



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

Introduction

For most of us, History exists through the printed page: it is written. This has not always been so, of course, for once history was related through oral tradition. But today, History is both a discipline and an aspect of literature. The units that follow demonstrate this obvious duality.

As a discipline History has enormous social utility, for it teaches us how to ask questions, and how then to seek out answers to those questions. Not everyone cares for a Socratic approach, however, and there are subjects best stalked rather than interrogated. Making judgments about how to ask the right question and about how to know when one has reached an answer is a valuable skill derived from the reading of History. But History will not be read, at least not by visually-prone young people, unless it is also well written: vivid, compelling, and intriguing. Thus one must give considerable thought to the nature of the audience for the question one wishes to ask before setting out on an inquiry. Questions are shaped differently to meet different needs.

To visualize an audience is to see that audience: to know to whom one is speaking. Thus these units are, in the deepest sense, about seeing things: a little house on the prairie, a tramp down and out in London or Paris, a churning industrial machine transforming a community, a work of art representative of its time. While some of the units that follow are more consciously bound to literary themes than others, and while some draw upon more specifically historical content than others, all share the conviction that learning to look—how truly to look, hard and plain—at an environment, a social custom, a painting, the side of a school building or the television screen, is central to developing that most important skill, the capacity for self-education.

These units share a second conviction: that learning by comparison is more effective than learning by linear conceptions of a discipline. The relationship between Shakespeare and a popular writer such as Ngaio Marsh is, at first glance, literary, and at second, thematic (since both are in some measure “about” the theatre), but when looked at more closely, the relationship is also one of tone, style, and attitude, especially with respect to subjects like fear, pretense, and illusion. The industrial revolution in Britain and America can be understood only as an historical continuum, while the role of geography and history in shaping popular literature represents a visual continuum that moves across the North American landscape with a kind of cinematic integrity. Young people understand these relationships (illustrated here in the units by Kelley O’Rourke, Al Gorman, and Diana Doyle) easily enough when they are given direction on how to look around them. These, and the other excellent units in this collection, are highly teachable ways to helping young people learn how to ask the right question, not in History or Literature alone, but about themselves.

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