



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

Introduction

The curriculum units from this seminar are as diverse as American mythology itself. They cover a wide gamut of American history, art and literature, from the paintings of the colonial artist John Singleton Copley to the intersection of jazz and art in the twentieth century. Each unit has a unique focus: some concentrate on individual artists or writers while others take the broad view and survey entire epochs. The units span a wide range of fields: photography, journalism, painting, music, drama, crafts, autobiography, and fiction. While most are adaptable to a large range of ages and learning skills, others are tailored for specific groups: slow learners, elementary students, high school literature classes.

Each unit approaches the notion of myth from an individual point of view. Two look at the richness of American myths in a celebratory fashion. Casey Cassidy (“The Hopper-Ville Express”) turns his attention to the paintings of Edward Hopper, finding in them not only great art, but an America that has long since disappeared. Ann Magda (“Playing with American Folk Heroes of the Nineteenth Century”) weaves a tapestry of American myths, from George Washington to Annie Oakley, through a play she creates about the lives and legends of American folk heroes.

Two units are concerned with specific ethnic or racial heritages. They provide students with new insights into their own backgrounds at the same time as they render students more sensitive to the sufferings and aspirations of other groups. Maureen Howard (Marginal Participants in the American Dream”) focuses on the Jewish experience in American literature. She examines texts in which Jews and non-Jews must acknowledge and overcome their own prejudices in order to live together in harmony. Pearl Mitchell (“The Roots of Modern Day African Americans”) turns her attention to three figures central to Black experience in America: Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass and Joseph Sengbe (Cinque). Through the sufferings and triumphs of each person, she provides models for Blacks and non-Blacks alike in racial understanding and self-esteem.

Four units are “medium specific.” They look at myths of American culture through individual media. Eileen DeMaio (“Early American Portraits”) introduces elementary school students to the history of art by focusing on the works of American “limners” (early untrained painters), John Singleton Copley, and the Western artist George Catlin. Eugene Gandelman (“Developing Language Arts Through Journalism”) turns his attention to the newspaper. His unit instructs students in the language and techniques of newspaper production. Michael Vuksta (“Phrasing and Framing Famous Men”) draws on his skills as a photography teacher to introduce students to James Agee and Walker Evans. His unit on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* explores both the tensions and possibilities of a collaboration between writing and photography. And Joan Zamore (“Responses to Twentieth Century Music”) esposes her students to the ways that painting and music intersect. She looks at the influences of jazz on twentieth century abstract art.

The final three units are united by their synthetic approach, their attention to a topic or period rather than an individual figure or medium. Francis Degnan (“Stepping into a Colonial Family”) brings elementary school students into contact with the daily life of colonial Americans. Through a wide range of hands-on activities, he acquaints his students with colonial education, the colonial homestead, and colonial crafts. Bethania Hernandez (“A Different Approach for a Special Child”) transforms her work with slow learners in a bilingual classroom into an exploration of Indians, African Americans and European Americans. She begins with the intersection of these different cultures in Puerto Rico and concludes with a look at contemporary society and a trip to the Yale University Art Gallery. Lystra Richardson (“Image of the American Family”) presents her middle school students with changing conceptions of the family in American history. She introduces her students to a wide variety of family experiences in order to help them understand the role the family plays in linking the individual to society as a whole.

Collectively these curriculum units represent a window onto American culture. They acquaint students with important aspects of their heritage; they demonstrate the diversity and richness essential to a pluralistic society; they help enlarge students’ understanding of those around them who are different from themselves; and they provide hands-on activities and exercises to strengthen students’ basic learning skills. The curriculum units prove that there is no single American Myth; instead that there are as many myths as there are Americans.

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