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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1999 Volume I: Women's Voices in Fiction

Sister Outsiders: Black and White Women Writing in America

Guide for Curriculum Unit 99.01.01
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One of the challenges of teaching English to high school students is to convince them that literature is not only living, but is actually an ongoing conversation about all of us. Giving students the means to participate in this conversation is essential to their development as readers, thinkers, and citizens as well.

This unit, designed primarily for the honors level American literature classroom, asks students to consider pairs of works of American literature by white/western European women writers and black/African-American women writers. By doing so, students will get a sense of the ongoing conversation between and among women who have written, and who are writing, in America today, as well as the importance of understanding one's own history and of participating in this conversation.

Students will read short stories, poems, novels and essays by Kate Chopin, Ani DiFranco, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Lauryn Hill, Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, Tillie Olsen, Adrienne Rich, and Alice Walker. They will become experts on reading a text not only for its aesthetic, but also for its cultural, value. They will engage in class discussion, write extensively in many modes, and conduct research about their own histories.

While the major thrust of this unit is to have students read and compare these pairs of texts by black and white American women writers, a secondary, intent is to see that, as Alice Walker contends, there is only one story being told, but with many voices. If we can encourage students to add their voices to the story, we will have done a lot.

(Recommended for Honors American Literature, grade 11.)

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