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# My Literary Space: Using Social Networking to Teach Character Analysis

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For many English teachers, the social networking site MySpace (<http://myspace.com>) is unexplored and even dangerous territory. This is not for lack of information: it is almost impossible to watch the news or surf the Web without hearing something about the enormously popular site that now boasts over 100 million registered users (Murdoch). But what we do hear about MySpace is largely negative. Media stories range from accounts of teens posting inappropriate images of themselves to cautionary tales about pedophiles using MySpace to snare their victims. Such stories may make us uneasy about social networking sites—and perhaps rightly so. But what if we are forfeiting an opportunity for this unique technology to aid our teaching? After all, millions of young people use MySpace and its college cousin Facebook for self-expression, communication, and social interaction. In fact, we think that the very qualities that make MySpace the ideal setting for people to express themselves and associate with a community of friends also make MySpace a great tool for students to explore literary characters from contemporary and classic texts alike.

## What is MySpace?

As your students can tell you, MySpace is a social networking community—an online platform that lets users design individualized profiles in order to find and interact with other MySpace users. More complex than a static website, a MySpace profile contains multiple components: users choose personalized backgrounds, post images, upload music and video, identify interests,

reveal social status and sexual orientation, keep a blog, and most importantly for social networking, display a roll of MySpace friends ranked in order of importance, with top friends at the head of the list. MySpace also allows users to communicate with one another through instant messaging, private emails, or by leaving comments on the *wall* that each profile features. By far the most popular social network site on the Web, MySpace has spawned hundreds of imitators, and spending just a few minutes on the site explains its massive draw. Simply put, MySpace offers a user-friendly

and appealing way to represent yourself and meet others online. It is easy to become personally invested in your profile as a visual and auditory representation of yourself. MySpace also makes it easy to keep in touch with old friends or make new ones.

By looking at a friend's profile, it is easy to see what your friend looks like, what she is interested in, how your friend wishes to portray herself, and what music she listens to. It is also easy to see whom your friend associates with, who her friends are, and even which friends are the most important to her.

MySpace is such an intuitive social environment that many young people already think and talk about social interactions in terms of MySpace. For example, the concept of *friending* someone, which means inviting a MySpace user into your list of friends, is now a common expression among young people. Given the popularity, appeal, and flexibility of social networking—and given that every literary work has a cast of characters who are often in complicated relationships with one another—we think MySpace is the ideal place for students to envision the social world of literary characters.

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## Character Analysis in MySpace:

### M.T. Anderson's *Feed*

We were first inspired to use MySpace to represent literary characters when we read the young adult novel *Feed* by M.T. Anderson as part of Dr. Rozema's literature methods course in the secondary English education program at Grand Valley State University. *Feed* is a futuristic story that lends itself well to virtual resources such as MySpace because of its science fiction feel. In the world of the novel, all people have a computer implant called the *feed* that feeds them information continuously. With the feed, characters can surf the Web with the blink of an eye, shop at their favorite online stores with a twitch, or instant message their friends at the dinner table without their parents knowing. The novel is molded around two teenage characters: Titus, a thoughtless frat-boy type who is addicted to the feed, and Violet, an introspective and sensitive girl whose feed begins to malfunction early in the novel. Titus and Violet fall in love in a complicated way, not unfamiliar to teenagers—or adults—today. For us, their relationship proves to be a more important part of the novel than the futuristic elements. So after reading the text, we decided to explore how these characters would interact on MySpace.

To begin, we made MySpace pages for Violet (<http://myspace.com/violetfeed>) and Titus (<http://myspace.com/titusfeed>). Doing so involved extracting specific details from the text, such as what the characters liked to eat, where they spent their time and what hobbies they enjoyed. But as with any act of character analysis, we also needed to make inferences. Titus, for example, was the acknowledged leader of a small group of friends, so we understood that his social status would be important to him. We decided to create his profile as a facade that hid his true self, the self no one saw. To Titus, image was everything. We chose a picture of Titus that we thought would make him look aggressive and noble. For the rest of his page, we used key facts from the book and made several inferences based on how his character acted in the text. For instance, we listed his general interests as “partying, chatting with friends and riding my new car.” For the *book* section within *interests*, we wrote “Books? Like only when I’m totally bored.” Filling in these details about Titus involved elaborating on the text, reading between the

lines to create a richer and fuller portrait of him.

For the character Violet, a girl who is more brains and art than hair and makeup, we kept the page simple, realizing she would probably spend more time reading books than on the computer. Unlike our Titus page, which worked to create a likable public persona, our Violet page was designed to be read mostly by Titus. Consequently, her only listed friend is Titus. We also wanted to show just how different Violet was from the other characters. In her general interests, we wrote that Violet likes “reading, resisting the feed, and spending lots of time with Titus.” She also likes “all books” and prefers “indie music.” We also added a list called “Definite List of Things I Want To Do.” In this list, we excerpted language directly from the text: “I want to see art. Like, I want to remind myself about the Dutch. I want to remind myself that they wore clothes and armor. That some of them fell in love while they were sitting near maps or tapestries” (183).

We also added a blog section to her MySpace page. In our entries, we approximated Violet's voice, hoping to illustrate her struggle against the feed. For instance, we started off one later post, “I really enjoyed spending time with you today, Titus. I loved riding in your upcar and the museum was nice. In 1904 Bob Green stole a pot from my great grandmother and she was a cat. Also, I think I'll order a pizza today with extra shoes and pickles.” The incoherent message is meant to show the disintegration of her mind that occurs when her feed malfunctions. Overall, we hoped Violet's MySpace page would reveal the real Violet—a young woman deeply critical of the status quo and consequently ostracized by her friends.

To encourage students to develop MySpace profiles for other literary characters, teachers might begin by assigning characters to individual students or small groups of three or four. Students could start by creating paper profiles, recording key facts about their character, highlighting important interactions with other characters, and writing from his or her perspective. Teachers may even ask students to respond to hypothetical situations as their characters might or create their own missing scenes involving the character. The key idea is for students to have some understanding of the character before going

online, so that when students create MySpace pages, they have already gathered textual evidence and drawn key inferences.

Moving these paper profiles to MySpace, students would continue to learn more about their characters by finding appropriate images for the character and detailing his or her interests, musical taste, and friends—other characters in the text. Here, teachers should remind students that meaningful character profiles take a great deal of thought: students must think and write as that character and not fall into easy generalizations or unsupported speculations. Small groups working on single characters would yield multiple points of view and rich conversations. Students might also be asked to create dialogue between their character and another character, using the *wall* feature of MySpace to document these conversations. Throughout these tasks, students would be able to infer ideas about the characters and relate them back to the text.

### **Surface Spaces and Deep Spaces:**

#### **Layers in *The Great Gatsby***

When we first thought about MySpace as a classroom tool, we guessed that it would work well with futuristic texts like *Feed*, but we soon realized that classic texts would work just as well. We decided that F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* might be a good fit for MySpace, since it is commonly taught and its characters are deeply complex. Going beyond our original assignment, we created profiles for the main characters ([http://myspace.com/jamesjay\\_gatsby](http://myspace.com/jamesjay_gatsby)) and were delighted as several layers of each character began to form. Better still, we found that these layers corresponded with the various features that MySpace has to offer.

When you meet a person for the first time, there are surface features that you can see right away—the clothes a person wears, his smile, the way he carries herself, the way he shakes hands, and the people who surround him. Later on you'll see how he interacts with others, what he thinks about important issues, and maybe even what he says behind closed doors, but those features lie at a deeper layer of his or her character. MySpace can represent both of these levels—the superficial and the subterranean—for real users or for literary characters.

As we describe above, a MySpace profile has multiple components. Some of these might be considered *surface* spaces, including the page's layout, the user's picture, the *about me* box, the *interests* box, and hyperlinked pictures of the user's top friends. The background colors, patterns, and text fonts all make up the layout—and there are many pre-made layouts available at MySpace and elsewhere on the Web. User pictures are displayed at the top of your page and also show up in the top friends display. Most users choose a picture of their own face. Users can write anything they like in the *about me* and *interests* text boxes, but there are also prompts for specific interests like music, films, television, books, and heroes. In the top friends list, users can rank their top four to forty friends. Those top friends' user pictures are displayed, and by clicking on the picture, an authorized user can see that friend's profile as well.

We had fun developing the surface features of the characters in *Gatsby*, and we think young readers familiar with MySpace would also enjoy this process. We used pictures of actors from *Gatsby* films for a couple of the characters, but others we simply found in image searches. We looked for time period photos and used keywords like “rich,” “blond,” “beautiful,” or “mechanic” to try to find a perfect fit for each character's appearance and attitude. We used antique themed layouts to set the environment of the novel. For example, for Daisy, we picked an elegant background covered in delicate flowers, while Gatsby's page sported a regal looking gold paisley pattern. Nick followed Gatsby's lead with the same paisley pattern, but in dark green. In contrast, we gave George a plain grey background with nothing in sight but his garage.

Since Gatsby spends so much time deceiving others about his identity, we wanted his ruse to show up in these surface features, especially the *about me* text box. We wrote the following:

I'm an Oxford man and a veteran war hero. I've spent my days wondering about the world like a young rajah and trying to forget something very sad that happened to me long ago. I aspire for one dream and one woman only. In the meantime, I love to throw beautiful parties. I treat all of my guests very well, so be sure to come enjoy my mansion and don't forget to invite your friends.

We continued to write from Gatsby's voice as we answered the questions about interests, selecting details from the text that illustrated our understanding of his character. Gatsby's general interests, for example, included "throwing extravagant parties, taking scenic drives, and gazing at the green light on the end of Daisy Buchanan's dock." When asked about the music he likes, we imagined Gatsby might favor "live jazz ensembles. The bands at my parties are the best." We also imagined that Gatsby might respond about books he enjoys with a simple, "I have a very impressive library."

We also wanted to portray Nick as an untrustworthy narrator who wants the reader to believe him. To accomplish this, Nick said this about himself:

I just moved to West Egg. I've found a small house here right next to the Gatsby mansion. My cousin Daisy lives in East Egg, so I spend some time over there with her and her husband. I'm currently working at getting into the bond business. I am hoping it will be quite profitable for me. I pride myself in my ability to reserve all judgments when meeting new people. People tend to trust and confide in me because of this.

We used the top friend lists of the characters to show that not all of the characters in *Gatsby* associate with each other. Gatsby's number one friend, for example, was Daisy, followed by Nick, Jordan, and party guests. But he did not include Tom because he is competing with him for Daisy—in fact, Gatsby ran from Tom when he saw him at the bar. Tom's number one friend is Daisy as well (even if only for the sake of appearance), followed by Myrtle, George, Nick and Jordan. Myrtle, on the other hand, does not bother with appearances and lists Tom as her first friend and her own husband as a second. Poor George only has his unfaithful wife to boast in his top friends list. So with just with a few clicks, readers are able to see the small social groups within this classic novel. Readers can also make inferences about the tension that exists between some of the characters.

MySpace also allowed us to reveal the deeper layers of the characters. For us, *deep* features of MySpace include wall posts, private messages, blog, and audio files

attached to the blog. Wall posts are written in a column below the top friends list. Friends of the character are able to write directly on the character's profile. These messages are usually short, friendly, and often refer to something that happened in real time or plans that are still being made. Anyone who can view the character's profile can view all of his or her wall posts. Private messages are viewed between the sender and receiver only. Similar to emails, they can be read and replied to in an inbox just like an email. The blog is shown on a separate page but can be viewed through the character's profile page.

The blog is one of the most versatile features on MySpace, a fitting platform for almost any form of writing. Here, students might write brief analyses of characters, create missing scenes involving the character, or compose journal entries that retell key incidents from the text. Audio files can be attached to the character's blog as well as to the profile and can provide added textual and creative elements. Music that is attached to the profile page usually contributes to the mood of the character and can be changed at any time.

For *Gatsby*, we used wall posts and private messages to show dramatic irony at work in the novel. We concentrated specifically on Gatsby's arrangement for Nick to invite Daisy over for tea. We used a combination of wall posts and private messages to show which portions of conversations would be appropriate in public or private environments. The incident starts with a wall post from Gatsby to Nick; "I've got a large favor to ask of you old sport. Miss Baker has kindly consented to speak to you about it this afternoon."

Nick replies with a wall post to Gatsby; "Why does it have to come through Miss Baker? I don't like mysteries." Gatsby reassures Nick with another wall post, "Don't worry about it old sport. It's nothing underhanded. Miss Baker is a great sportswoman and she'd never do anything that wasn't all right."

Later that evening, Nick receives a private message from Jordan regarding a meeting they had in real time, "Thanks for the talk this afternoon. I can't stop thinking about you. Remember to invite Daisy over, but don't tell her about Gatsby arranging it. He doesn't want her to know." The next morning we see a phone conversation between Nick and Daisy in the form of wall posts:

*Nick:* “Good morning Daisy, how would you like to come over for tea tomorrow?”

*Daisy:* “I would absolutely love to, dearest one. At what time should I have Ferdie drop me by?”

*Nick:* “How about four o’clock. Oh, and don’t bring Tom.”

*Daisy:* “What? Who is ‘Tom?’ haha. Why do I have to come alone? Are you in love with me? (giggle) I’ll see you tomorrow darling.”

We were happy with the effect of this representation because in addition to airing Jay and Daisy’s dirty secrets in an interesting way, MySpace allowed us to explore their characters in a dramatic and visual manner. And we can imagine other literary texts working just as effectively: what sort of MySpace pages would Beatrice and Benedick from *Much Ado About Nothing* keep? Could students use MySpace to illustrate the complicated mythology of the *Illiad* or *Odyssey*, or to keep track of the multitude of characters in *The House on Mango Street*? We hope teachers are willing to explore these possibilities, but we know that doing so raises questions of student safety and security—questions we do not want to ignore.

### **MySpace and Student Safety**

We believe that there are safe ways to use social networking in schools if teachers and administrators are willing to keep open minds and explore their options. MySpace offers a range of security precautions that are often overlooked by sensationalistic media coverage. In creating character pages, for example, students can change their security settings to allow only friends of to view the page, comment on the wall, or send messages. Students can even require a last name or email address of a person before the person can request to be added as the character’s friend. This very simple step all but ensures that only book characters from the appropriate classroom project could be linked together as friends, letting students develop character profiles in a small social bubble within MySpace, untouchable by the larger MySpace community. In addition, teachers can require students to give them access to their MySpace character accounts, enabling them to read all private messages and keep an eye on all other components of the page. If understood and mediated properly, MySpace is a safe environment.

Of course, some schools prohibit access to MySpace and other social networking sites. If this is the case in your school, it may still be valuable to think and talk about how literary characters might interact in MySpace, using social networking vocabulary and concepts that are familiar to many students. Or you might design your own character profile pages and use them to convince colleagues and administrators of the academic potential of social networking sites. Ultimately, using MySpace or other new applications is about motivating students to read and leading them into deeper understandings of literary texts. For us, the teaching opportunities afforded by MySpace outweigh any negative consequences of incorporating social networking into the English language arts classroom.

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