



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2010 Volume II: The Art of Reading People: Character, Expression, Interpretation

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## **The Shelleys: Author and Character, Reality and Fiction**

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### **The Dramatic Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft and Percy Shelley**

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The story I always tell my students about the Shelley's at the beginning of the unit is about how they came to be a couple: Percy was working for Mary's father, William Godwin, when the two met. Despite the fact that Percy was already married to Harriet Westbrook, they fell in love. After a brief "courtship," they decided to elope in July of 1814, and accompanied by Mary's step sister, Claire Clairmont, they began a tour of continental Europe. Soon, feelings of guilt drove Percy to invite his estranged wife, Harriet, to take up residence with Mary and him, assuming the role of sister in an already bizarre relationship circle. Harriet is found drowned in early December of 1816 as the assumed result of suicide. Percy and Mary are officially married before the month is out.

This brief overview of one aspect of this couple's soap-operatic life always draws my students into their lives and transitions into an appreciation for their writings. Their impressions of these events, occurring almost two hundred years ago, bring a life to the Shelley's work that could otherwise seem to them dead words on a page. There are other elements of their lives that make the authors and their writings real to students in today's classroom: the story telling contest in 1816 that led to Frankenstein, the travels through the Alps that inspired so much in Percy's poem and many of the sublime backdrops in Frankenstein, the tragic circumstances surrounding their first four attempts at having children (no doubt echoed in themes of Mary's novels and Percy's "Ode to the West Wind"), the legend of the consummation of their love on Mary's mother's grave, and of course, Mary's souvenir of Percy after his death.

In 1822, Percy died in a boat accident when a sudden storm rose up. When the bodies were recovered, a pyre was constructed on the beach and the bodies were set on fire. Once the flames had consumed the bodies, Byron noticed that a piece of Percy remained, his heart. Byron reached into the flames and retrieved the organ, giving it to Mary, who kept it wrapped in fabric in a box in the drawer of her writing desk for the rest of her life.

## Rationale

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It has been my experience, not only as a teacher but also as a scholar, that developing an understanding of the circumstances surrounding the creation of a piece of literature can greatly enrich the understanding and interpretation of the work. At the same time, it is important to understand the differences between actual events from an author's life and the fictional events an author chooses to write about in his or her work. This duality, the effect of reality on fiction and the separation of fiction from reality, is the area of focus for this unit.

In the classroom, I have recognized a difference in students' engagement with a text when they have some understanding of the author's motivations in creating that text. An understanding of the writer makes the reading take on a different meaning to the students: it becomes more authentic to the artist's intentions and more significant to the student. This unit aims to foster that level of engagement between students and various works by Percy and Mary Shelley.

Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley were major forces in the Romantic Period in English Literature. In order to understand and appreciate the impact of these significant writers, the experiences of their lives (as both individuals and as a couple) must be understood, at least on a basic level. Percy Shelley's life is evident in the themes, motifs, and imagery of his poetry. Many of Mary Shelley's experiences mold characters and themes of her novels.

This is not to say that Mary's *Frankenstein* or Percy's poetry should be read with blinders on, forcing the reader to accept either one as a direct retelling of life-events. The historical and biographical connections that students find in a text should not cloud a reading of that text as a fictional work. Often, students adopt an all or nothing policy when it comes to their analyses of literary works. If they are told to make connections between the life of an author and her work, they tend to read the work myopically, seeking out only those elements which help to further their assumptions and ignoring those which counter them. Analyses should be a means of expanding students' understanding of the literature, not a means of narrowing that understanding. Good literature is complex. An insightful and accurate reading of the literature should be as complex.

Another advantage of adding biographical understanding to the analysis of a text is that it helps students in reading an author's motivations and intentions. Students in today's classrooms have been so steeped in Reader-Response theory that they have come to believe that they can make any interpretation of the text they want as long as they can point to some piece of evidence within the text. They are encouraged to make personal connections to the text and interpret it in light of their personal experiences. Though this is a great way of introducing students to analysis of a text when they are younger, students must be aware that every text is not about them. Author's have voices in their text and wrote intentionally.

For example, the first two lines of Percy's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" speak of a "Power / [that] Floats though unseen among us." Without at least a minimal understanding of Shelley's thoughts on religion--he was a much avowed atheist--students often interpret this "Power" as the Christian God. They bring their own beliefs and experiences to the poem, leading to a misreading of Shelley's intended meaning. Allowing students to misread poetry, to believe that all writing is written for them to interpret as they wish is an injustice, not only to the poetry but to the students as well. Students need to be aware of multiple interpretations of the text, but in order to understand and function in a world that grows more socially complex each day students need to be aware of an author's, a speaker's, or an orator's intentions in creating

his work and choosing her words.

Likewise, Mary and Percy Shelley both developed interests in science and scientific experimentation during their youths which lasted into their adult lives. According to George Herbert Clarke in his introduction to *Selected Poems...*, Percy had a deep interest in "physical and chemical" experiments during his time as a student at Sion House Academy. Understanding this aspect of the Shelleys' lives should not lead the reader to believe, however, that Victor Frankenstein is Mary's representation of her husband in the novel. In other words, students do need to draw a distinction between fiction and reality while at the same time drawing connections. This is complex.

This complexity is apparent in the closing scene of *Frankenstein*, where the creature explains to Walton that he has decided to end his own life. There are again strong parallels between the ending of the novel and events from the Shelleys' lives. <sup>1</sup> Mary was deeply affected by the suicide of her half-sister, Fanny Imlay, and of Percy's first wife, Harriet Shelley. In fact, Mary may have felt some of the responsibility for each of these deaths. But how does this translate into the creature's promise of ending his own existence? This is perhaps the most humanizing event in the story for the creature; he is now feeling the deep effects of his actions. The creature recounts the happiness he first felt in the days after his creation, contrasting that happiness with the bitterness and desolation he now feels. Is this what Mary feels at the death of these two close associations in her life or is this merely an attempt at figuring out the motivations for suicide? Is the creature noble in his promise that Walton will be the last human to set eyes on him or is simply giving up because he has lost all hope of ever receiving the companion he so desperately wanted throughout the novel?

These questions have no simple answer. They demonstrate the complexity of literature, of human emotions, and of finding connections between the two.

In this curriculum unit, students will explore the lives of these two individuals. They will then apply what they have gleaned from their biographical study to several of the authors' works (poetical and fictional) to develop thorough analyses which take into account the historical and personal forces at work in their writings. This does not imply dogmatic retellings of the author's intentions of the works, but rather encourages students to see that the artist's life and intentions may be echoed her/his work.

While this unit focuses specifically on the Shelleys and their writings, it has potential to be adapted to other authors. I have selected the Shelleys because of their dramatic lives and the impact they have on students in my classroom. Helping students see as individuals those writers they are exposed to will create an arena for deeper connection to their writings and help mold our students as lifelong learners and readers.

Finally, this unit is only a single attempt at helping students to understand a complex and difficult issue. Students need exposure to various lenses and to various methods of analysis, just as they need exposure to various authors writing throughout history. This is one step towards developing students who read, understand, and appreciate the complexity of literature and its importance to life and society.

## Timing of the Unit

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This unit will be presented in a twelfth-grade honors British Literature class. Prior to this unit of study, students will have completed a survey of the major periods of British Literature leading up to the Romantic period: Anglo-Saxon, Medieval, Renaissance, and Neo-Classical. Historical perspective will be a major component of study in each of these literary periods.

While the lessons are being written with an honors level class in mind, I feel an adaptation of the unit for lower level students is easily accomplished by providing further scaffolding through modeling text annotations, modifications such as shorter poems, and more time in class for research, reading, and group analysis.

Students will have also completed a portion of study on the Romantic period including both an introduction to the key characteristics of the period and an analysis of works by some of the earlier writers of the period, including the prose writings of Burke, Paine, Godwin, and Wollstonecraft, and the poetic writings of Wordsworth and Coleridge. These readings will provide students with an understanding of the historical, philosophical, and artistic underpinnings of the period and provide a background from which their more focused study of the Shelleys will draw.

## Overview

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The unit is composed of four divisions: biographical study of the Shelleys as individuals and as a couple; literary study of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poems; literary study of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*; and a synthesis of these elements into a cohesive whole.

### Biographical

Students' study of the lives of Percy and Mary Shelley will begin with a brief overview of their parents' lives (with reference to materials students have already read by William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft), their individual lives prior to meeting, their life together, and Mary's life after Percy's death. Student readings for this portion of the unit will be drawn from various sources and materials including excerpts from Julie A. Carlson's *England's First Family of Writers: Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Mary Shelley*; Maurice Hindle's introduction to the 1992 Penguin edition of *Frankenstein*; *Letters of Mary Shelley*; Robert Metcalf Smith's *The Shelley Legend*; samples of letters written by Percy Shelley; excerpts from Percy Shelley's "A Defense of Poetry;" and Richard Holmes's *Shelley: The Pursuit*.

Students will also conduct guided research on a selected element of the Shelleys' lives and present their findings to their classmates in a PowerPoint presentation. This cooperative process of research and presentation will provide a broader and deeper identification with these two as individuals, allow students to begin an authentic discussion of the writers and their lives, and provide a first step in fostering a connection between students' own lives and the lives of the Shelleys.

## Percy's Poems

You could spend an entire school year studying Shelley's poetry; the catalogue of his writings is extensive, and each of his works adds something to the puzzle of understanding him as a poet and as an individual. While some of the shorter poems will be used as introduction to the style and craft of his writing, the majority of study in this area will be with two poems: "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and "Ode to the West Wind." Using these two works, students will analyze Shelley's adherence to the conventions of romanticism. Also, these readings will allow students to solidify their understanding of his poetry as a reflection of the elements they studied in their biographical research.

## Mary's Novel

Classified as both a Gothic horror novel and a piece of Romantic Literature, Shelley's *Frankenstein* has become a household word in many cultures. The themes of the novel, the hazards of human intervention in the natural world and the formation of identity through (sometimes tragic) personal experience, are as relevant today as they were in 1818 when the novel first appeared. The lessons surrounding the novel will focus on three areas. First, students will connect events from Mary's and Percy's own life-tragedy and struggle, a profound interest in science, a love of the natural world--to the events that make up Walton's, Frankenstein's, and the Creature's tales. This aspect will call on students to return to their research from earlier in the unit. Second, students will analyze the novel as an expression of romantic ideals and connect these with the implications of the novel for today's world. Third, students will explore the literary conventions Shelley employed in crafting the novel, specifically her methods of developing characterization of Walton, Frankenstein, Elizabeth, and the Creature and the framing of the narrative within the context of Walton's exploration to develop an allegorical connection between characters and the realities of scientific progress.

## Synthesis

As a culmination of the three former areas study, students will look at the connections between the lives and literature of Mary and Percy Shelley and draw a conclusion about one of them as a writer and individual. Students will write an analysis paper in which they draw a conclusion about the role of an author's personal life in the creation of a piece of literature (fiction or poetry). Students will work from a thesis in which they postulate an idea of the role of reality in the act of literary creation. Students should draw the other elements of the unit (biographical research, Percy's poetry, and Mary's novel) in their development of this idea.

## The Romantic Period

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Romanticism was a movement in art and literature that began on the European continent in the course of the eighteenth century and then quickly spread to the British Isles. The period was defined by a new interest in the natural world as a source of inspiration and a cultivation of aesthetic experiences referred to as the "sublime." The philosophy of these artists and writers, building off of the foundation set by the Enlightenment, shifted even further from the value of a collective society, instead focusing on the importance of the individual through emotion and imagination. These two elements, the sublime and the individual, led to dramatic changes in art and poetry infused with interpretations of natural imagery by the creator's own mind.

In England, the poetic movement occurred in two waves. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge

were at the heart of the first movement. The second movement centered on the writings of John Keats, George Gordon Lord Byron, and Percy Bysshe Shelley.

It is no accident that this period in writing occurred in tandem with the very dramatic changes in poetic form and style. Poets moved not only away from traditional subject matter in their works, but also in the form. Where earlier poets were very concerned with the importance of adhering to traditional rhythms, rhymes, and formulas, the Romantics focused their attention on their feelings in the poetry, often using less confining structures instead of the more rigid forms dictated by tradition.

## Introduction to Romanticism

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### Overview:

This introductory series of lessons is designed for the classroom that has not yet introduced the Romantic Period. The lessons provide a background on the changes in philosophy that brought about much of the literary and artistic changes during the period. By studying various works of poetry by the key poets of the time, students will learn firsthand how the elements of Romanticism had an influence on and were evidenced in works of the period. Key to these philosophical changes are an appreciation or love of nature in the "sublime," the importance of the individual as expressed through imagination and emotion, and the rejection of societal constructs.

Students will begin by analyzing a poem, "I Wondered Lonely as a Cloud" by William Wordsworth, as a group, analyzing the poem's meaning through figurative language and other devices. The class will then draw their own understanding of the Romantic Philosophy by looking at the attributes of the movement in the context of the poem. Once students have an understanding of the concepts, they will move to independent analysis of other period poems and continue their discussions in class.

The final assessment piece asks students to compose a formal analysis paper of one of the poems from this series of lessons.

### Objectives:

- Students will be able to list the key components of the Romantic Movement and apply them to several works by period writers.

### Methods:

"I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" by William Wordsworth [Since this is a shorter poem with relatively simple vocabulary it makes a good introduction to the ideas of the period.]

- Read the poem aloud in the class or have a volunteer read it. Clarify any vocabulary.

- Break students into four groups and have each group summarize one of the stanzas from the poem.
- Share their summaries and ask the class for feedback that might help to complete the summaries.
- Record the class's summaries on an overhead, chart paper, or other medium.
- Have students trace the emotions of the poem's speaker throughout the poem. When is he the happiest? When is he the least happy?
- Have students look for instances of figurative language such as metaphor and personification. How does Wordsworth use these devices and for what purpose?
- Use these discussions to introduce the key components of the Romantic Movement to the class: emotion, imagination, individuality, rejection of society, and the "sublime".

### **Continue the discussion of the period by looking at other poems, such as:**

- "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye on a Tour July 13, 1798" by William Wordsworth
- "Kubla Khan" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- "To Autumn" by John Keats
- "She Walks in Beauty" by George Gordon, Lord Byron

### **Assessment:**

Students will write a two-page analysis of a poem from the period in which they analyze the appearance of romantic conventions in the poem.

## **Introduction to the Shelleys**

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### **Overview:**

In this series of lessons, students will read a biographical narrative or an outline of the Shelleys' lives, making connections between specific elements of their lives that may influence them as writers. Students will then conduct independent research into specific aspects of the writers' lives and present their findings to the class.

These initial understandings of the writers' lives will provide the foundation of later connections between the biography and writing of these writers. Students should also be aware of the ultimate assignment at this point in the unit. Knowing what they are working towards will help to encourage ownership of the assignments leading up to the final project.

### **Objectives:**

Students will be able to present an initial understanding of experiences and influences that motivate writers in their craft through whole-class discussion and written analysis of independent research.

### **Methods:**

- Begin with a journal entry: "What role does reality play in the work of a poet? What role does reality play in the writing of a novelist/fiction writer?"
- Ask students to volunteer parts of their writing and record their thoughts on an overhead, chart paper, or some other medium. Hopefully students will connect specific elements of each to reality, but will see a stronger tie in poetry writing where the emphasis is more on direct relation of emotion and less on the development of narrative. Ask students to connect their ideas to specific examples from writers they have been exposed to in the past, whether in this class or another.
- Provide an overview of the Shelleys' lives in either an outline or in a narrative. Ask students to peruse the overview and to highlight the elements they think would be most influential on their lives as writers.
- Students share the elements they have highlighted. Encourage students to respond to one another's ideas to promote a discussion of why specific elements would or would not be influential. Through this discussion students will not only gain deeper insight into the Shelley's, but will begin thinking critically about what motivates writers in their craft.
- Assign students one of the following topics for further research. Students may conduct the research as individuals or in small groups at the teacher's discretion.

- Percy's parents and his childhood
- Percy at college
- The death of Mary's mother
- Mary Wollstonecraft's writing
- William Godwin's writing
- Harriet Westbrook



- Percy and Mary's elopement
- Mary's attempts at having children
- Percy and Mary's travels through the Alps
- The Shelley's friend Lord Byron
- The contest that began Frankenstein
- Percy's death and Mary's reactions

**Assessment:**

- From their research (which may be assigned as homework or as an additional class period), students are to write a two-page analysis of their findings on their research answering the question, "How do you think the life experiences of these authors might have an effect on their writing?"
- Students should make brief presentations to the class based on their research and analyses.

## Percy Bysshe Shelley's Writing

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**Overview:**

In this series of lessons, students will apply their study of Percy Bysshe Shelley to two poems written by the author. The first of these poems, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," will be analyzed as a class as a way of modeling the expectations for the second, teacher selected, poem. Students will compose an analytical response to the second poem looking specifically at connections to Romanticism and the author's experiences.

**Note:**

- This lesson will take place over two class periods.

### **Objectives:**

- Students will be able to identify and analyze elements of Romanticism in "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty."
- Students will be able to connect elements from Percy Bysshe Shelley's life to his poetry.

### **Methods:**

- Prior to this lesson, students should have read "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" for meaning and marked passages that they feel give the reader some level of understanding of the writer's past experiences.
- Ask students: "What role do the seasons play in the poem?"
- Discuss the symbolism of the seasons as they are presented in the first and the final stanzas of the poem.
- Ask students to locate other elements of nature in the poem that are being used as symbols. What do they symbolize? Allow students five to ten minutes to look silently and mark symbols built on natural imagery, and then hold an open discussion encouraging students to build off of each other's ideas.
- Have students write in their journals responding to the following question: "What is the 'Power' that Shelley refers to in this poem?"
- After students have written in their journals, ask students to locate other words or phrases Shelley uses to refer to the "Power" throughout the poem:

- Spirit of Beauty (13)
- Demon (27)
- Ghost (27)
- Heaven (27)
- messenger of sympathies (42)
- awful Loveliness (71)
- Spirit fair (83)

- Discuss with students their thoughts on the nature of Shelley's "Power" in this poem.

- What attributes does he give it? (guide students to look at Shelley's use of metaphors for description)
- What is its purpose? (guide students to look at verbs connected to the "Power")
- When and where did the speaker first encounter it? (stanza 5)
- What does the speaker ask of the "Power" in the final stanza?

•Ask students to share the passages that they marked for homework (passages that they feel give the reader some level of understanding of the writer's past experiences) by reading them aloud.

•How do these passages give us insight into or connect to Shelley's own life? Encourage students to make connections based on the previous class discussions, their own research, or their classmates' presentations. Students focus should be on stanzas 5-7, but they may connect to other parts of the poem.

**Assessment:**

•Students are to read and independently analyze either "Ode to the West Wind" or "Mont Blanc" (based on teacher discretion and student level) for elements of Romanticism and for connections to Shelley's life in a two-page paper.

## Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's Writing

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**Goal:**

By applying the concepts learned in the introduction to the Romantic Period and elements from the biographical study of the Shelleys, students will analyze Frankenstein by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley to get a fuller understanding of her life and her work, and her contributions to the period and to literature.

**Objectives:**

- Students will be able to identify and analyze elements of Romanticism in Frankenstein.
- Students will be able to connect elements from Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's life to her novel.

**Overview:**

In this series of lessons, students will be applying their study and understanding of the Shelleys' lives to their reading of the novel, Frankenstein. Since the reading of the novel will take three to six weeks depending on the reading level of the students, these lessons are to be developed around smaller designated sections of the larger text and gradually to build into a complete understanding of the relationship of biography and the novel

as a whole. In classrooms with struggling readers, to whom the entire novel is too large an undertaking, I have taught a survey of the text using selected chapters to provide a general understanding of the story as a whole. Though I do encourage the reading of the novel in its entirety, this modification is necessary in some cases and the benefits outweigh (in my eyes) the losses.

### **Suggested Breakdown of the Text:**

The following schedule of reading from *Frankenstein* provides a three-week structure for the completion of the reading of the novel. This structure is intense and relies on students reading between 15-25 pages each night. This could be modified by making the nightly readings shorter or by doing some of the reading in class and holding discussions on alternating class periods.

1. Author's Introduction (1831) and Preface
2. Letters 1-4 (the account of Robert Walton, leading up to Victor Frankenstein's story)
3. Volume 1, Chapters 1-3 (Victor's early life and interest in natural philosophy/alchemy)
4. Volume 1, Chapters 4-6 (discovers the secret of life; builds and abandons the creature)
5. Volume 1, Chapters 7-8 (death of William and trial of Justine)
6. Volume 2, Chapters 1-2 (Victor's guilt and trip to the Alps)
7. Volume 2, Chapters 3-5 (Creature recounts his early existence; learning to speak/read)
8. Volume 2, Chapters 6-7 (life with the cottagers and his attempt at friendship)
9. Volume 2, Chapters 8-9 (Creature's recounts murder of William; agree to build female)
10. Volume 3, Chapters 1-2 (Victor delays his new project)
11. Volume 3, Chapters 3-4 (destruction of female; suspect in murder of Henry Clerval)
12. Volume 3, Chapters 5-6 (Victor and Elizabeth's marriage; Elizabeth's murder)
13. Volume 3, Chapter 7 (Victor tracks the creature to the north; Walton's final letter)

There are connections between the Shelleys' experiences and each of the sections of text above. One example would be the connections between their travels through the Alps, Percy's poetry, and division number 6 above. The role of the sublime in easing Victor's mind is a major element of the two writers' philosophies. An interesting point of conversation could also center on the contrast between the peace of this setting and the appearance of the Creature.

There are also ongoing connections that unfold as the story does. Victor is reluctant to marry, whether because of his distraction by scientific interests or his feelings of guilt over his creations actions. Consider this in light of Mary's father's view of marriage and the influence this must have had on Mary. Also consider the strange circumstances surrounding her own marriage to Percy. This is an area of discussion that most high school students will quickly connect to.

### **Assessment:**

At the completion of each segment of the text, students should complete a brief journal entry analyzing the reading for connections to the biographical materials they have already studied. These entries will form a starting point for students to build off of in class discussions.

## Annotated Bibliography

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Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

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## Implementing District Standards

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Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

This unit focuses on literature from the Romantic Period in English Literature, but makes use of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. Students do not simply read the materials as independent items, but seek out connections between the various pieces.

Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

During the biographical research segment of the unit, students conduct research on the authors being studied which they present to their classmates. All students then use the multitude of information gathered in their analysis of the literature.

Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

During the biographical research segment of the unit, students conduct research on the authors being studied which they present to their classmates. All students then use the multitude of information gathered in their analysis of the literature.

Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

Several elements of the unit aim at creating open discussion. The research segment hinges on student sharing of their research. The Literary analyses demand that students build off of one another's interpretations and observations.

## Endnote

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<sup>1</sup> iHoobler 172

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