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Societal Polyphony in Burney and Austen: Using Digital Tools to Invite Students into the Conversation

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Societal Polyphony in Burney and Austen: Using Digital Tools to Invite Students into the Conversation

Abstract

How can we invite our students to experience the social wit and wisdom of the eighteenth-century novel, on an interactive level? Addressing challenges faced by those who teach eighteenth-century novels in General Education surveys or seminar classes, this essay offers two lesson plans—easily adapted for different texts and courses—that use digital technology to engage students' imaginations and cultivate skills of reading comprehension and interpretation. The first, "*Evelina* Tweet Fest," invites students to participate in a collaborative conversation on a simulated Twitter platform, translating the literary polyphony of Frances Burney's epistolary novel into the language of our own, status-conscious milieu. The second, "*Pride and Prejudice* meets Myers-Briggs," taps into student interest in online personality quizzes and asks them to use Austen's textual clues to explain character quirks and relational dynamics.

Keywords

teaching the eighteenth century, literature pedagogy, Frances Burney, Jane Austen, Myers-Briggs personality test, digital pedagogy

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One of my pedagogical aims, regardless of the text or period under consideration, is to help students imaginatively immerse themselves in literary worlds in order to develop and appreciate the skill of slow, careful reading—to somehow smell the sewage in Swift’s “Description of a City Shower,” or hear the cacophony of political discourse in the seventeenth-century coffeehouse, or feel how Wordsworth’s “beauteous forms” of nature help us “see into the life of things” (Wordsworth ll. 23, 50). At my teaching-oriented university, where the relentless academic calendar and heavy general education load ensures that depth and breadth seem perpetually at odds, I have found the eighteenth-century novel to pose a particular challenge to achieving this goal. The vast majority of my students have little knowledge of or particular interest in the eighteenth century and little practice in reading older, complicated, or lengthy literary texts. And too often, typographic quirks and prolixity can obscure the delightful humor and wit in character dialogues that, translated into contemporary English, resonate soundly with students’ concerns about social conformity, relational uncertainty, financial instability, and more.

This essay offers two discrete and easily customizable lesson plans that invite students to engage with canonical novels that feature witty conversations and complex social cues. Deploying digital platforms that are familiar to our students, the lessons tap into students’ affinity for “participatory cultures” and need for collaborative skills (Jenkins et al. xiii). The lessons are designed to fit easily into a variety of courses, from British literature surveys to advanced topical seminars, and to address two challenges that many of us face, particularly at teaching-focused liberal arts colleges. First, as numbers of English majors decline, nationwide, many of us teach an increasing number of general education courses and must find creative ways to incorporate our disciplinary content.¹ Second, as universities work to recruit and retain students in a competitive higher-education marketplace, faculty members are expected to engage students with multimodal, active-learning activities and innovative uses of technology that genuinely further our course objectives.² The lessons I describe here—which invite students not just to read *about* the worlds eighteenth-century novelists create but also to participate in these worlds in memorable, meaningful ways—demonstrate how we can use technology to engage students’ imaginations, cultivate their interest in our period of literary history, and enhance the material we teach.

Example one: *Evelina* Tweet Fest

Frances Burney’s *Evelina* offers a witty satire of late eighteenth-century London society, much of which emerges through dialogue. The majority of my students are emerging adults whose university years also serve as an “entrance into the

world,” so to speak, and who are actively forming their sense of self through their words, actions, and interactions with others. They find that Evelina’s efforts to learn the customs and cues of her society while remaining faithful to her moral upbringing resonates in a selfie-obsessed and status-conscious society like our own.

By this point in our semester, in an upper-level British literature seminar on The Cosmopolitan Eighteenth Century, we have discussed how the rise of the novel in Britain provided a vehicle for new ways of thinking and societal emphases on sentiment, sensibility, and sociability. Through the genre of the epistolary novel, Burney allows us to ‘hear’ her society from multiple perspectives at once. If the letter form provides Evelina with distance to reflect on her experiences, the dialogues showcase the sensations she experiences—the snap judgments, involuntary blushes, or embarrassed giggles that reveal her formation of character and taste as she learns to navigate her complex social milieu.³ Vivien Jones has argued that *Evelina*’s “linguistic richness and exuberance” reflect Burney’s own fascination with spoken language, and that within the novel, “differences of idiom are key to [the] social background, cultural status, and moral attitudes” that Evelina encounters (x).⁴ With this in mind, I ask students to pay attention to the varied voices we hear emerging throughout the novel. How—and by whom—is each voice characterized? Which is most strident, or anxious, or logical, or conservative, or witty? Who makes us laugh, and why? Does Evelina’s judgment of other characters change over time? Whose manners does Burney satirize, and how does she do it?

Digital tools help us enter into Burney’s literary polyphony so we can see the stakes of these questions more clearly. I include the *Evelina* Tweet Fest lesson early on in our reading and discussion of the novel, just after students have read Volume 1. One class period in advance, I explain to the students how our Tweet Fest will work. Rather than require students to set up actual Twitter accounts, we create a digital space that simulates aspects of the platform. Doing so allows us to confine the activity to a discrete class period while avoiding what students tend to see as an inconvenient or ongoing commitment to a new social media account. I set up a collaborative Google Document through Canvas—giving all students permission to view and edit—and ask students to bring a laptop or other device to our next class. In the rare case that bringing a device is a hardship for a student, I assure them that they can share a device and contribute as part of a team. I also pre-assign Twitter handles that correspond to Burney’s characters, such as @evelina, @MadameD, @theLordOrv, @BranghtonClan, @avillars, @theCapn, @foppish, and so on. Finally, I let students know which scenes of the novel we will focus on, so that they can read them carefully, and more than once, before we

explore them together. Each of the scenes I select from Volume 1 showcases a space where Burney's characters attempt to see and be seen. In our seventy-five minute class period, we have time to cover five or six scenes—for example, the ball and its aftermath (Letter 11), excursions to the opera and ridotto (Letters 12 and 13), conversations at the Mirvans' house (Letters 17 and 18), *Love for Love* at the Drury Lane theater (Letter 20), and, again, the opera (Letter 21).

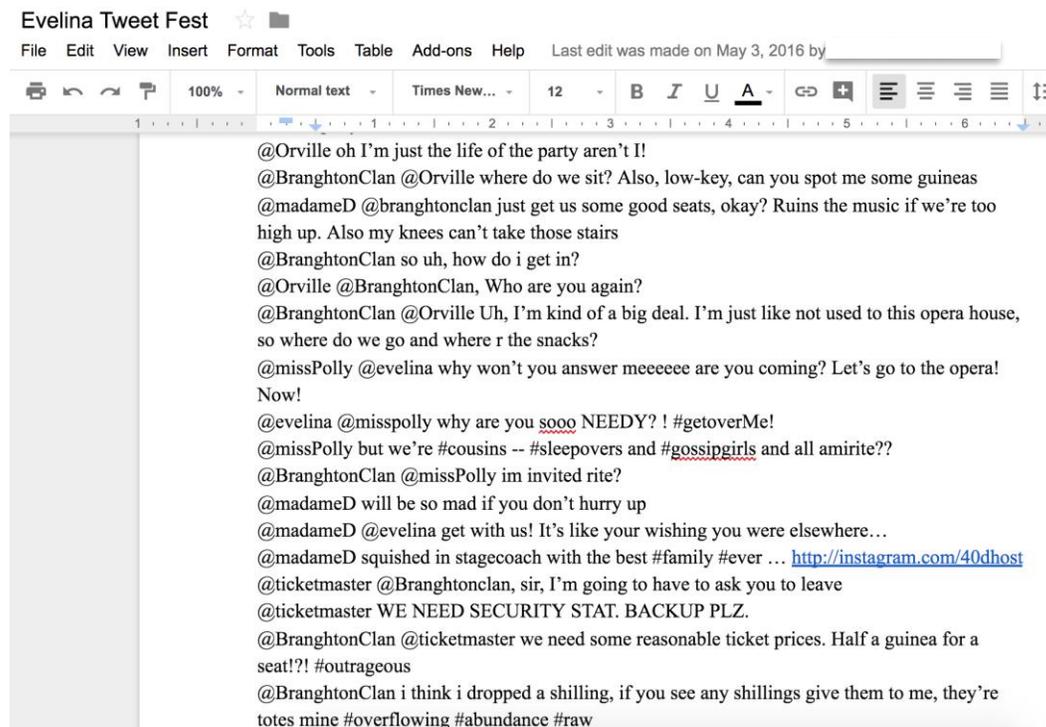


Figure 1: Screenshot from ENGL 370 Tweet Fest (Google Doc on class Canvas page)

When we convene, I pull up our Google Document so everyone can see it both on their screens and overhead, make sure everyone has at least one Twitter handle and knows which scene we are in, and set a timer (beginning with five minutes, and modifying for subsequent rounds depending on how much time we have and how engaged the students are). Then, we're off! There are a few minutes of awkward fumbling as everyone starts typing and the document takes shape (see Figure 1). Then, the hilarity begins, as we ventriloquize different voices. I invite students to be as creative as they would like; for instance, they can change or create handles, take on several voices or get comfortable with one. Their creativity takes shape on the page, as they 'talk' to one another in—and take ownership of—the voices of various characters. We type fast and avoid censoring.

Sometimes we quote exact words from the text, but usually we are paraphrasing or riffing in some way (see Figure 2). However, I push students to stay grounded in the text, and to remain attuned to the textual clues of tone, behavior, sentiment, and attitude that Burney provides for each character. When our timer dings, we move on to another scene or location and set of pages and repeat.

@BranghtonClan Looking for cheap petticoats. Will pay cash.
@madameD found a good store on the way to London.
@BranghtonClan How much are the wares?
@BranghtonClan about a half shilling!
@BranghtonClan Yeah. No. I am not made of money.
@avillars Frugality is a virtue! Nice work ladies, and gentleman.
@madameD oh don't be a cheapstake
@madameD get some class!
@BranghtonClan @MadameD BLOCKED.
Retweet@avillars Watch your eyes and guard your heart, young lady!
---my heart is guarded, BUT my eyes are unguarded, I have never seen such beautiful clothes !
@BranghtonClan Looking for VERY cheap petticoat. Imma pay you back.

Figure 2: Screenshot from ENGL 370 Tweet Fest (Google Doc on class Canvas page)

By the time class ends, we have collectively “read” Burney’s novel in a new way. In the process, we have entered into the text, interacting with each other to make her societal polyphony come alive. Along the way, we have seen in Evelina’s experience echoes of earlier readings from our semester, from Locke’s argument that knowledge is built through a process of sensation and reflection (as mentioned earlier); to the experiences of Daniel Defoe’s cosmopolitan heroine, Roxana; to *The Tatler’s* and *The Spectator’s* gently satirical lessons on manners, civility, consumption, and taste; to perspectives on women’s education from Eliza Haywood’s *The Female Spectator* and Hester Chapone’s *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*. Moreover, attending to the tone and expression, actions and reactions of Burney’s characters opens up interpretive issues and critical readings that we might pick up in later class discussions or that students might pursue for their own research essays. For example, the Branghton family’s ignorance about opera ticket prices in Letter 21 is not only awkward to imagine but also showcases a link between status and taste, as one’s possession of commodities and grasp of intricate social conventions (or lack thereof) signify one’s role in London society. The Captain’s xenophobic jabs at all things French not only discomfit Evelina, but also reflect broader anxieties about what it means to be English.⁵ Evelina’s interactions with the well-mannered Lord Orville, foppish Mr. Lovel, and aggressively solicitous Sir Clement Willoughby

underscore gendered boundaries and the dangers of female naïveté. Mr. Villars's cautious directives echo the litany of expectations preached in popular conduct manuals (like Chapone's) and underscore the distance between public and private, city and country life (Jones xv).

Through the work of translating Burney's eighteenth-century prose to a more familiar form of discourse and of translating Evelina's awkward social dilemmas to their own expectation-laden spaces of the classroom, cafeteria, family gathering, or workplace, students learn to engage with Burney's world on her own terms while recognizing its similarity to their own. One participating student expressed that the activity "helped me understand the characters in new ways," because it allowed "[me] to interact with the novel in a way that is familiar to us, and isn't usually used in the classroom. It really helped me get inside the characters' heads, since we had to 'tweet' from their perspectives. Plus, it was pretty funny. Our whole class was laughing!"⁶ By taking interpretive ownership of Burney's characters, students are able to recognize the stakes of Evelina's education and, by extension, their own.

Example two: *Pride and Prejudice* meets Myers-Briggs

While *Evelina* masterfully ventriloquizes a chorus of perspectives, *Pride and Prejudice* offers a psychologically complex portrait of social interaction. Students delight in reading Jane Austen's witty and perceptive character sketches of the reserved Mr. Darcy, bumbling Mr. Collins, supercilious Lady Catherine, silly Lydia, and others. But non-majors who do not often spend time reading outside of class sometimes have a hard time getting past unfamiliar vocabulary to see the humor in Austen's dialogues and recognize the satire undergirding her snapshots of society. During one class period, halfway through our reading and discussion of *Pride and Prejudice*, I tap into my students' keen interest in online personality quizzes and use one of many free, online Myers-Briggs inventories to help them attend to Austen's textual clues about characters' thoughts and behaviors. By this point, I have introduced *Pride and Prejudice* as a novel of manners, and we have spent time close-reading the novel's famous opening sentence, asking how it begins to reveal the plot and themes to come.⁷ We have considered the problem of entail, the complex hierarchy of rank in Regency England, and the significance of place in signaling one's status. In preparation for this lesson, I have also asked students to consider how and where we first meet Austen's characters, noting not just *what* we learn about each character but also *how* and *from whom* we learn it: which voices give us information, for example, and whether we can trust those voices.

For this lesson, I begin by asking students to identify their favorite characters in the novel; then, together, we narrow this list to the four or five most important characters. Our final list usually includes Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth, Mr. or Mrs. Bennet, Lydia or Jane or Lady Catherine, and (if I have a vote) Mr. Wickham. I have students split into small groups, one for each character. Then, I pull up on the overhead screen and provide the link to a short Myers-Briggs personality quiz and explain our task: in groups, we will take the quiz for, and from the perspective of, each character.⁸ One or more students in each group pull up the quiz on a laptop or other device, and the team works together to go through each of the questions. I tell students not to think too hard about any one question. Instead, they must put themselves in the character's shoes and answer questions based on the clues Austen provides about that character's thought process and behavior.

I circulate and contribute to each team's work. There is a lot of laughter as students debate their reactions to the quiz questions and find textual evidence to support their answers. Those who have not read the assigned chapters (or who skimmed them, rather than carefully reading) struggle a bit, since answering the questions requires a solid understanding of the character clues Austen provides. Some questions are harder than others: would Mr. Wickham play video games? The novel offers us a few clues, and our class often includes one or more gamers who can help to clarify how our interpretation of the characters might be influenced if they did play video games. For example, Mr. Wickham likes to socialize and waste time (and other people's money); moreover, he is a master strategist who attempts to orchestrate an alternative reality where he does not have to live with the consequences for his real-world behavior. How about Mr. Bennet? While the patriarch of the family, he frequently retreats to his study to avoid taking part in the squabbles and frivolity going on around him. In many ways, he tries to escape the real world, finding solace and pleasure in his books. The more students talk through the textual evidence, the more apparent each answer becomes: for different reasons, in this case, both characters might desire the chance to lose themselves in imaginative possibilities and virtual worlds. Another question asks whether "you prefer to: keep things in their original state [or] make changes, even if only for the sake of change." Again, clues in the text show us, for example, that Mr. Bennet avoids disruptions to his status quo, whereas Lydia seeks to escape the boredom of rainy days spent in the drawing room, whether in a new hat ribbon, a new relationship, or a change of scene in Brighton.

Once all teams have finished (groups that finish early are prevailed upon to offer their consulting skills to slower teams), each chooses a spokesperson to read aloud the results. While different classes may come to different conclusions about

the characters, several iterations of this exercise show that teams arrive at fairly similar conclusions as long as they have carefully read the novel and genuinely worked to enter into each character's experience, perspective, and conversation. For example, Mr. Wickham often turns out to be an ENFP "Suggester," according to the particular quiz I use (see Figure 3):

[The Suggester is] full of passion and imagination. Life for you is full of possibilities. You can quickly find connections among all kinds of information and matters and handle things confidently according to the patterns you find. You are eager to get validation from other people and also you are quite generous with your praise and support of other people. You are very casual and flexible. You are gifted with a rare eloquence and the ability of improvisation ("A Real Me").

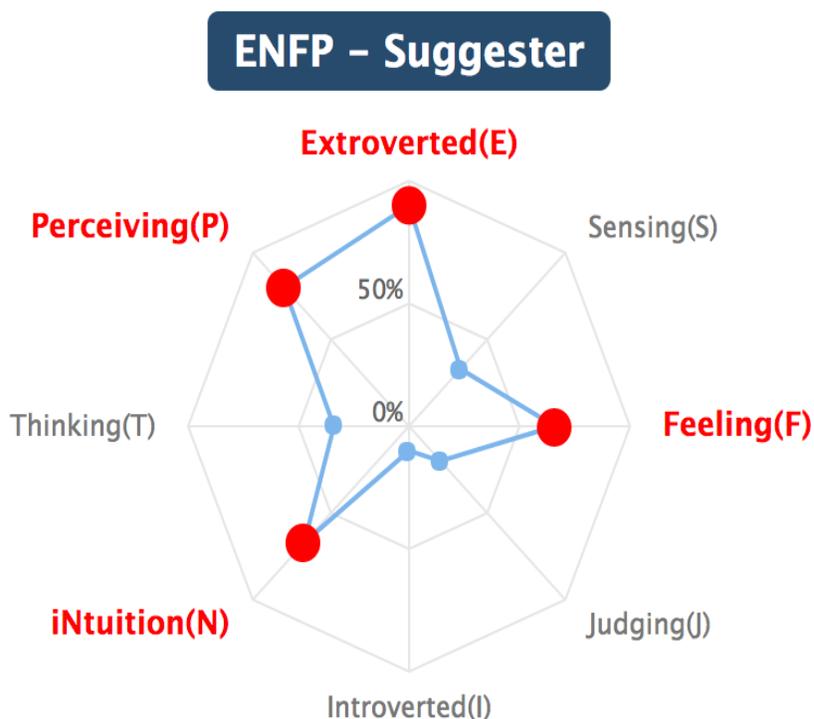


Figure 3: Sample personality result for Mr. Wickham from www.arealme.com

At first glance, the description does not seem to match or do justice to Mr. Wickham's villainous character. As we discuss each result, though, I remind students that the quiz puts a positive spin on each personality type. Even the devious Mr. Wickham can be expected to have redeeming qualities. We

remember, too, that for much of the novel, other characters—including Elizabeth, who prides herself on being a perceptive judge of character—see Wickham as gracious, generous, and witty, an upstanding and eligible bachelor in their community. His manipulative behavior is hidden behind an engaging façade: an “eloquence” and “ability of improvisation,” so to speak, in keeping with the personality traits of “the Suggester.” By contrast, Mr. Darcy often registers as an ISTJ “Inspector,” according to this quiz:

Quiet and serious, [you] can win by the virtue of your considerate and careful thinking and honest personality. You are realistic, pragmatic and dedicated. You decide what you should do rationally, and then you would achieve your goals step by step without any distraction. You like to arrange things in a good order. No matter whether at work, home, or in your own daily life, you will take much account of tradition and loyalty (“A Real Me”).

Considering Mr. Darcy’s personality apart from his individual feelings for Elizabeth—which take him outside of his comfort zone and prompt him to express feelings he says he has “repressed” (Austen 131)—opens up conversations about the hierarchical bonds of obligation and responsibility that structure Austen’s social landscape.⁹

Examining how character clues reveal personality allows our discussions in later class periods to move away from a fixation on the story’s plot, in which Wickham is a villain and Darcy a hero, and towards character development within the layers of Austen’s satire. For example, I ask students what they think about Elizabeth’s early comment to Darcy that “people themselves alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them forever” (Austen 31). We consider how and why people change, and how personality traits can be contingent upon social roles and responsibilities, as well as others’ expectations and our own choices. We discuss, for example, the basis, legitimacy, and evolution of Mr. Darcy’s “pride,” in contrast to Mary’s perfunctory warnings about pride as a vice. We also end up examining Austen’s varied portraits of marriage, both in terms of relational compatibility and in terms of social and financial transactions. Do opposites attract, in the novel? In which cases, and why?¹⁰ Our work on character allows us to think through the contexts and rationale behind the radically different perspectives on marriage that characters voice, from Colonel Fitzwilliam’s statement that “younger sons cannot marry where they like” (128), to Lizzy’s query about the fine line between “discretion” and “avarice,” where “matrimonial affairs” are concerned (107), to Charlotte’s resigned marriage to Mr. Collins as the best “preservative from want” (89).

Ultimately, thinking about Austen's characters in terms of personality gives students a new appreciation for Austen's enduring popularity in our time. There is a universality to her story, of course, insofar as she portrays deep and timeless human desires to be secure, to be noticed, to be recognized, admired, respected, and loved. But Austen also challenges ostensibly universal ideas and assumptions about complex people in a complex society. She portrays characters that are capable of change and that refuse to fit neatly into boxes. At the end of our "Myers-Briggs" class period, I make sure to reserve a few moments to ask my students how they find Austen's depiction of personality and character to be relevant to them on a personal level. I ask how many of them identify as "introverts" or "extroverts" (sometimes the answers are surprising!), and we talk about the problems and possibilities that accompany our attempts to label individuals based on personality traits and character categories, and, inevitably, on stereotypes and assumptions.

Conclusions

Both of these classroom exercises—which can be easily adapted for different novels and within different course types and sizes—have in common a focus on reading as a rich, rewarding, and relevant process of discovery.¹¹ The skills of reading comprehension and literary interpretation emerge out of student participation, drawing in even the most introverted or reluctant participant through enjoyable and low-stakes collaboration. Both exercises facilitate a student-centered classroom space and empower student teams to make their own discoveries, allowing the instructor to engage as an equal participant alongside students or to step in just to point students back to the text for answers and to facilitate concluding discussions. In addition, by focusing on character development and humorous, witty dialogue, both exercises help students see past unfamiliar typography or elevated diction to appreciate the eminently "relatable" aspects of eighteenth-century texts. By starting with and remaining grounded in the text, these exercises reinforce the differences *and* the similarities between eighteenth-century worlds and our own, resisting the siren call of presentism while creating space for meaningful conversation.

Notes

¹ Eric Hayot notes in a recent issue of *Profession* that “at many institutions the decline in humanities majors since 2010 is over 50%”; many of these are English majors (par. 11).

² These realities often require those of us who teach literature to defend our work at the institutional and departmental levels. We face increasing pressure, for example, to align our teaching of literature and interpretive discovery with both institutional assessment outcomes (Goodwyn) and a move within English departments away from traditional literary study and towards “digital and multimodal forms of literacy” (Beavis 244). In such a climate, as Judith Langer argues, it is important for us to show that reading literature is “a way of thinking” with practical benefits (2), insofar as it “permits us to create new combinations, alternatives, and possibilities; to understand characters and situations in ways not necessarily suggested when we accept things as they appear to be on the surface” (9).

³ Earlier in the semester, we read and discuss John Locke’s influential argument in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) that all knowledge comes from sensation and reflection (Book 2, Chapter 1).

⁴ On the moral significance of characters’ speech in *Evelina*, see also Christina Davidson.

⁵ I point students who are interested in exploring this dynamic to Leanne Meanu’s chapter on *Evelina* in *Women Writing the Nation*.

⁶ I am grateful to my students in ENGL 370 Studies in British Literature: The Cosmopolitan Eighteenth Century and ENGL 252 Survey of British Literature from 1616-1832—one of whose feedback is anonymously quoted here—for their cheerful collaboration and insightful reading.

⁷ *Pride and Prejudice* is the final text we read in our survey course of British Literature from 1616-1832. By this point of the semester, we have discussed several forms of satire, as well as the development of the novel in Britain.

⁸ Isabel Briggs Myers and Peter B. Myers expand on Carl Jung’s theory of personality and the personality inventory in *Gifts Differing*. For my pedagogical purposes, the exact personality quiz one uses is not as important as ensuring that the questions serve as a vehicle for reading and discussing the novel itself. The sample questions and personality assessment described in this essay come from the 47-question “Vocational Personality Radar Test”. Each question includes just two answer options, streamlining the in-class teamwork. Occasionally, I have taught a class that included one or more Myers-Briggs ‘experts,’ who opposed the quiz methodology (or results) and good-naturedly demanded a more nuanced version. One student suggested a different quiz (found at www.16personalities.com) as a more reliable gauge, since it allows for a spectrum of agreement to statements such as, “You feel superior to other people” or “Winning a debate matters less to you than making sure no one gets upset.” More important than the specific assessment the class uses is that all participants use the same quiz and criteria; keep in mind, however, that the more nuanced and complicated the test, the more time it will take for teams to arrive at consensus and complete the activity.

⁹ For a further discussion of this topic, advanced students would benefit from reading Sandra Macpherson’s essay on “entail” in the Norton edition of the text.

¹⁰ For example, Jenny Rebecca Rytting uses “Jungian personality theory” to explain the aversion and then attraction between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, arguing that, “although a large part of *Pride and Prejudice* revolves around the differences between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, in terms of psychological type they are really quite similar. They share three out of four preferences—introversion, intuition, and judgment—differing only on the thinking-feeling dimension” (par 3).

¹¹ Of course, as Sherry Lee Linkon reminds us, it is not enough simply to invite students to observe and participate in this process; we need to move beyond “funny, smart, and sometimes fast paced” lectures or discussions to provide students with clear strategies and scaffolded assignments that allow them to develop and support their own critical interpretations (248).

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