

LESSONS

LESSON ONE: Setting the Scene: Exploring Identity

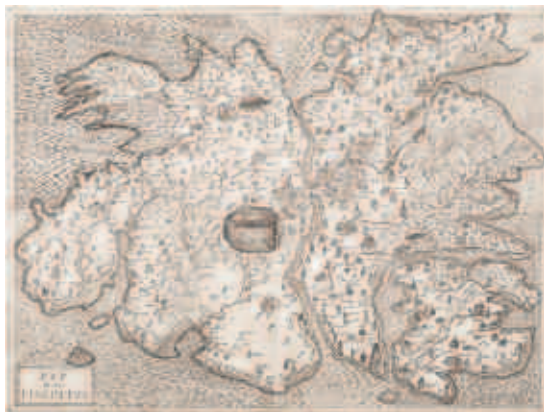


IMAGE ONE: Grayson Perry (British, born 1960). *Map of an Englishman*. 2004. Etching, sheet: 44 7/8 x 59 1/2" (112.1 x 150 cm). Patricia P. Irgens Larsen Foundation Fund

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history it has been common practice to associate a work of art with the geographical origin of the artist. We often think of artists' work in relation to their national or cultural heritage, even when they leave their homelands and live in or travel to different places. Some artists leave their countries of birth and never return. Others go back and develop new relationships with them, re-examining the past and seeing their birth countries from fresh perspectives.

We live in an era of **globalization** characterized by mass migration, international **nomadism**, exile, and transition. Our world is continuously defined and redefined by contested territories and changing borders. Today artists everywhere are exposed to a diversity of conventions, religions, political outlooks, stereotypes, and attitudes from around the world, and this is reflected in their work.

This guide explores the problem of identifying works of art with their creators' country of origin or a local cultural history. Through a careful examination of work by contemporary artists, students will explore different **representations** of national **identity**, the relationship between historical artistic traditions and contemporary practice, and the effects of these issues on each artist's creative process.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will explore the varied meanings of "identity."
- Students will learn how **irony** and **satire** can function in a work of art.

- Students will discover how maps can be used to chart not only geography but also psychological, emotional, and intellectual states.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Divide your students into pairs to interview one another. Ask them to discuss the following questions: How do you describe yourself? What are the characteristics that make you who you are? Encourage students to discuss their family backgrounds. Where were they born? Where were their parents and grandparents born? Where do they live? How does the place where they live reflect their beliefs and values, if at all? Did they live someplace else before their current residence? How do all these things help define who they are? What other aspects of their lives impact their identities?
- After they have completed the individual interviews, ask your students to share the things they feel have had the deepest impact on creating their identities.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to consider the traditional purpose of a map. How do they use maps?

Show your students *Map of an Englishman*, by Grayson Perry (Image One), and share the title with them.

- Divide your students into two groups and ask one group to study the left side of the map and the other to study the right side. What are the names of each region, denoted by the larger text? What are the characteristics of these regions? What kind of place has Perry depicted?
- Ask your students to imagine each section of the map as a neighborhood. How would they describe each one? If this were a map of a city, what kind of city would it be? What kinds of activities and places would a visitor find in it?

Tell your students that Perry, a British artist, based his map design on the two halves of the brain, with a right and a left side. Perry used the conventions of geographic maps: the area around the brainlike shape looks like water and the mass takes on the qualities of an island, similar to the island of Great Britain, the artist's homeland.

Before he drew the map, Perry and his wife made a long list of emotional states to be included on it. He said, "I don't think there is a particular rhyme or reason to how I did it. I tended to put the darker, more subconscious things on the bottom right, because that's where they are in the brain."¹ He called the bodies of water Psychopath and Delirium, and named landmarks Happiness, Peace, Spit, and Bad Manners, among other things.

Perry employs satire and irony to make works of art that critique accepted social and cultural norms. He challenges the human tendency to simplify identity by showing that it is complex, multifaceted, and sometimes humorous, depressing, and confusing. In this large **etching**, Perry reveals facets of life in the contemporary era, with all its emotions, phobias, and obsessions, adapting a traditional map into a depiction of the twenty-first-century human condition. The work posits a shared identity between artist and viewer—every viewer of the map will have wishes, ambition, anger, and many other of the common desires

1. Grayson Perry quoted in "Grayson Perry," by Charles Booth-Clibborn, in *Contemporary Art in Print*, ed. Etienne Lullin and Florian Oliver-Simm (London: Paragon Press, 2007), 326.

and emotions delineated on the map—and among Englishmen, but it is also full of personal, autobiographical references to the artist. “A lot of people think it’s generally like an Englishman,” he has said. “It is an Englishman. It is me.”²

- **Ask your students to look closely at how the words are written and what symbols Perry has used for the images on the map. Does the style he drew and lettered in remind you of a particular historical period?**

Perry studied old maps and drew on a wide range of visual and literary conventions to make the work appear as if it had been made long ago; for example, he used a lettering style from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A similar work, *Map of Tenderness* (1654), by Madeleine de Scudéry, influenced Perry in his work. Scudéry gave waters and villages names such as Indifference, Indiscretion, Negligence, and Mischief.

ACTIVITIES

Identity Maps

Ask your students to create maps of their own identities with colored pencils and paper. Their maps should encompass aspects of their outer, physical worlds and their inner worlds. Before they draw their maps, ask them to make lists of words according to categories they want to include. Encourage them to include their ambitions, fears, and character traits as well as geographic places of interest. Ask them to think about how to best visually represent these items and then incorporate this style into their maps.

Layers of Identity

Ask each student to write a simple description of him- or herself on a sheet of paper. Then have them each provide more detail on a separate piece of paper, including something they don’t think anybody else knows about. Collect everyone’s descriptions, shuffle them, then redistribute them. Ask students to try to match each description with a person.

Maps and the Passage of Time

Ask your students to research maps of England from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, noting similarities and differences between these maps and Grayson Perry’s *Map of an Englishman*. Have them find a contemporary map of England and report to the class how names of places and territorial boundaries have changed over time.

2. Ibid.