can the media both reflect and create reality? On any given controversial issue, to what extent is the media either creating the issue or manipulating the arguments? Argument manipulation is usually accomplished through such strategies as scapegoating, false analogies, extreme examples, etc. Students should recognize that the degree to which the media or advocates of a position rely on such strategies provides an indication of the validity of an argument. Detecting such tactics gives students a useful tool for assessing an argument and making a judgment on an issue.

As far as the Afghanistan question is concerned, there is lots of manipulation of the arguments to go around, and in the end it may not lead to any conclusion, only an awareness that manipulation happens. That in itself is a worthy learning outcome. Nevertheless, it is evident that some time spent looking at examples of statements on the various sides should allow students to form an opinion on where the manipulation is taking place, and whether one side is more prone to it than the others.

Conclusion

At the end of such an inquiry and discussion process, students may be less certain of their position than when they began. This outcome is entirely expected, since they now have more information and have engaged in a process that requires critical reflection and open-mindedness. Most importantly, they will have arrived at their conclusions through their own deliberations, and we teachers will have provided the lamp of learning, not the pointer and the answer book.

Common strategies for manipulating arguments

*Ad hominem* strategy: judgment based on who said something rather than on the merit of the statement

*Either/or* tactic: forcing a choice by presenting only two possibilities when there may be others

*Extreme* examples: non-representative examples used to prove a point, to slant an argument, to support a prejudice

*False analogy*: an analogy that makes an inappropriate connection or comparison

*Irrelevant appeals*: appeals to emotions, patriotism, tradition.

*Leading statements or slogans*: statements designed to damage credibility, encourage hostility, create a false impression.

*Polarized thinking*: presenting limited and false choices, e.g., us/them, strong/weak, rich/poor, good/bad (encourages distrust, suspicion)

*Scapegoting*: assigning blame for a complex situation to a specific person or group

*Straw man*: a caricature of a person or group, set up to represent an easily defeated opponent

Media Study in the Classroom: Creative Assignments for Character Analysis

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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 motives, values, and behaviors of media characters?

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 audience of the authors’ attitudes and perspectives, 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 sense.

The analysis of media characters is based on a variety of creative assignments outlined here: literary imitation, dramatic role-playing, and graphic representation. 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 (e.g., writing a play, development of characters, writing screenplays for scenes in well-known literary works). Role-playing assignments, involving students 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 story based on a popular comic strip or cartoon. Show the development of characters that demonstrate character development.
- Write an original piece (report or interview) for a newspaper, magazine, TV, the Internet (e.g., a blog) about a particular character.
- Make up “letters” (to newspapers, magazines, TV, the Internet, 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.

The “Monologue by a Woman-Pensioner from Perfume comes to visit Hannibal Lecter from The Silence of the Lambs. ‘Will you dine with me?’ Dr. Lecter asks. ‘No thanks, 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). Furthermore, they are especially effective in helping students to better understand the particularities 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...
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 and live her own life. She is excitable, nervous, rude, and often cruel. She may even be capable of murder—say, in a stroke of hypocrisy. 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 smoketacks and associating with foul-mouthed thugs, and watching her stepmother mother constantly fighting with her drunken 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.
- Dramatic 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).

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.
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, conformity, 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?
- What political, social, and cultural trends are represented in a given text? Do you see evidence of rebellion, sexism, conformity, anxiety, stereotypical thinking, generational conflict, arrogance, snobbery, isolation, etc.?
- 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?
- What political, social, and cultural trends are represented in a given text? Do you see evidence of rebellion, sexism, conformity, anxiety, stereotypical thinking, generational conflict, arrogance, snobbery, isolation, etc.?