



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

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## **The American Family in Literature**

Guide for Curriculum Unit 90.05.06  
by Patrick A. Velardi

Educators must understand the concept of family. Furthermore, teachers must be fully equipped to deal with the many manifestations of the family. Before a teacher can begin to influence a child's mind, that teacher must know with whom he is dealing. The family is the first and probably the most important molder of the child's mind. What the schools get, then, is a child who may have his most important education already in place. The school picks up the process at that point and continues.

The first goal of this unit is to provide a firmer understanding of what family means. When is a family a family? Why does it make a difference to teachers to know the answer to that question? Cultural differences, the age at which a family begins, single-parent families, the break-up of a family, and the subsequent re-forming of a new family are some of the many influences that come to mind. In this unit a sampling of research into the formation and functioning of American families is presented. One becomes aware that there is no one ideal type of family, and that our American culture draws much of its strength from the diversity that we all bring to it. When reading a book about a traditional family, students will be better equipped to understand their own families, many of whom may not resemble the mother, father, sibling arrangement. Since so much of the literature read in class has family as a central theme, the time spent on what makes a family will be fruitful.

A second goal of this unit is understanding literature and how family plays such an important role in so many of the novels read. Students must learn to peel away the layers of a novel or short story and begin to see what lies beneath the plot. The novel, "Farmer Boy," is the story of a pioneer family whose daily existence depends upon the family. Living on a farm, each member is a major contributor to the well-being of the whole. While the family is undeniably a traditional one, students can understand why each member is such an important cog, and then relate principles of the fictional family to their own, even if their family may be far from traditional. The model of the family presented in "Farmer Boy" is clear and from that starting point deeper understanding of the variations of the family can be developed.

In a second book, "Nobody's Family Can Change," the family is also traditional in the mother, father, sibling sense, but it is an Afro-American family living in the present in New York City. The story revolves around the conflicts of the children in coping with the family's values and their own desires and aspirations. This book is enjoyable because of its contemporary language and problems and it also provides insight into the generational advancement of families, that is, parents expecting a child to advance beyond what they have. This theme is very important to immigrant as well as Afro-American families. In the novel we see goals of children that are different from what parents expect, a pertinent issue to many young adults who are pushed

and pulled by peer pressure in contemporary America.

The third goal of the unit is to look at art as a chronicler of the American family and how art can open our eyes to the changes that have occurred. In particular, I want to concentrate on photography as an historical marker of changes in the American family. Most of the emphasis is on the students' own pictorial documentation of family. No family, it seems, is absent of a photographic record of its important events. These snapshots provide the color or vividness to one's recollections of one's own personal history as part of one's family. Wedding pictures, baby photos, picnics, trips or shots of everyone gathered together for holidays provide frozen moments that provide amazing impetus for discussion and then writing in a classroom. Photographs provide the needed push into creative writing about a topic a student feels comfortable about.

Teachers must understand as well as possible what influences may have made students what they are. By using family, good art, and literature as motivators, this unit builds appreciation for all three. Students need to understand family, and to feel comfortable enough with it to use it as a force in their writing.

(Recommended for English and Humanities, grades 6-8)

**Key Words**

*Family Life Adolescence Literature American Journals Writing Instruction*

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