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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2007 Volume II: Across the Curriculum with Detective Fiction for Young People and Adults

Beyond Criminal Justice: Investigating Social Issues through Detective Fiction

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Detective fiction, a genre often considered solely for entertainment, abounds with good writing and trenchant social criticism; it is also a treasure trove of high interest literature, accessible for students of all backgrounds and levels. In this particular unit, I target 11th grade American Literature students who attend a Vocational-Technical High School in New Castle County, Delaware. The unit revolves around four novels: Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Barbara Neely's *Blanche among the Talented Tenth*, Sharyn McCrumb's *If I'd Killed Him When I Met Him*, and Tony Hillerman's *A Thief of Time*. It also includes stories by Dorothy Sayers and Raymond Chandler in order to familiarize students with the genre's traditional conventions so that they will better understand how the novelists subvert or alter these conventions for purposes which include social criticism and the creation of an aesthetic that is true to each author's social and cultural identity. The novels deal with themes of identity, social class, race, ethnicity, gender, assimilation, and discrimination, while containing complex protagonists and intricate plots; hence they can be used to study characters and to analyze the structure and conventions of plot and narrative. Meanwhile, students will enjoy the challenge of beating the protagonists to the solution of the mystery.

(Developed for American Literature, grade 11; recommended for English, grade 11)

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