



Introduction

This seminar originated among a group of teachers in Conte School who, in discussing their work with each other, realized that both their students and they had developed an interest in literature that treats family life. The four of them (Bill Coden, Diana Doyle, Jan Johnson, and Kelley O'Rourke) approached James Vivian late in the Fall with their request for a seminar on that subject, and shortly thereafter the Coordinators approved their request and asked me to be the seminar leader. For me it was a valuable experience to organize my understanding of the history of Western literature in a new way—to take a topic that I had never considered as such before, and develop both a historical sense of its development and a formal and theoretical sense of what are the major questions to ask about this theme, and about poems and plays and stories that treat it. I ended up suggesting a historical approach to the literature, starting with Homer's *Odyssey*, and also some study of the history of the family.

We ended up reading *The Odyssey*, *The Oresteia*, Genesis, Luke, Terence's *Brothers*, Augustine's *Confessions*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Tartuffe*, *Rape of the Lock*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Great Expectations*; and three books of family history. When we got to the Twentieth Century, we read books and poems that people were doing in their units, among them *Cry the Beloved Country*, *Raisin in the Sun*, *The Oxcart*, *Nobody's Family is Going to Change*. Our last session was devoted to a discussion of poems on family themes that people brought in and distributed. There was also a certain amount of trading of xeroxed copies of short stories on family themes. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of our discussions was the discovery that works such as *Gulliver's Travels* which are not obviously on family themes can yield even more interesting material on the subject than more obvious works such as *Romeo and Juliet*. The subject seems ubiquitous, and most interesting when suppressed in some way. We also found that drama is the genre that seems most suited for treatment of family matters, and a good many of the units that follow are built on readings from plays. But perhaps no general statement can characterize the units, except that they manage to cover the enormous range of ways in which the theme of family enters literature. I consider them a rich resource for teachers in both junior high school and high school.

Traugott Lawler

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