



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2013 Volume III: John L. Gaddis, Professor of History

A picture is worth a thousand words: Rediscovering biography

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by Audra Bull

Like a painter, a quality biographer paints a portrait of his/her subject. The biographer strives to convey an interesting and meaningful story. This unit will teach students to dig beyond the facts to a more revelatory exploration. This unit will employ four key lessons from the seminar. First of all, a quality biography, more than a simple recitation of facts, is a portraiture of a life presented in such a way to have relevance to the reader. In addition a biography, technically a non-fiction piece of text, is written with the elements of fiction: characters, setting, plot and theme. The biographer is a storyteller, yet not all aspects of a life are worth telling so the biographer must decide what stories to preserve and what to prune. Lastly, a biographer must remember there is no right or wrong way to write a biography. This unit will begin by analyzing iconic pictures representing historic events of the 20th century as a method of revealing the story behind the picture. We will then transition to studying Walt Disney with the purpose of discovering the story behind his success. The unit will conclude with a living history presentation of a biographical subject.

(Developed for Reading, grades 6-8; recommended for Reading, English, and Language Arts, grades K-12)

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