



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1987 Volume IV: The Writing of History: History as Literature

Historians Are Real People: When Stories are True

Guide for Curriculum Unit 87.04.03

by Jane R. Marshall

This unit enables students to “play at” being historians by analyzing primary source material—literature. Students will learn about 1930s Britain through a consideration of George Orwell’s “Down and Out in Paris and London” and Agatha Christie’s “The ABC Murders.” A comparative reading of these two works will lead to student discoveries of the books’ similar themes. Both works consider the problems inherent in a class society; the authors’ similar themes include social isolation and social manipulation. A brief history of Britain in the 1930s follows the comparative study of “Down and Out” and “The ABC Murders.” Students will be encouraged to consider the political and economic decisions of the time, and to relate these to the concerns and/or themes raised by Orwell and Christie.

Students will also judge Orwell’s and Christie’s books—which have been traditionally classified as high-brow and low-brow literature. They will consider each in light of its depiction of 1930s British society. The authors’ divergent styles will be analyzed, and students will consider such variables as author’s voice (or lack of) and audience (envisioned by the author).

The underlying purpose of the unit is to enable students to respond critically to works which delineate social history. The unit encourages students to view as well as read critically, and thus it includes a consideration of two Hitchcock films of the 1930s—“The 39 Steps” and “Sabotage.”

The unit provides analyses of “Down and Out in Paris and London,” “The ABC Murders,” “The 39 Steps,” and “Sabotage.” Questions which will facilitate student discoveries (and discussions) are also provided.

(Recommended for English classes, grade 12)

Key Words

Christie, Agatha ABC Murders Social History British Literature British Comparative Orwell George Down And Out In Paris And London

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