



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2004 Volume III: Representations of American Culture, 1760-1960: Art and Literature

How to be an Individual: Analyzing Society's Influence on Us through Art and Literature

Guide for Curriculum Unit 04.03.05
by Mary K. Donahue

" Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? "

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

This unit will interweave skills used to understand art and literature with the hefty idea of taking charge of oneself and becoming aware of choices one can make to be an individual.

In this unit, students are pushed to look objectively at society and make decisions about the differences between themselves and the 'whole.' We focus on individual choice and concepts related to conformity. Through studying several great American authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, the students first take an in-depth look at literature of the mid-1800's and begin to develop an idea of the themes and questions that these authors were engaged with. Then through a series of experimental assignments, the students branch out into thinking about themselves as part of the whole of society: their beliefs about how they should live come into question and we work toward trying to 'discover' the individual. After that, the students will be introduced to a series of paintings that fit under three headings: "The Individual," "Conforming to Society," and "A Functioning Society." We will learn to 'read' a painting as one does an essay or short story, and from there we will deepen our understanding and mirror those themes on individuality that we have already laid the groundwork for.

(Recommended for English and Honors English, grades 8-12.)

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>