

DRAMATIZING HISTORY WITH A VICTORIAN TEA

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Recreating a culture or time period using food and a social occasion is an exciting method for enlivening a college or secondary history course. Classes have had medieval banquets or jousts, Renaissance minstrels, and Chinese dinners before. Our idea was to stage a Victorian tea, to capture not only the style and flavor of British life at the end of the nineteenth century, but also to recreate the conversations of the period by role-playing prominent Victorian personalities. The advantage to this approach was that it allowed students to dress in the costume of the day, to make and taste the elegant tea sandwiches and sweets, and, more importantly, to engage in discussion of significant as well as trivial Victorian topics. This added a relevant dimension to the role-playing experience.

The participants in our role play were high school seniors taking an advanced course in Western Civilization as well as honors English. The teachers of both courses decided to coordinate their programs for a few weeks to prepare students for a total Victorian experience. Most students were in both courses at the same time, but never before this experiment had the two teachers done any team teaching. The twenty participating students found no difficulty in finding an interesting historic or literary personage to play as the Victorian period is filled with such characters.

Role-playing can be an effective way of teaching, especially if one of the goals is to immerse the student personally and emotionally in a period of history. The affective results of role-play should not be dismissed, for it provides motivation to pursue cognitive objectives of research. Obviously, a teacher cannot afford the time, and the students cannot extend the concentrated effort needed for this type of role-play repeatedly in a course. If done once, however, the benefits of the experience will extend into other units of study that use different methods.

We hoped by this unorthodox method to see if our students could better understand the issues of the Victorian age. How did the English upper-classes come to grips with the problems of the working classes in the industrial revolution? What solutions did the reformers (the Webbs, Marx, Utilitarians, etc.) have to these problems? How did British liberalism as expressed by William Gladstone and others respond to these problems through legislation? What were the national and psychological motivations that propelled England to such power and influence in India, the Far East, and Africa? What vision did Disraeli have for England as an imperial power? How did the Queen embody the symbol of the great empire? What were her relations with Disraeli and Gladstone? What was the spirit of adventure that led the great explorers (Richard Burton, Livingston, etc.) to brave illness and hardship to discover the headwaters of the Nile or to convert the heathens to Christianity? With what curiosity did they view the strange customs of tribal life, or the religious fervor of the Moslems in the Middle East?

In this world of action and adventure, what was the role of the Victorian woman? Did she lay on her bed nursing imaginary illnesses, play piano in her parlour filling the expectations of a lady of her age? Did some defy proper roles by extending out to seek their own form of adventure (Nellie Bly), to even fulfill societal requirements as a moral guardian and helper (Florence Nightingale)? Why did the daughters of American robber barons (Consuela Vanderbilt) want to legitimize their wealth by seeking

marriage with the nobility of Victorian Europe? What were Victorian ideas concerning marriage, children, divorce, sexuality?

It is these questions--economic, political, social, and cultural--that were addressed as students researched their chosen biographical figures. Not only were students responsible for learning about their character's life and accomplishments, but more importantly about that person's place as one figure in the "portrait of an age."¹ As students moved about the parlor conversing with one group and then another, issues of the times were discussed.

The idea for this activity occurred to the history teacher while students were studying the topics of imperialism, Marxism, socialism, and the legislative reforms of the late nineteenth century. The English teacher wondered what piece of literature might be read in her course to complement the history of the period. We ruled out most Victorian novels because of their length, and decided instead on Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest. Doubtless, Wilde would be invited to this tea; and even if he were not, all of London was talking about the Wilde trial. Students should get a feel for the man, his wit, and personality.²

Wilde brings out the controversial subject of homosexuality. The very word Victorian means sexual repression to many students, so it seemed necessary to examine this stereotype. Students read an article entitled "The Victorians Unbuttoned" that appeared in Horizon.³ The thesis of the article, familiar to readers of recent books on Victoriana, suggests that Englishmen were not as prudish as thought by many. They simply felt it indiscreet to mention adultery, prostitution, or homosexuality in polite society. This in no way prevented them from practicing these.

Besides sexual attitudes and behaviors, students investigated the role of women in Victorian times. How did the societal expectations of women affect the lives of such prominent females as George Eliot, Florence Nightingale, Ellen Terry, and Nellie Bly? The conversation on the subject of women that took place when these personalities met at tea was revealing. Students involved in feminist issues took on the challenge of representing the frustrations of clever and creative women of Victorian times with studied seriousness, and some degree of indignation.

Another topic of conversation, one which seemed to engage the young men especially, was imperialism. Karl Marx, who, with a bit of historical license, arrived at the tea after his death (approximate date of tea was 1884), said that imperialism, the natural result of capitalism and worker exploitation, was evil. Disraeli, among others, strongly disagreed.

Disraeli's rival, Gladstone, presented his position on the Home Rule question and talked about the need to rescue and reform prostitutes. Richard Burton, the explorer and adventurer, had recently returned from a trip to Arab lands, and was full of stories about his experiences as the first non-Moslem to make a pilgrimage to Mecca.

The center of attention at the tea was the Queen herself. What was she really like? Why did she come to embody a whole social period of history? Obviously, the best way to find out was to read one of the many incisive biographies of the Queen. Since time did not allow for this, students got a brief psycho-view of Victoria by watching the film, Queen Victoria.⁴ The Queen is pictured in her later Dowager years as she answers questions submitted to her by a modern-day reporter. The approach used was similar to

what Steve Allen used in his popular Meeting of the Minds television program.

The student who was selected to play the Queen at the tea learned a great deal from the film about Victoria's imperious manner, her devotion to Albert, and her affection for Disraeli. This all helped prepare her for her major role as the hostess of the tea. Since all the students in their various parts were introduced or presented to the Queen, it was essential that they knew something about her Majesty's character and manner.

Students themselves decided what characters each would play. As often happens in role-playing exercises, there was a degree of type-casting that naturally occurred. We had the perfect cast. The most morally upright young man in the class selected Gladstone as his character. Our patriotic conservative was delighted to expound about the value of overseas colonies in his playing of Disraeli, and the sweet, helpful student appropriately took on the Florence Nightingale role. Edward, the Prince of Wales, and Lillie Langtry were acted by a dating couple in the class. They had seen the PBS television production of Lillie Langtry which helped them play their parts with zest and passion.

Students researched their characters.⁵ Brief descriptions of each were written by the student and distributed to the rest of the class. In turn, each student prepared a sociogram indicating the people with whom they most wished to speak. Books on Victoriana were placed on reserve in the library, so that the styles, dress, and leisure of the period could be studied. (See bibliography.)

Students were clever in coming up with the proper dress for each character. Consuelo Vanderbilt wore many chains of pearls as pictured in one of the resource books,⁶ and Disraeli even arrived with an authentic Derby hat discovered in a local attic. The label indicated that the hat was in fact made in London by "hatters to the Queen." Shawls, white gloves, and ball gowns were somehow acquired by the students. Rimbaud, the French poet, looked very eccentric and Gallic in a flowing cape. Oscar Wilde parted his hair down the middle, and Gladstone appeared quite proper in his ascot and morning coat.

The tea was held in the library turned into Victorian parlor for the afternoon. The librarian brought in a white linen tablecloth, a silver service set, and authentic nineteenth-century glass basket vases filled with fresh spring flowers from her garden. Reproductions of pre-Raphaelite paintings were borrowed from the art department, and the library tables were covered with pieces of velvet, crocheted table scarfs, and knick-knacks obtained from a student whose parents sell antiques and second-hand curios. The students learned that the cluttered look was modish in Victorian times, and that even the piano legs should be covered for decency sake. Our plans for a piano recital of late nineteenth-century music commonly enjoyed in England were rejected because the class pianist preferred to play Ellen Terry. Instead, recorded romantic sonatas provided a soft background sound.

Food for the tea, everything from watercress sandwiches and scones to trifle, was prepared by the students at home or in the home economics classroom. This was the first time that some students had ever eaten the traditional tea sweets. They were surprised and delighted to discover how tasty they were. The Earl Grey tea, especially brewed for the occasion, proved to be popular.

Students decided that the teachers should get into the spirit of this recreated Victorian world by playing roles too. What better part for them than to be the maids at the tea? High school students, not unlike young children, enjoy reversing roles. In this case, teachers, cast in the subordinate position of servant, answered the constant calls for more tea, thus giving the guest-students a feeling of importance. Daisy (the English teacher), Rose (the history teacher), and Maureen (the librarian) were the parlour maids, always ready to serve the distinguished guests. This role-playing proved to be most useful, as it afforded us a chance to inconspicuously move among the guests, all the while listening to their conversation. We were able to judge the degree to which each student kept within character, and to gauge how much research had gone into a study of Victorian manners and nineteenth-century history. The real trick was not to seem obtrusive, or over-eager, in passing the scones. After a time, we became practiced at standing about at strategic locations within earshot of the tea conversation, much in the same way the head waiter in a fancy restaurant stands by the potted palm, aware and attentive, yet not obvious.

The atmosphere was so completely authentic and the students were so much into their roles that when the bell signalling the end of the school day rang, many had difficulty leaving the simulation and moving back into the twentieth century. We teachers though did recognize that point at which our students returned to reality. It was when they stopped the "little pinky in the air" polite tea manner and dove hungrily into the left-over plum pudding and crumpets.

Evaluation of the student may seem more difficult with role-playing than in more traditional methods of teaching. This problem can be alleviated in a number of ways. In our experiment, three teachers came up with independent evaluations and then met to discuss each student's contribution. This provided more than one viewpoint which, in a sense, may be less subjective than a single teacher grading an essay or term paper, the more typical history assignments. The team can then decide on one grade to be applied for all courses. If there is fear of double jeopardy, each teacher may use his or her original assessment grade that can be justified as the mark earned for the particular criteria of that subject area. For example, the English teacher may have been looking for aspects of characterization, while the history teacher was more interested in evidence of student research and accuracy in portrayal of an historical figure. This grading system worked quite well. Surprisingly, the teachers agreed on the worth of most students' contributions. Any differences in view often seemed to revolve around the quality of the pre-tea research and preparation done in the English and history classes.

Another way to grade a role-playing exercise is to have the students do an evaluation of each other. Teachers must provide criteria for this assessment so that students have a clear idea of what makes up effective role-play. Most teachers will want to add their own professional judgement to the students' opinions before deciding on a final grade.

Our students did evaluate each other with a great deal of earnestness and honesty. Generally their worst criticism of an individual character revolved around how responsive that character was in conversation. In short, students tended to judge the effectiveness of a portrayal by whether or not that person provided a foil for their own conversational gambits. When encouraged to be more objective, however, students did evaluate their peers by how well the Victorian character was delineated.

As for the whole dramatization, students were uniformly enthusiastic about what they had learned. The Victorian age came alive for them. When tested later in a paper-and-pen evaluation, we found that they had learned more than just historic re-creation. The results of a test on imperialism, the English reform period, and the growth of socialism showed them to be above average when compared to students who studied the same historical period in more conventional ways.

The role-playing method is one that can be successful with middle school, high school, and college students. College instructors may think that their students will be reluctant to throw themselves into the parts, but will find that in spite of the cool, sophisticated exterior of the undergraduate, there is much of the kid on the inside, waiting to come out. Dressing in period costumes and putting on another persona is interesting and fun for any age and educational level.

NOTES

¹G. M. Young, Portrait of an Age, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936).

²Brandt Aymar and Edward Sagarin, Laws and Trials that Created History (New York: Crown Publishers, 1974).

³J. H. Plumb, "The Victorians Unbottomed," Horizon, 11 (Autumn, 1969), 16.

⁴"Queen Victoria" (26 min.), Profiles in Power, 16 mm., Learning Corporation of America, New York, New York.

⁵Characters in the Victorian Tea: Ellen Terry, George Eliot, Nelly Bly, Florence Nightingale, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Bernard Shaw, Consuelo Vanderbilt, accompanied by her father Cornelius, Beatrice Webb, Karl Marx, Disraeli, Gladstone, Lillie Langtry, Edward VII, Queen Victoria, Richard Burton, Arthur Rimbaud, Oscar Wilde, Jack the Ripper (tea party "crasher"). Most of the class considered Jack the Ripper as a most inappropriate guest to a Victorian tea, but the student who insisted on playing the part claimed that the occasion might benefit from a little excitement were he to sneak into the otherwise dignified affair.

⁶Famous photograph of Consuelo Vanderbilt, This Fabulous Century, Volume I, 1900-1910, (New York: Time-Life, 1969), 210. Consuelo Vanderbilt, an American heiress, had gone to England to search for a titled gentleman to marry. She appeared at the tea on the arm of her father, Cornelius, with the obvious intention of finding such a nobleman, thereby legitimizing her new American wealth with old European respectability. She married the Duke of Marlborough.

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