



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1985 Volume III: Twentieth Century American Fiction, Biography, and Autobiography

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## Introduction

This Seminar on American literature studied both modern and contemporary writings. In fashioning our reading list, we sought to gather texts by established pillars of the canon (e.g., Edith Wharton, William Faulkner) as well as by talented contemporary writers (e.g., Alice Walker and Edward Rivera). We also sought to create a multigeneric syllabus in which biographies and autobiographies would stand in equal measure with novels and short stories. In short, we wanted alternately to blur and sharpen the distinctions between these genres in order to gain a keener sense of what is literary and more precisely, what is fictive, in each type of writing.

These interests led, for example, to reading units in which we examined both a novel and biographical study of the novelist. In other units we read fiction and essays by the same writer, partly in an effort to see how those texts “conversed” with each other. In a third type of unit, we studied writings that are deliberately multigeneric in conception, and which thereby forced us to discuss anew what we mean by terms such as the autobiographical novel or autobiographical biography.

In the curriculum units that follow, the pursuits of the seminar are quite evident. The authors to be taught include established figures such as Hemingway, Wright, Steinbeck, and Porter, and prominent contemporary writers including Angelou and Gaines. Autobiography or the autobiographical act is a major concern of each unit, whether the focus is on autobiographical fictions, an author’s letters, or on student writing. Biographies are not always worked into the teaching plans, but they usually appear in the bibliographies, frequently with suggestions for how they may be put to use. I am sure that the Fellows join me in hoping that the units will be of service to many teachers.

Robert B. Stepto

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