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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2010 Volume III: Creating Lives: An Introduction to Biography

Who is Sylvia Plath?—An Inquiry-Based Biography Primer

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by Molly Myers

Like the genre of biography itself, this unit attempts to bridge the gap between History and English. It can also be used in either of the disciplines separately and effectively. While my purposes for creating the unit were meant to prepare students for a year-long biography assignment, the unit itself can stand on its own as an exploration of the genre. This unit explores the material of biography, primary sources, as well as the problems and possibilities of interpreting that material. The poet Sylvia Plath is the focus of the unit since her life is rich in accessible primary source material and she is the subject of multiple, and often conflicting, biographies. Students will practice the art of biography by "doing" biography while at the same time analyzing the existing biographies (in text, film, and song). They will navigate the same letters and journal entries that the biographers wrestled with, make their own interpretations, and compare their arguments to those of the excerpts on similar periods from published biographies. Through this unit, students should gain the skills of making inferences, reading critically, organizing information, forming and defending an argument, and comparing their argument with others.

(Developed for Women's Studies, grades 11-12; recommended for U.S. History, American Literature, and Humanities, grades 10-12)

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