



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2008 Volume IV: Representations of Democracy in Literature, History and Film

Introduction

Given that my own field of expertise is the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England, the design of a seminar of use to teachers in American schools was a considerable challenge. I created a topic that I thought might be adaptable to teachers of English and history or civics, and eventually enrolled one of the latter and a Spanish teacher. The topic of democracy was dear to my heart, and I presented the seminar as one with a thesis, to be proved or disproved, that democracy is in fact unrepresentable, because “the people” are unrepresentable. The arts of all kinds tend to require single protagonists.

I believed that we needed to start with a scaffolding, however flimsy, of political thought, from Aristotle’s *Politics* through John Locke and Thomas Paine, to lead us to Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. This went down more smoothly than I had feared, though we had to return at the end of the seminar to recall what Aristotle had actually written about democracy, the sixth of his six kinds of regimes. I had also thought to illustrate the political thought of the ancien regimes by way of two plays of Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, sometimes taught in high schools, and *Coriolanus*, which is in a way its sequel. I also wanted to raise the question of what is capable of representation on the live theater (how many persons can fit on a stage?), as a prelude to American drama of social protest, in the form of Clifford Odets’ *Waiting for Lefty* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of Salesman*. I wanted the Fellows to consider what kind of language a dramatist is limited to, given that they must work immediately, with no looking back. This focus on medium and genre I tried to keep going throughout the seminar. Unfortunately, the Fellows found the Shakespeare plays more difficult to read than practically anything else!

By similar token, I included the two representations of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, by John Trumbull (almost contemporary with the event) and Howard Chandler Christy’s much later rendering, in order to see the limits of painting in representing not only democracy, but ideas in general. The tendency to fall back on group portraiture to describe a revolutionary event means that Trumbull’s painting looks formally British! This would lead to our better understanding the election series by George Caleb Bingham, which we considered after reading Tocqueville, since the two were close in time. We used Bingham’s paintings, which themselves were partly based on Hogarth’s satirical election series, to deepen our understanding of what paintings can show, how they control the tone and value of the event in question, and what democracy looked like when it excluded both women and blacks.

We then moved on to the Civil War era, considering the language of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, and some poems and prose by Walt Whitman, including his rather unwieldy but telling *Democratic Vistas*, published when the Civil War was over and the strains on American democracy were beginning to show in their most familiar form, corruption. This led naturally to the satirical novel by Henry Adams, entitled *Democracy*, whose

theme is that political corruption is inevitable in any system. Although at this point the Fellows seemed rather overwhelmed, I subsequently supplied to each of them a paperback version of the novel. Based on what I had told them about it, or quoted from it, they all planned to read it later in the summer.

We were now moving into the twentieth century, and considering how democracy fared as an ideal when the Depression hit, along with the great Drought. The idea was to compare Walker and Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which I intended as a central text for the seminar. Speaking generically, both are works of protest, the one a combination of photographs (without commentary) and a wrathful poetic description of tenant farmers' hardships, the other a novel with fictional characters but a firm underpinning of documentary fact. We also compared Steinbeck's novel with the film featuring Henry Fonda, noticing how the film avoided the harshest aspects of Steinbeck's saga.

This was the period in which ideas of democracy fastened on the idea of the common man. We did some work, of course, on Roosevelt's New Deal and his speech on the Four Freedoms, piously illustrated by Norman Rockwell and scathingly represented by Ben Shahn. The same motif resurfaced in Capra's film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, the common man theme identified in the hero's surname, even if his first name is Jefferson, and Miller's *Death of Salesman*, which was accompanied by the author's essay on the possibility of common man tragedy. Then, with George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, we considered how the theme of corruption faced by Adams and Whitman turned into wholesale satire (in the form of an animal fable) of socialist ideas.

But it would not have been good to end on such a sour note. Instead, the Fellows watched the film *Salt of the Earth*, a film about unionization, produced in defiance of the Hollywood blacklist by a blacklisted producer, and acted by blacklisted Hispanics and real miners. That the workers win eventually because the women take over the picket line was not only true to the facts, but pointed forward to female activism in the suffragette cause. Throughout the seminar, we tried to keep the dates straight, so that the historical context of these varied works could be, if not fully investigated, seriously invoked. One of the Fellows intended to ask his students from time to time throughout his unit the thousand dollar question, "Is America a democracy today?" Another fastened with delight on Langston Hughes' poem, *Let America be America again*, since she thought its broad canvas would be therapeutic in a classroom where the focus usually was on the hardships of African Americans.

Now, what did the Fellows make of this material? The Spanish teacher created a unit on democracy or its absence in Cuba. The history/politics teacher created a unit that stressed political thought (he added Hobbes) and made use of the *Federalist Papers* and Whitman. Of the English teachers, one chose to focus on dissent, what is a democracy and what is a citizen, adding Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, the 1848 feminist manifesto, Martin Luther King's speech "I have a dream" and Barack Obama's address on racism. Another chose to focus on the plays of August Wilson, connecting him with Arthur Miller, by whom he was deeply influenced. Another made the center of her unit *The Grapes of Wrath*, but framed in the issue of rights as raised by Paine's *The Rights of Man*. Another very experienced teacher made an eclectic syllabus that ran pretty close to mine. All of my Fellows but one taught high school. The one Fellow who teaches middle school came up with a wonderful unit on the Civil War, combining Lincoln's speeches, Matthew Brady's photographs, and Walt Whitman -- simple and powerful, not least because Whitman wrote poems on Lincoln and knew Brady personally. I was very happy with the results.

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