



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

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 non-family 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, single-parent, 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 the second of two sections 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: general studies of the family at different moments in history, and studies of particular minority or ethnic families. Under each heading, the units are presented alphabetically by author.

The first heading includes six units designed for a wide range of teaching situations. Lorna Dils focuses on “Cultural Diversity: The American Family—Past, Present and Future.” Her unit explores literature from Black, Hispanic, White, Japanese, Chinese and Native American Cultures. Diana Doyle, in “Faces of the Family,” contrasts different family situations at different periods of history, from pioneer days to slave ships to urban New York. Michelle Edmonds uses dance as the glue to hold together a wide range of ethnic families. In “The Family as Seen Through Interpretive Dance,” she teaches middle school students to translate cultural

differences into expressive body movements. Phyllis Grenet, on the other hand, introduces her first graders to hands-on activities involving life in the colonial family. In “American Life—A Comparison of Colonial Life to Today’s Life,” she makes family experience from the past tangible to kids in the late twentieth century. Jane Platt focuses on children’s literature as a means of introducing her grammar school children to the family in its different incarnations. Her unit, “Family Matters—Using Children’s Literature to Explore How Families Function,” looks over the shoulders of *The Shimmershine Queens* to explore urban families today. And Patrick Velardi, in “The American Family in Literature,” compares two novels, *Farmer Boy* and *Nobody’s Family Can Change*, in an effort to understand what changes and what remains the same in American family history.

A second type of teaching unit concentrates on ethnic and minority family histories. Mary Baba takes students from grades 8-12 on a tour of Irish family history. In “Irish Immigrant Families in Mid-Late 19th Century America,” she brings students across the Atlantic with her immigrant families to recreate the experience of first coming to this country. Mary Ellen Leahy explores the life and writings of novelist Zora Neale Hurston in “A Cultural Outlook on the History of Black American Families in the Rural South.” Her unit is designed to introduce sixth graders to family life as seen through the ideas of one of America’s major writers. Francis Pierce uses a wide range of African-American literature to survey the history of the Black family. She looks both at the oral tradition and at novels by Black authors. Jean Sutherland takes an historical approach. In “The Family that Endured—An Historical View of African-American Families as Seen Through American Literature and Art,” she explores both traditional and non-traditional family structures as reflected in American painting and literature. And Beverly White introduces her 11th grade students to issues of the African-American family in “The Black American Family in Literature and Art.” This unit focuses on two novels: Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Alex Haley’s *Roots*.

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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