



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

to strengthen teaching in public schools®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2011 Volume I: The Art of Reading People: Character, Expression, Interpretation

Approaching Portraiture: The Character on the Page and on the Canvas

Guide for Curriculum Unit 11.01.05, published September 2011

by Elizabeth R. Lasure

In this unit we will focus on the mystery of trying to understand characters in literature and apply some of the methods we develop to create portraits in the visual arts. I believe there are some intrinsically natural and subtle ways we respond to characters in literature and that we recreate some of those same instincts when we look portraits. This unit is intended to help weave together these two kinds of study and ultimately produce the kind of portrait that allows for that mystery to be revealed with the subtlety that the written word so often creates. We will be exploring characters in our world, both real and imaginary, in an attempt to deepen our understanding of language and in some cases, bring us literally face to face with those who have lived, loved and died. It is my hope that this unit also brings into question for my students other concepts for understanding the function of art in our world. Is it *l'art pour l'art*, or must art serve a more severe moral or didactic purpose? Where does portraiture fit within this quandary?

Analyzing metaphors, tone, identity, place, and point of view is common practice in beginning to think about how we approach character studies in literature. When we read literature we often identify characters that are 'like us' in any number of ways. This can take us on a broad path of understanding ourselves and others if we consider closely the various devices the author may have (very cleverly) used to set this up.

Visual artists creating portraits must be able to move back and forth cognitively from the obvious physical characteristics to more abstract conclusions about what is observed (strength, intelligence, insecurity); and back again to the detailed observations that yield the abstraction (strained muscles, furrowed brow, slouching posture). It will be the goal of each assignment within this unit to capture (and communicate) the essences of a character students have met in a literary work through a drawing or painting.

(Developed for Studio Art III, IV AP, grades 11-12; recommended for Studio Art II, III and IV AP, grades 10-12)

<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