



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2009 Volume II: The Modern World in Literature and the Arts

Introduction

Literature and the visual arts offer outstanding opportunities to teach students about the modern world. Modern art and literature are known for their rejection of traditional conventions for representing the world and constructing works of art. The modern world opened up new ways of representing reality that would be appropriate to a period of constant change, when people were migrating from the country to the city, and across national borders. Modern writers and artists were often keenly aware of living in a world that was utterly different from that of their parents, whether because of new religious and scientific beliefs, industrialization, changing attitudes to sex and gender, or transformative political events. Many modern writers and artists produced their works in an effort to display what was distinctively modern about the times in which they were living.

This seminar explored these experiments, which sometimes involved getting rid of traditional structures (like rhyme or meter in poetry, or perspective in painting) and often involved a focus on the special role of the observer.

Participants in the seminar discussed classic works of twentieth-century literature and art from around the world that address the unique problems of modern life. Many of the stories discussed in the seminar were written in the first person, offering accounts of what it is like to experience the rapid changes of modern life. The works were selected because they were likely to be of interest to teachers and also to middle- and high-school students; many of the themes could also be incorporated in elementary-school classrooms.

The unit on Europe explored some of the major modernist literature that transformed literary methods of representing the world, including Franz Kafka's story "The Metamorphosis," and poems by William Butler Yeats and Federico García Lorca. The unit on Africa discussed Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* and Albert Camus's "The Guest," both concerned with the colonial encounter in Africa. The longest unit, on the Americas, explored the history of migrations in the Western hemisphere in stories by William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Gabriel García Márquez, and Leslie Marmon Silko and poetry by Langston Hughes. Under the guidance of curators Jessica Sack and Kate Ezra, we visited the Yale University Art Gallery and explored paintings and sculpture from Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

The Fellows, 12 teachers in the New Haven public schools, teach subjects ranging from first grade to Advanced Placement, including middle-school language arts, social studies, and special education, and high-school Spanish, English, and Art. The units are presented according to subject matter and grade level.

Visual Arts

At opposite ends of the spectrum of K-12 education, two of our units explore modern art. In "A Pop Portrait of the Artist as 'the Young Person That I Am,'" Christine Elmore introduces first-grade students to the Pop Art of Andy Warhol. Starting from Warhol's premise that "in the future, everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes," she gives her first-graders their first fifteen minutes of fame by having each of them produce a self-portrait in Pop Art style. The unit combines art with reading, writing, history, and drama (in the form of a brief play about Andy Warhol). It also touches on related art movements such as the Abstract Expressionism of Jackson Pollock. The unit can easily be adapted for students in higher grades. Sara Thomas's unit on "Futurism: Capturing Modern Technology" designed for advanced courses in high-school art, uses students' interest in emerging technologies to explore some of the leading movements of twentieth-century art. Focusing on futurism and its debt to the techniques of photography and cinema, she proposes first a historical survey of futurist art and then a series of classroom activities for allowing students to make use of current technologies, such as digital photography, while also developing traditional artistic skills such as brush control. Her unit makes use of resources available in the Yale University Art Gallery.

Spanish and French

Three Spanish teachers participated in the seminar and explored a range of Spanish-language works in their units. These are generally appropriate for students at the level of Spanish III or IV. In "Advanced Spanish Taught through the Short Stories of Quiroga," Laura Tarpill draws on the grisly and macabre works of the Uruguayan writer Horacio Quiroga to entice students into reading Spanish literary works. In "La Generación del 27," María Cardalliaguet Gómez-Málaga challenges advanced students by introducing them to works of Federico García Lorca and Rafael Alberti, as well as to the art of their contemporaries such as Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. This approach also allows students to learn about the broader cultural context of Spain in the period leading up to the Spanish Civil War. In "Cuentos de Eva Luna: Magical Realism in Latin American Literature," Valbona Karanxha, who teaches at Spanish I and II level, proposes an introduction to the works of Isabel Allende and Gabriel García Márquez in English translation. Studying these works in English will permit beginning Spanish students to develop cultural understanding of Latin America.

Like the high school Spanish teachers, Crecia C. Swaim attempts to balance language learning with cultural literacy and confidence-building in "Poetry and Differentiated Instruction in the Middle-School French Classroom." Her approach focuses on having students learn and memorize short poems while they are at an elementary stage of learning French. This approach allows students to develop confidence in their own ability to learn and pronounce French. Even if some students do not understand the poems when they begin to memorize them, they gradually develop confidence and understanding.

Middle-School Language Arts and Social Science

Three other units focus on middle-school language arts, social science, and English to Speakers of Other Languages. Multicultural experience is a crucial concern in the middle-school classroom, especially in a city as diverse as New Haven. In "Modern Literature and the Arts Seen through the Experience of American Immigrants," Julia Biagiarelli introduces eighth-grade language arts students to the writings of five writers from immigrant families: Gary Soto, Laurence Yep, Julia Alvarez, Amy Tan, and Roberto Felix Salazar. These writers, representing a diverse range of ethnic groups, tap into the long history of migration to the United States. The unit begins with the historical background to U. S. immigration from the late nineteenth century to the present (including the resistance to immigration) and then focuses on the most recent immigrant groups, showing both the continuities in their experiences and the unique experiences of various groups. Susan Holahan addresses a similar set of issues for a group of middle-school students in English to Speakers of Other

Languages. Since a high proportion of such students are native Spanish-speakers, she focuses in "Observing the Modern World: What Do Writers See? What Do I See about Myself?," on short excerpts from works by Hispanic writers whose works have been translated into English, including Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, Jorge Ibarngüengoitia, and Laura Esquivel, as well as one Hispanic writer in English, Sandra Cisneros. The special challenge here is to involve English Language Learners in reading by drawing on works that may have particular cultural resonance for them, but with which they are probably not familiar. In "A Comparative Literary View of U.S. History, 1820-1900," Hoyt G. Sorrells brings some of the literary concerns of the seminar to bear on historical sources. He inquires into the ways that American history textbooks have described 19th-century policies such as the Monroe Doctrine and the policy of Manifest Destiny and related historical developments involving settlement of the west and re-settlement of native populations. His unit, designed for middle-school social studies classes, has students conduct independent "I-search" research projects to explore representations of such events as the Trail of Tears and the U.S.-Mexican War through documents written by participants from different sides of these conflicts, such as accounts of the Battle of Little Bighorn by native leaders and accounts of the U.S.-Mexican war from the perspective of Mexican historians and political leaders.

High-School English

Finally, three of the units, written by high school English teachers, focus on aspects of modern North American literary history and interpretation. In her unit for college prep sophomores, "What Lies Beneath: A Strategy for Introducing Literary Symbolism," Sandy Friday introduces a crucial problem for advanced literary interpretation. Beginning with relatively simple fables and allegories, such as Aesop's Fables and the allegorical stories of Dr. Seuss, she gradually introduces students to the problem of interpreting literary symbols. She concludes the unit with a discussion of William Faulkner's 1942 story "The Bear," a story full of complex symbolism that describes a boy's rite of passage. Students in this unit will learn how to analyze stories and also how to write their own stories making use of various forms of symbolism. In "And the Beat Goes On: American Art and Literature from 1950 to Present," Matthew S. Monahan explores a group of writers who remain of enduring interest for teenagers today, the Beats. Rebellious against what they perceived as an era of conformity and suburbanization, such writers as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and LeRoi Jones (also known as Amiri Baraka) helped to create the counter-culture that would flower in the 1960's and influence both politics and popular culture up to the present day. Monahan suggests that these writers can appeal to students today because of their central theme of rebellion; the challenge here is how to select works appropriate for the 11th-grade classroom when many of the writers wrote about drugs, sex, and other problematic topics. Monahan has selected a group of poems and stories that give a fair sense of the tone of these writers while still being appropriate for classroom discussion. Shannon Ortíz explores the experiences of Puerto Ricans both on the island of Puerto Rico and on the U.S. mainland in "Puerto Rico: Americanization, Assimilation and Diaspora through Literature and Film." The unit, designed for advanced high school students of English, draws on literature by Piri Thomas, Esmeralda Santiago, and others while encouraging students both to keep a journal on their reading and to create a multidisciplinary artistic project at the end of the unit. Although the unit focuses on one particular group in U.S. society, the experiences it explores are relevant also to other immigrant and minority groups.

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