



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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A Unit on American Folklore

Guide for Curriculum Unit 78.03.08
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Through the study of folklore, students can gain understanding of one of life's most painful processes—the gradual loss of independence on the part of the individual. This unit is unusual in that it does not focus on a single idea, but rather attempts to outline a year-long program of study in folklore (with emphasis on black folklore), where the common thread was and is tradition. Two segments of folklore are examined in detail in the narrative: material culture (what we can touch and feel) and music (what we can hear). James Thomas, a rural Mississippi musician, artist, and tale teller, a man with little education and no formal training, becomes the model for how tradition combines with talent and experience to create an individual of tremendous importance to his community. Three sources of influence (inspiration) for Thomas and, by extension, for students, serve as a link between the formal world and the folk world: memory/imagination, dreams and visions, and the media. The second half of the narrative focuses in on the background and significance of the ballad (especially Mississippi Delta Blues) in this country. An extensive bibliography includes resources available in prose, music, or film.

(Recommended for students in grades 7-12; the unit is appropriate for English and Social Studies classes.)

Key Words

Folklore American Art Literature Music

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