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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1981 Volume I: The "City" in American Literature and Culture

American History Through Literature: Adolescent Identity in the 20th Century

Guide for Curriculum Unit 81.01.09
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The options for adolescents have broadened radically over the last eighty years. This process will probably continue. I think that it would be helpful for students to read how adolescents in other times and places experienced changes and dealt with the emotional demands of their adolescence. In small towns people had relatively few options. Roles were stable and rigid. While kids could dream they had a whole community maintaining expectations. The move to the city and away from traditions opened a whole new range of life styles. There is a wealth of short stories and novels which deal with these themes. By giving students an historical understanding of the changing opportunities for adolescents in America, I hope to give them new insights into their emotional themes and show them that literature and history are rich resources for understanding their lives and struggles.

This unit has been organized for students with a high school reading level and the ability to express themselves in writing. It will be used in an inner-city alternative high school, the High School in the Community. The class is interdisciplinary, English and American History, and it meets daily for three hours. The course lasts eight weeks. The unit will be used as half the daily period. I have focused on the historical and psychological issues which students have raised with me over the last ten years. Although I did have a particular student body in mind as I organized this curriculum, I do feel that the approach and much of the content would be useful in many different settings.

(Recommended for 11th and 12th grade American History and American Literature.)

Key Words

Literature American History Historical Content Reading Instruction General Writing Narrative

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