the contribution of each character to your understanding of the main protagonist?
- Can you give an example where your sympathies for a character changed in the course of the plot?
- Ideally, what qualities and character traits would you like to see in a hero or heroine? Would you characterize your favorite hero as an active and energetic person?
- Can the reaction of the audience prolong or cut short the lives of characters in media series?