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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1989 Volume V: America as Myth

Phrasing and Framing Famous Men

Guide for Curriculum Unit 89.05.10
by Michael Vuksta

This unit takes an in-depth look at a single American literary and artistic artifact. The co-texts of “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men” by James Agee and Walker Evans are used to examine the creative process of art and self-expression as a form of myth-making. The author does not view myth as a primitive, ingenuous or inferior form of understanding. Rather he professes that mythic or mythological understanding incorporates a symbolic expression which is comprehensive, creative and transformative.

While in the past this phototext has been considered a masterpiece of the documentary art, this unit chooses to explore the personal observations of Agee and Evans for their revelations of the values and attitudes of the men themselves. In attempting this examination of symbols and psyches it is hoped that the nature of the photographic and literary arts will be exposed as unique modes perception and reflection.

The writing and photographic activities are plentiful and can be used singly or in a series as a means for understanding the joys and challenges of creative self-expression. Includes a brief annotation of the text as well as an extensive bibliography.

(Recommended for Photography classes, grades 8-12)

Key Words

Agee James Art Photography American Evans Walker Famous Men Literature

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