



Introduction

"The City" is a vast, diverse, and controversial theme in American literature and culture. It touches upon social values as well as social structures, upon class preferences and racial and ethnic attitudes, upon ingrained yet changing notions of space, time, and community. An "academic" theme in that it can be studied by reference to history, to social science, to the accumulated artifacts of the humanities, it is also a theme of the most pressing contemporary immediacy. How to negotiate these two perspectives—the detached view of the scholar, the more practical, urgent view of the citizen—became perhaps the central continuing issue out of which the following curriculum units emerged. For teachers in the public schools confront the question of perspective as a daily necessity: how to translate academic knowledge, the product of research and reflection, into active, engaging, and relevant *teaching*.

Translation is a good word to describe the typical sessions of the seminar. The teachers brought to class their virtually instinctive sense of their students' needs as human beings, growing youngsters, often deprived and parochial adolescents. The instructor brought a body of materials, assigned readings in fiction, poetry, social theory, urban history, and his own considered interpretations, his own developed sense of how such materials should be read and understood, and finally translated into cultural insight and value. The seminar proved to be a constant process of mutual challenge and exchange, and the following pages represents only the most tangible fruits. Readings were submitted to the test of pertinence to the lives and minds of inner-city students whose social and cultural horizons reflect the constricting limits of their urban condition. And the individual process of creating meaningful teaching units profited from the open discussion and exchange of ideas and information which occurred freely at every stage. Indeed the opportunity to discuss teaching experiences and plans, to exchange thoughts and feelings, proved one of the most valuable opportunities of the seminar, which in this sense approximated the urbanity of the good city.

The diversity of theme and experience compacted in the word "city"—indeed the word conveys one of the richest metaphors of creative and satisfying human existence in our culture—is reflected in the variety of topics, approaches, interpretations, and materials in the following pages. But one principle unifies the assembled units, a principle which emerged as a distinct educational value for the instructor of the seminar: knowledge of their own city, their own urban situation, is a basic human need of New Haven students. For in that knowledge, as many of the following units affirm, lies a hope for knowledge of other human beings in like and unlike circumstances, a knowledge of difference and multiplicity, of the persisting influence of the past, of social as well as personal and family history—and knowledge which might lead to an enhanced sense of human opportunity within an enlarged personal universe, a polis which extends beyond family and neighborhood, embracing both in what might become a more self-knowing and sympathetic city.

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