



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1988 Volume III: Autobiography in America

Introduction

This seminar on American autobiography had as one of its goals the study of the many forms an autobiography may take. In fashioning our reading list, we therefore included autobiographical poems (by poets as various as Emily Dickinson, Nikki Giovanni, Theodore Roethke, and Robert Hayden), diary entries (Mary Chestnut), slave narratives (Frederick Douglass), autobiographical fictions (Edward Rivera), texts including and sometimes prompted by family photographs (Mary McCarthy, James Alan McPherson, Robb Forman Dew), essays (Alice Walker), and “celebrity autobiographies” (Dave Winfield). As several of these examples should indicate, we were especially attentive to the shorter or more compact forms of autobiography. This was so because we wanted to prepare curriculum units which dispel the myth that an autobiography can only be a long prose narrative, which provide shorter readings more accessible to middle school and to lower level high school students, and which present short forms of autobiography which can serve as models for student writing.

In the seminar, our focus on many autobiographical forms was matched by a concern with developing autobiographical writing activities. This led to sessions in which, for example, discussions of photographs in autobiographies took up additionally how to use photographs in various writing exercises and classroom projects. Other discussions were devoted to the writing of poems, stories, and journals, to writing autobiographically about objects and places (e.g., the family house or apartment), to writing about others as a means to self-portraiture, and about one’s self as, say, a public person, or as a representative of a group, race, generation, etc.

In the curriculum units that follow, the Fellows offer many stimulating ideas for teaching readings by authors as different as Eugene O’Neill, Anne Frank, Walter Dean Myers, Zora Neale Hurston, Huynh Quang Nhuong, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Malcolm X, Maxine Hong Kingston, Nicholasa Mohr, Russell Baker, Joan Blos, John Wideman, and Rita Dove. Clearly, many American experiences are presented by these readings, and the literary genres encountered, ranging from drama and poetry to prose, are myriad, too. The units are also strong in what they develop for classroom and writing activities. While many activities are offered, the Fellows are, I believe, especially comprehensive and inventive in what they collectively propose for journal writing projects. In this way, among others, the units should assist many teachers who wish to help students in coming to terms with features of their lives in part by reading autobiographies and by writing autobiographically.

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