



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

to strengthen teaching in public schools®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2010 Volume I: Connecting the Visual to the Verbal in the Classroom

Writing about the Big Picture: American Ekphrasis

Guide for Curriculum Unit 10.01.07, published September 2010

by James Foltz

The titular character from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* asks: "What is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?" In this unit, students will not so much ponder Alice's question as they will ponder its "looking glass" image: "What is the use of pictures without literature and conversations?" Teachers and their classes will delve into this question, but also and more specifically, delve into the literary approach to writing about pictures known as ekphrasis. Ranging from the blazing scarlet letter pinned to Hester Prynne to the ghostly eyes of T.J. Eckleburg to Longfellow's burden of a "Cross of Snow" to Ahab's nailing his crew's fate to the *Pequod's* mast, students will explore during a school year through American literature the relationship of text and pictures and of text's power over its optical cousin, which is the written word's ability to manipulate the visual arts' meaning.

(Developed for English II American Literature, grade 11, and AP English Language and Composition, grades 11-12; recommended for English, especially those that use American Literature heavily, High School grades 11-12)

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use