



American Detectives: On Tv and in Books

Guide for Curriculum Unit 89.04.05

by Jane K. Marshall

A quick perusal through “TV Guide” indicates that detectives and their stories are enormously popular; they hold a piece of the prime time action virtually every night of the week. Though I am not a fan of TV, I believe that, given the right emphasis, the medium of television might be used to promote thinking skills and even reading.

I plan to use current and not so current TV fare during the course of this unit. Initially, these television shows will serve to introduce characters and the structure of the detective story to students. Because many of my students are non-readers, the prospect of a new book in English class often precipitates student anxiety. It is my hope that providing students with introductory material in the form of TV shows will lessen this anxiety.

More important, television shows such as “Perry Mason” and “Spenser: for Hire” will be viewed seriously. That is, I hope to encourage students to analyze these shows with respect to their places in time. I imagine, for example, that we will be able to discern the values, concerns, and/or preoccupations of the late ‘50s/early ‘60s by asking the right questions of the “Perry Mason” re-run.

Essentially, this unit will be organized along a time line. Students will read of Perry Mason, Virgil Tibbs, and Spenser in that order. The pairing of the television show and novel (with television show usually coming first) will lead ultimately to a critique of each medium. Television will not be run down, and students will be encouraged to seriously assess each medium with regard to entertainment value and educational usefulness.

All of the shows to be viewed and novels to be read are American. I am most interested in looking at the development of the American fictional detective over time. These figures are always in some sense both heroic and mundane, and, therefore, it seems to me, reflect both what we are and what we long to be at any given juncture.

The pairings to be studied in this unit are as follows: Perry Mason re-run/ “The Case of the Spurious Spinster” by Erle Stanley Gardner, “In the Heat of the Night” (current TV show)/“In the Heat of the Night” by John Ball, “Spenser: for Hire” (current TV show)/“Mortal Stakes” by Robert Parker.

The unit provides fairly brief critiques of the television shows and books. These critiques supply the reader with an overview of salient themes which emerge through both content and style. Questions which might help students to discover the social-historical significance of such works are included as are questions or topics which might aid students in forming their own critiques of these novels and television shows.

(Recommended for English classes, grades 10-12)

Key Words

Film American Detective Television American Novel Literature Mystery Thrillers

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