



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1985 Volume VI: Time Machines: Artifacts and Culture

A Study of Twentieth Century British Culture Through Art and Literature

Guide for Curriculum Unit 85.06.05
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This unit attempts to engage students in a multi-leveled learning process which will lead them beyond superficial encounters with art and literature. It provides a method of study which enables students to participate actively in the process of deep analysis. The method is first introduced as a visual-thinking skill. Students initially learn how to approach and decipher the meanings of paintings. The method is then transferred to the study of poems and short stories. Thus the student is introduced to a scheme which allows intense engagement with three different art forms.

The broad subject of the art forms encountered in this unit is twentieth-century British culture. As a result of the three stages of the methodology, students are enabled to discover cultural beliefs (and learn that cultural beliefs are always imbedded in works of art). The student becomes a historian of sorts who uncovers cultural meanings through his own creative mental processes.

The unit initially explains Professor Jules Prown's methodology of material culture; this methodology is the basis of the unit. I have worked through applications of the methodology for use with the short story and the poem, and these subsequent applications are also explained.

Thematic pairings of paintings and works of literature are included in the unit. Thematic pairings allow the student two "keys" as it were with which to discover culture. Pairings also enable the student to become aware of the strengths and limitations of different forms of artistic expression. Two of these pairings or four works of art are extensively analyzed by me; they serve as particular examples of the methodology at work. They also provide the time-constrained teacher with classroom material. Additional unworked pairings are also included which might serve as beginnings for others in working through the method and/or discovering phenomena of twentieth century British culture for themselves.

Suggested lesson plans include:

1. a way of introducing the method to students
2. means to facilitate student engagement with the method
3. an idea for comparing art forms
4. an idea which promotes historical research (which will prove—or not—the use of the method)
5. ideas for creative endeavors for students which may underscore their remembrance of the

entire learning process.

(Recommended for English classes, grades 10 through 12)

Key Words

British Art Twentieth-Century British Culture Literature

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