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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2006 Volume III: Postwar America: 1945-1963

Biographies for Change in a Time of Conformity

Guide for Curriculum Unit 06.03.02
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During the 1950s in America, conformity to group norms was the common behavior of the majority of people, both young and old, as they settled back into their traditional roles with the ending of World War II. Not everyone, however, chose to conform to the cultural norms, and the postwar era in America also became a time for sowing the seeds of great, even revolutionary social change. In my curriculum unit, I plan to focus on three particular social movements that drastically changed America's perspectives on music, on civil rights, and on the environment. Each movement has its human catalysts, without whom the great momentum may well have eventually dissipated. These seminal figures Elvis Presley, Malcolm X, and Rachel Carson were children of their times and so, in an effort to better understand postwar America, we should not refer only to history textbooks, but also to biographies that can 'flesh out' the times with more personal, human events.

Biography is like a versatile lens by which we can examine in detail a human being's life. But it can also be used to focus on the world in which that person lived. The reader comes away not only knowing about the person's life, but also about the social, economic and political fabric of the time.

The focus in my curriculum unit will be on *literacy*, both reading and writing. A number of the fourth generation CMT objectives will be our reading comprehension focus as students read, discuss, and write in their 'response journals.'

The lessons in this unit will be introduced three to four times a week for a period of 45-60 minutes over a three-month period.

(Developed for Language Arts, grade 4; recommended for Language Arts and Social Studies, grades 4-6)

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