



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1987 Volume III: Writing About American Culture

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by

Human beings have a sense of humor which gives them the capacity to enjoy comical situations, to laugh at the incongruous, and to relish, intellectually, playing with words. Yet, defining humor is difficult because reactions are individual and the theme of humorous writing is often serious. This unit traces, chronologically, what Americans in particular have found humorous, so students may be aware of what we considered to be funny historically and how it relates to what we consider funny now. In so doing, the student will read not only about cultural influences, but about the important influences of certain writers in this literary history.

The curriculum is designed to incorporate prose which is representative of particular periods in American history. These are: two colonial wits—Benjamin Franklin and Washington Irving; a hero of the tall tales of the early 1800s—Davy Crockett; the incorporation of dialect into writings found in Yankee, Negro slave, and southwestern humor during the 1820s and 1830s; the writings of Mark Twain in the late 1800s; George Ade at the turn of the century; the Alonquin group of the 1920s; Langston Hughes' writings during the 50s; and Woody Allen of the present-day.

Because the works of Mark Twain and Langston Hughes reveal elements of humor found in all generations, "Huckleberry Finn" and "Pudd'nhead Wilson" are read in their entirety, as well as "The Best of Simple." Both authors, while placing their characters in comic situations, express concern about race relations, make comments about the human condition, and indicate the author's attitude toward improving society. Their characterizations integrate comic types which are found in the earlier chronology even as the writing style of each author reflects the influence of the oral, dialectical tradition.

By contrast, one finds in the later works (of which Hughes is also a part) less a concern with individual personalities, and more a concern with the role of an individual with society. Whereas the characters are strong, clever, and wily in the earlier works, characters are weaker, more cynical, and less certain in the later works.

As a consequence of this study, students are asked to define humor, to recognize its tone and to be familiar with its vocabulary, and to appreciate the power of humor to reveal not only the faults of our society but our common humanity.

(Recommended for Advanced English II classes, grade 10; and Advanced English 3 classes, grade 11)

Key Words

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