



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1990 Volume IV: American Family Portraits (Section I)

Introduction

This volume explores American art and culture through its families, both real and imagined. Through literature, painting, and photography, the individual teaching units trace the history of family life over the past three centuries. Three assumptions govern the volume as a whole: the first is that the family is an institution that changes over time. The colonial family included many nonfamily members under the same roof: apprentices, servants, hired hands. It served as the basic unit of production in a culture that was overwhelmingly agricultural. Today the family takes many different forms: nuclear, extended, singleparent, etc. It has lost many of its traditional functions to the state (education, care of the sick and elderly), and it operates more as a unit of consumption than production in modern times.

The second assumption concerns the ties between family identity and national history. The family is never just a family: it is always part of a larger history, whether that history concerns the nation as a whole or specific racial or ethnic groups within our national life. Whether one is looking at colonial portraits or reading novels from the Harlem Renaissance, he or she will discover images and stories that always tell more than we initially expected. The tales that our artists have told about the family all provide allegories, in miniature, for the country as a whole.

The third assumption is built into the title of the volume, “American Family *Portraits* .” To understand the family, we must understand how it has been *portrayed* in the art and literature. Each of the individual teaching units explores family life through literary or visual materials. Each focuses simultaneously on the family and the art through which the family is portrayed. The reason is simple: our experience of the family is mediated by expectations that we learn from film, television, literature and art. Our thinking about the family is shaped in other words by *conventions* . We don’t just experience family life, we filter our experience of the family through categories that we imbibe from the arts and mass media.

The individual teaching units included here grew out of one of two sections of a seminar that explored American family life from colonial times to the present. The units produced by seminar participants may be divided into two headings: studies of American family life since World War II, and studies of particular minority family histories. Under each heading, the units are presented alphabetically by author.

The first heading includes three units designed for middle school teachers. Elizabeth Lawrence has constructed a unit appropriate not only to English and American history classes, but for a course on “family life and sex education.” Her unit, “Changing Images of the American Family in Literature and Media: 1945-90,” compares family life of the 1950s to today’s using drama (*A Raisin in the Sun*), television and paintings.

Delci Lev, “Depicting Family: Changes and Modifications,” uses a time line to correlate developments in

science and technology with changing family patterns from 1945 to the present. Her students read *The Shimmershine Queens* and *Lottery Rose*, two novels of contemporary life. Rose ChristoforoMitchell focuses on literary skills for seventh and eighth grade remedial reading students, using a DirectedReadingThinking activity book while looking at the novel, *A Teacup Full of Roses*.

A second category of teaching unit concentrates on ethnic and minority family histories. Bethania Hernandez, in "A Different Approach for a Special Child (Part II)," helps bilingual children with special needs and learning disabilities focus on Puerto Rican family life both in Puerto Rico and New Haven. Her unit complements a more general introduction for special students written as a teaching unit in 1989. Barbara Moss centers her unit on the AfricanAmerican tale teller. In "How the AfricanAmerican Storyteller Impacts the Black Family and Society," she looks at African traditions of storytelling and relates them to modern figures in AfricanAmerican life. Henry Rhodes turns to the question of crisis among African-American families. In "The AfricanAmerican Family in Crisis," he takes an historical and sociological approach to Black family history. Lystra Richardson, "Portrait of the African American Family," looks at novels of contemporary Black life to understand different family structures and values. She approaches her material through "cooperative learning" techniques. Clarence Roberts pursues an historical approach to family life in "The Changing Family: How Changes in the Family Reflect Social and Economic Changes in Society." His unit surveys American family history from the Indians through colonial culture into the present and future. He focuses on the AfricanAmerican family before and after slavery. Cynthia Roberts in turn supplements an earlier unit on "Urban New Haven in the Making" with a new unit on "The Art and Culture of the AfroAmerican." She guides her students through the lives of a series of Black artists in an effort to understand African-American culture and family life. And Barbara Coles Trader focuses her unit on literature and painting of AfricanAmerican culture. Her unit, "Highlights of Modern Family Art and Literature," introduces her students not only to art by Black painters and writers, but to the figure of the Black throughout the history of American art.

Each of these units is designed not only to familiarize students with the particular subject of the volume, but to engage them in reflections on their own families, their relation to the community and their place in the history of this country. The units 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. They bring together private life with public history, demonstrating how each individual is a part of the tossed salad we call American culture.

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