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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1991 Volume III: Afro-American Autobiography

Magic, Sass and Rage

Guide for Curriculum Unit 91.03.03
by Bill Coden

A careful study of autobiography allows us to go beyond sympathy—feeling for—to the more advanced state of empathy—feeling with. “Magic, Sass and Rage” has a dual focus: elements of autobiographies of childhood and adolescence; writings by African American female authors. The unit is intended for use with ninth graders.

Readings in the unit concentrate on scenes and themes characteristic of autobiographies of childhood and adolescence: magic, a sense of being at one with the totality; alternative dimension, an angle of vision different from that of the adult recreating his/her past self; abundance, the awareness of existing and moving in a universe which is full.

The readings are linked by an examination of the concept of the outraged mother and the use of “sass.” The outraged mother is incensed at the abuse of her people and of her person; sass, a verbal weapon of self-defense, may be a part of the outraged mother’s repertoire for the survival of flesh and spirit. Writing assignments, suggested by class readings and discussion, are designed to foster the improvement of writing skills; to form and ask questions in order to find truths; to appreciate the power and joy of words—and of life.

(Recommended for English, grade 9)

Key Words

Adolescence American Autobiography Afro-Americans Literature Women Family Life

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