

Superman Is Dead: How We Help Students Make Sense of Literary Characters

Barry Gilmore
Hutchison School
Memphis, Tennessee
barry.gilmore@bellsouth.net

It's true. Superman is dead.

No, that's not some post-modern comment on the nature of the 20th-century superhero archetype. Nor is it a nod to education reform as depicted in recent documentary films. I mean it. In 1992, in volume 2, issue 75 of the DC comic, Superman—the Man of Steel, perhaps the least vulnerable character ever created—died. He was killed by, and killed in return, a machine called Doomsday in an epic battle in the streets of Metropolis.

Perhaps you knew this already. You might know, too, that Superman came back in a number of incarnations in later issues; most of these proved not to be the true Superman but imitators of the great hero. I found out about the demise of the man from Smallville long after the fact, from a tenth-grade student whom I'll call Christopher. Christopher may sound familiar to you; an underachiever in class, he rarely finished the assigned reading, did poorly on tests, failed to turn in essays, was a whiz with computers, and could provide, down to the smallest minutiae, the detailed biography of every Marvel and DC comic book character, Hogwarts resident, or Jedi Knight ever to grace a page or screen. When I mentioned Superman's invulnerability in passing during a class discussion of *Hamlet*, Christopher jumped on the chance to inform me, at length, of his death.

In an issue of this journal devoted to literary characters, Christopher's case is worth consideration. Hamlet, after all, is a likely candidate to jump to the



This 15-foot tall bronze statue of Superman by Gary Ernest Smith appears in front of the courthouse in Metropolis, Illinois.

mind of any English teacher who is asked about characters of great depth and interest; Christopher pronounced the play “pretty OK” and named, as the last assigned class text that really gripped him, *Lord of the Flies*, a novel he'd read three years earlier in middle school. What was the difference, I wondered, between Christopher's empathy toward literary characters and those of his classmates, or my own? Why did he adore Harry Potter, Jack and Piggy, and the Dark Knight, merely tolerate Hamlet, and have no patience at all for Darcy or Elizabeth Bennet,

while other students in the class would feel a similar affinity for Heathcliff, Scout, or Eva Luna but detest Edward Cullen? And where in the mish-mash of affection and aversion for these fictional constructs did the years of teaching my colleagues and I had provided—the discussions of round and flat characters, the graphic organizers designed to help students amass details and consider motivation, the “text to self” group work intended to shift from reading about literary characters to examining one's own moral character—where did all of that time and instruction come to bear on which of the figures in the texts students actually cared about?

In her book *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* Blakely Vermeule addresses the tendency of the academic establishment to dismiss affection for literary characters in favor of objective analysis, describing teachers with “the furrowed brow, the worried expression: responsible teachers [who] wean

their students off their passion for literary characters or at least teach them how to think about them in a responsible way, leavening their passion with skepticism, dialectic, and appropriately aesthetic distance” (17). No doubt, the study of literature offers numerous appropriate stepping stones for teaching students the structures of fiction and nonfiction, but Vermeule has a point. An overly reductive approach in which characters become no more than a list of traits and stories a catalogue of symbols and ill-phrased themes is a recipe for disaster in encouraging students to read. Sometimes, students may need to be allowed to love characters, while at other times academic distance may be appropriate.

I suggest that every English teacher should revisit with his or her students three deep questions that have no definitive answers. Notice that I suggest that this discussion take place *with* students, in class. Although I’ve offered some reflections on these questions, the questions themselves are meant to guide discussion not toward right answers but toward fuller understanding of our reading.

Question 1: *Why do we care about literary characters?*

Why we love fiction is easy—sort of. Fiction offers ways to make sense of the world, to reshape one’s own experience, to escape, to connect, to learn, to “reveal truth,” as Emerson put it, “that reality obscures” (<http://bit.ly/Md6KU9>). The answers to why we love fiction may be numerous, but there’s little doubt that any of those answers may serve as a good enough reason to pick up a book.

Why we love *characters* is a tougher question to answer. What makes one student adore Holden Caulfield and another despise him? What, for that matter, makes anyone take an interest in Holden at all—in a made-up construct, a *lie* (what Holden might himself dismiss as a *phony*)—when there are so many real people, living and dead, deserving of our attention?

This question has sparked a number of responses that delve as much into the psychology of reading as into the literary merit of various protagonists. Indeed, one recent debate sounds in many ways similar to debates about why we like other people, real or not. Vermeule, whom I mentioned above, is one voice in this discussion; her central

thesis is that we offer fiction our attention and suspension of disbelief and “fiction pays us back with large doses of really juicy social information, information that it would be too costly, dangerous, and difficult for us to extract from the world on our own” (14). Our interest in characters, in other words, stems from our love of gossip. Vermeule is not alone in making this argument; another recent book suggests that our attachments to character derive from “our cognitive cravings that are satisfied—and created!—when we read fiction” (Zunshine 4), the implication being that we care about characters because they advance our own Machiavellian interests as social creatures. Why do we love characters? Because we love ourselves.

One worries about what this line of reasoning might bring to our feelings about literature; does it reduce books to mere tools of self-aggrandizing? It’s also a viewpoint that seems to best serve stories whose characters are, in fact, engaged in juicy gossip—think *Emma*, not Superman. But consider our empathy for Rachel, the narrator of Sandra Cisneros’s story “Eleven,” who is embarrassed by her teacher in class:

I wish I was invisible but I’m not. I’m eleven and it’s my birthday today and I’m crying like I’m three in front of everybody. I put my head down on the desk and bury my face in my stupid clown-sweater arms. My face all hot and spit coming out of my mouth because I can’t stop the little animal noises from coming out of me until there aren’t any more tears left in my eyes, and it’s just my body shaking like when you have the hiccups, and my whole head hurts like when you drink milk too fast. (9)

Our care for Rachel does not stem from a gossip’s pleasure in observing misfortune, like a sort of literary Jerry Springer show. We feel for Rachel; we feel *through* Rachel. Rebecca Wells Jopling explores this sort of caring as a direct alternative to Vermeule and Zunshine, suggesting that “perhaps we don’t care for literary characters because we get loads of social information from them” but rather because they “make us vulnerable to emotional losses because they suffer while we are identifying with them.” We see our eleven-year-old selves in Rachel, surely, but we also see Rachel’s eleven-year-old-self, and we care.

We also see in Rachel a step beyond the expected and beyond genre. Genre has its place in

reading; it offers a sense of the familiar and the satisfying. It may also act as a springboard into gossip; we come to genre ready to encounter certain character types and to love or hate them, to judge almost instantly. Yet there's also a pleasure in moving beyond genre into the realm of realism, where we can't be sure that any character doesn't have a personal history yet to be discovered.

Where does this discussion about why we like characters leave us as classroom teachers? I'd suggest that we and our students might want to explore the possibility that when we read we are developing more than just tools for understanding how authors shape a believable human being out of airy nothing; we are developing tools, as well, for shaping our own interactions with others. It is now well-established that social, emotional, and literacy development are connected in student learning (Hansen and Zambo 40). To discuss why we care about characters is also to discuss why we care about anyone, and that conversation leads inexorably to a discussion of differences in character type, genre, and detail that is probably richer than any graphic organizer or list of epithets can easily produce.

Question 2: *How do we care about literary characters?*

If, in fact, our caring about characters stems both from our desire to indulge in a heightened form of gossip and also from genuine caring and empathy, then it makes sense that the characters about whom we care would be both those with whom we can identify and those we wish we could be: the self and the other, the mirror and the window, the person we learn with and the person we learn from. Such distinctions aren't static; King Lear may represent the other to a high school student but the self to that student's teacher; Hamlet may be both. Sometimes windows wind up reflecting as well as offering a view to the outside.

Neither of the viewpoints described so far accounts, however, for Christopher's interest in Superman, an interest that he similarly extended to any number of characters with a similar flatness about them: Tolkien's Aragorn, Han Solo, Beowulf. One might argue that Christopher did not, in fact, love character so much as structure and mythology, as the comfort of the archetype. Many of Christo-

pher's characters of choice came preloaded with a set of rules, expectations, and vague but intriguing legacies—characters begging to be made into action figures. But it's also possible that an adolescent reader such as Christopher may be drawn to literary figures through both empathy and awe, in black and white terms as well as shades of gray. Put it this way: Christopher felt for Piggy and thought about Piggy's situation with intensity and real emotion, but he kept turning the pages of *Lord of the Flies* because of Jack's raw savagery.

Adam Gopnik suggests that adolescent readers, especially boys, are attracted both to the other and the self. Boys, Gopnik states, see adolescence as a series of tests that exist for their own sake, to be overcome and then faced again, and they are drawn to characters who are victorious when put through such gauntlets, but they also see their "lives from the inside to be those of lost kings, orphaned boys" (89). As Gopnik puts it, we may admire Sherlock Holmes, but "you don't 'identify' with Sherlock Holmes; you can't not identify with Luke Skywalker" (89).

Gopnik's discussion highlights a danger for those who work with adolescent readers; it is too easy to assume that a character's other-worldliness is indicative of *how* a young reader cares about that character. Harry and Dumbledore are both wizards, but we care about them quite differently. Note, too, Gopnik's description of how young girls read *Twilight*: "What's striking is how little escapism there is in these stories of vampires and werewolves . . . the genius of the narrative lies in how neatly the familiar experiences are turned into the occult ones . . . the tedious normalcy of the 'Twilight' books is what gives them their shiver; this is not so much the life that a teen-age girl would wish to have but the one that she already has, rearranged with heightened symbols" (89). Just because a character has wings or a magic sword, a student does not automatically find an inability, nor an ability, to empathize deeply; that level of caring stems more from the nature of the character's experience. And thus we find ourselves perplexed, too often, when students identify

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more with Percy Jackson than they do with King Lear. Isn't Lear a richer, more subtle exploration of fundamental human frailties? Of course he is. But not, perhaps, to a 13-year-old whose own frailties so closely match those of Percy and who cannot imagine himself old and senile but can easily imagine fighting off the monsters at summer camp (and not just the ones of mythological origin).

The nuances of how we care for characters are not lost on teen readers, but too often, perhaps, they are not allowed to express that understanding nor the desire to explore all levels of caring. In an age where one's "friends" on Facebook might range from the girl sitting beside you to a total stranger to Taylor Swift, students might benefit from a discussion of how they care about the various figures within their sphere of acquaintance. Ask students to list their favorite literary characters (from books, plays, or even movies), for instance, and then ask these questions:

- If you had to drive for three hours with one of these characters, which one would it be?
- If you were to start a fan club for one of these characters, which would it be?
- Which of these characters is easiest to describe to someone who has never heard of him or her? Which is hardest?
- Which of these characters has secrets or backgrounds you know little about? Which doesn't?
- Do you agree with the way these characters look at the world? Why or why not?
- Which of these characters, if any, would still be interesting after the story in which he or she appears has finished?

The point is not the exercise of answering the questions themselves, although those answers might be useful in exploring terms we use to refer to characters such as *round*, *flat*, *dynamic*, and *static*, but rather using those answers to spark a second discussion that could take place in class, in writing, or between pairs or groups of students. What does it take for us to be interested in a character? What aspects of the characters that students like make those characters interesting? How do authors use selection of detail, description, and the creation of character traits to lure us into an interest in the figures in their books? How much do we want the

characters about whom we read to be just like us, or different from us?

Such discussion can take place generally, about literature as a whole, but it can also be fruitful for the study of a single text. Do we actually like Romeo? What about Juliet? What about Tybalt? Do we need to? Jonathan Franzen, writing about Edith Wharton, notes that our sympathy for characters "can be driven by . . . my wish to be a character who is unlike me in ways I don't admire or even like" (63). So we must ask: What are the precise details that determine how we care? Returning to the text and looking closely at the descriptions of characters should involve more than just layering a few choice adjectives together: Romeo is love-struck, young, and idealistic, certainly, but those traits alone don't make us care for him or not. Our own experience and the precise words Shakespeare chooses for Romeo to speak inform our feelings about him as much as his fundamental traits. Allowing students to explore all of these aspects of caring may in fact open them to more sophisticated understanding of and caring for literary characters, to moving from an adolescent appreciation of characters who represent simplified extremes (think Jack and Ralph in *Lord of the Flies*) to those who offer challenging nuance and who act, as Harold Bloom put it in speaking of Hamlet and Iago, as "free artists of themselves," characters with the capacity to change through independent self-examination (70).

How we care about literary characters may change for us over time. It's important for teachers to realize that our own caring and that of the students we teach might not completely match—but



Piggy (Hugh Edwards) and Ralph (James Aubrey) from the 1963 film version of *Lord of the Flies* (dir. Peter Brook; Two Arts Limited).

that both are valuable. Here is how one group of authors describes this aspect of reading: “Perhaps more teachers need to be aware of students’ insights on characters and how those insights change as students mature and gain experience with narratives. Yet, it is equally important that teachers be familiar with ways of nurturing those insights by offering the right character and the right instructional support at the right time to help all students (regardless of age) peel back the layers of character in ways that help them make sense of text” (Roser et al. 550). For Christopher, Superman was a gateway, an entry to a world of literature and story, the right character at the right time. He was also Christopher’s choice; one might make the case that Christopher simply didn’t like books he was forced to read, but cared deeply when he owned the experience of his reading. What a shame if no teacher ever allowed Christopher to express his caring for a character he’d discovered on his own and through discussion also allowed him to begin a journey of understanding more deeply the lessons such caring has to offer.

Question 3: How do we *express* our understanding of characters?

The longer I teach, the more I worry that my teaching might be too reductive; the last thing I want is for students to walk away from a text feeling that it can be summed up simply. Character analysis is one area in which students may get this impression. Character is more than the sum of its parts.

At the same time, students need frameworks for understanding. They need to see Macbeth in the fullness of his humanity (which involves far more than just the personification of ambition) but also as a tragic hero in the tradition of other tragic heroes; and they need to see Cisneros’s Rachel as both every child and an individual, unique child at the same time. Consider how Lucy McCormick Calkins, for instance, describes this need to make connections in studying character: “If readers notice patterns and generalize about how a character tends to act, they can consider why . . . I’ve encouraged readers to think of ways in which characters are like and unlike each other—within one book, across several books, or between a book and our own lives” (471–72). I believe it’s important for

students to reflect on how we express our interests in and caring for characters. It may be helpful to consider this expression as it manifests in two distinct but linked manners: as a means to understand and identify with a character, and as a means for scholarly analysis.

Expression to Understand and Identify

Some research has demonstrated that adolescent readers may tend to focus on the external traits of a character before they focus on the internal; in fact, students need to understand both the external and internal to appreciate character fully (Groenke and Scherff; Smith and Wilhelm). Part of understanding the internal should involve careful textual study. We might notice, for instance, in considering the excerpt from “Eleven” I included earlier, that Rachel demonstrates external signs of embarrassment: she describes for us her “face all hot” and her “body shaking like when you have hiccups.” But we also have access to the internal through Rachel’s narration: she tells us “I wish I was invisible” and not just that she is crying but “crying like I’m three.” The simile offers a window into the workings of Rachel’s mind, her priorities.

It’s not a bad idea to ask young readers specifically to delineate between internal and external clues to character. But understanding and identifying character should probably go beyond close reading, as well, into the realm of activities designed to heighten student connection in and interest to the figures they read about. Deborah Appleman suggests that teachers help students hear the voice of the text through methods such as writing papers from the character’s point of view, reading aloud, role-playing, and placing characters in contemporary situations to predict how they respond. Calkins describes having readers dramatize or draw characters to increase understanding. Nancie Atwell creates character questionnaires students can use to conduct interviews of one another in character (Atwell’s questionnaires are designed to enhance student writing, but they could as easily be used to assist student reading).

In such activities, the goal should be connection: helping students connect to both the fundamental traits of character and also the richest understanding of the character as a figure of human frailty and contradiction. Discussion and role-play

may also help students distinguish between archetypes and more complex, rounded figures.

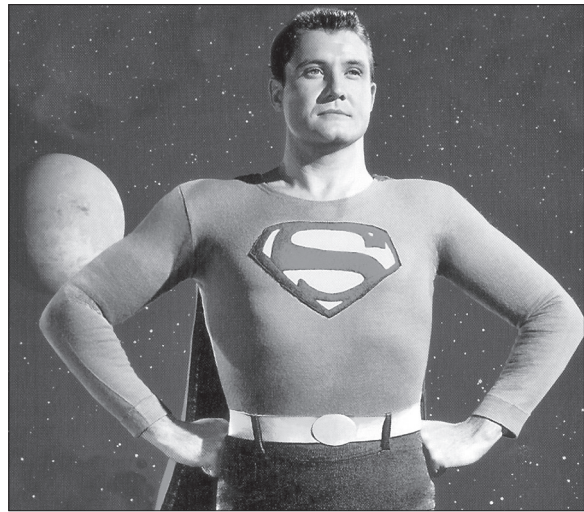
Expression to Analyze

If the purpose of forms of expression for understanding is to create connections, then the purpose of expression for analysis is to see characters within frameworks. There are many kinds of framework. Campbell's journey of the hero, Forster's description of round and flat characters, the Greeks' division of comic figures into buffoons, ironists, and imposters: all alike offer a structure for viewing the creation and role of various figures in a work. So, however, does a close reading of dialogue within a work and how it differentiates one speaker from another. So does attention to the details of clothing an author chooses for his or her subjects. Any of these offers reasonable substance for a thesis concerning the role a character fills within a story.

There's a tension inherent in such analysis. Authors don't set out, as a rule, to construct character types; they set out to construct individuals. Our understanding of individuals, however, also derives from our understanding of types. "Usually the author nowhere says that his characters are to be taken as representing a class," writes John Hospers; "that inference is made by us" (6). Yet the inference is an important one; students need tools to connect characters across works, genres, and time periods. It's thus important to use structures to view characters in relation to other characters, and it's equally important to step back and appreciate the most interesting characters in their own right.

Superman Lives


Outside of the technical aspects of reading, our interaction with literary characters may be among the most complex of all of the functions we bring to bear on a novel or story. Comparatively, expressing an understanding of theme, symbols, or setting is a relatively straightforward task; understanding character requires us to understand people, structures, and ourselves. It may be tempting to dismiss Christopher's interest in Superman using overly simple assumptions: Christopher just liked superheroes, wanted action scenes, liked the idea of a dual identity, one half mild-mannered reporter and one half American messiah. The truth is not so sim-



George Reeves as Superman in the 1950s TV series *The Adventures of Superman*.

ple, however. Christopher may well have identified with Clark Kent, may have loved action, may have viewed Superman within the expectations laid out by the genre of comic books themselves. Superman came alive (and remained alive, even after his death) for Christopher; that may be enough justification for his interest. Christopher was also intrigued, however, by Superman's humanity, by interpretations of his character that went beyond facile traits such as X-ray vision and weakness in the presence of kryptonite. Superman, for Christopher, was primarily a window, but with enough mirror embedded that both connection and analysis were not only possible but also to be desired.

What bothers me, all these years later, is not only the possibility that I didn't take Christopher's interest in superheroes seriously enough. Indeed, I listened carefully to his lengthy explanation of Superman's death and why it mattered in the scheme of the DC universe. I probably made more connections to Hamlet's death and tried to draw him into the play in that manner. I may even have discussed archetypes with him. I hope I took his reading interests seriously. What bothers me is also, however, that I may have taken him *too* seriously. Did I allow for the simple enjoyment of genre without analysis? Did I validate the literature he loved without overburdening him, yet at the same time challenge him to read deeper, further, and with more sophistication?

Walking the line between what we love and what we need to know is always tricky, nowhere more so than in our desire to nurture lifelong readers. The study of literary characters is a place where the two can coincide, but only if we are deliberate and thoughtful in our activities, our message, and our efforts to help students reflect on how and why they read. 

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Barry Gilmore has taught English in middle schools and high schools for more than 15 years and now serves as chair of humanities and head of middle school at Hutchison School in Memphis, Tennessee. He is the author of six books for teachers and students, including *Plagiarism: Why It Happens and How to Prevent It* and *Tim O'Brien in the Classroom*, a volume in the NCTE High School Literature Series. A National Board Certified Teacher and past president of the Tennessee Council of Teachers of English, Gilmore has been named an NCTE High School Teacher of Excellence and an American Star of Teaching by the U.S. Department of Education.