



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1989 Volume IV: Detective Fiction: Its Use as Literature and History

Mystery and Detective Fiction: Comparison and Contrast

Guide for Curriculum Unit 89.04.08
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This unit defines detective fiction as one in which a detective solves the presented mystery through uncovering and recognizing important information from which he constructs the pattern which resolves the initial mystery. The puzzle presented often includes profound issues of the human condition; such as, racial injustices, alienation, greed, and loneliness. The unit differentiates among the books of detective fiction by contrasting whether the focus is on a puzzle or on a detective; by considerations of point of view; by contrasting settings; and by comparing tone. Within this structure, the teaching aims are to have students become familiar with the broad spectrum of detective fiction available, to consider the logic of the dynamics which lead to action, to have them become aware of the ethics illuminated, and to grow more cognizant of their own values as a consequence of their written and verbal reactions to the reading.

The nature of some of the material among the plethora of titles requires that the teacher give equal consideration to the books selected and the developmental level of the students. This latter aspect has less to do with reading skill and more to do with mature issues which are frequently raised in detective fiction. It is recommended that excerpts of books be used, as well as assigning whole books, so that students may experience the variety of detective fiction available to them while the teacher may eliminate problems which arise from either the language used in the books or the time required to read whole books.

Detective fiction offers a rich source of material for motivating students to read, to discuss, and to write. To demonstrate this, the prose section discussed the works of a number of authors, including in the discussion possible teaching aims and methods. The separate student bibliography is compiled of titles most likely to be found in the school library which may be utilized in a similar manner.

(Recommended for college preparation English classes, grades 9-12)

Key Words

Mystery Comparative Literature Critical Thinking Reading Instruction

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