YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE
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Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2013 Volume II: Interpreting Texts, Making Meaning: Starting Small

Introduction

by Paul H. Fry, William Lampson Professor Emeritus of English

The Fellows in this seminar shared a lively and productive interest in the "So what?" of teaching. Why am I doing this? What do I expect my students to learn? How can I get them to think harder about what they read?—or, in any case, how can I get them doing what Bloom's Taxonomy calls "higher-order thinking"? In the seminar, we began by working with very small or very elementary texts, having outlined some interpretive approaches to texts in general that have appealed to critics. We then settled into the interpretation of more challenging texts that involve what might be called an interpretive crux: for example, Tennyson's "Ulysses," James's *The Turn of the Screw*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. We returned in the end (much to my enjoyment, at least!) to a group of poems by Robert Frost.

For their curriculum units the Fellows arrived in New Haven for the most part knowing which texts – mandated or allowed by their school districts – they wanted to teach, so it remained only to decide how to teach them. As nearly always in our seminars, the Fellows' interests fell spontaneously into clusters, and it's in the order of these clusters – four of them – that I want to present the units here. There are of course overlaps of interest that might prompt another arrangement, but these are the clearest linkages. First, there are two units, to my extreme but happy surprise, on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Second, there are three units that involve the teaching of Native American culture. Third, there are three units that have as their main purpose the encouragement of spiritual and social understanding, if not activism. And fourth, there are three units that bring interpretive strategies to bear on a single age-specific text.

Ludy Aguada offers a unit on *Heart of Darkness* best suited for AP students that focuses interpretive skills on the text but also extensively engages with secondary materials (her base text is the Norton edition), focused on Chinua Achebe's provocation and the most thoughtful responses to it in the ensuing controversy. **Jo Stafford's** unit on *Heart of Darkness* takes a similar painstaking approach with the help of secondary material, but with a special emphasis on the theme of evil and its implications.

LeAndrea James from the Diné Nation teaches special education students in her school district with the hope of igniting in them an interest in the Navajo language and their culture. To this end, she assigns poems for children based on the seasons and concerning traditional practices that are illustrated and written in both English and Navajo. **Alexandra Edwards** is a history teacher using fictional and semi-fictional texts to illuminate the historical circumstances surrounding outsiders attempting to secure and maintain landed property in the United States: Black families during Jim Crow (Mildred Taylor), immigrants in the Midwest (Cather's *My Antonia*), the Lakota Sioux and also the Navajo after the Long Walk (various texts). **Christen Schumacher** fulfills a State of Virginia mandate for second or third graders by covering concepts of cultural difference and change through time with the comparison and contrast of Native American cultures from the

Southwest, the Great Plains, and the Northeast, using illustrated books of fact and fiction for young children.

E. M. Miller encourages the appreciative understanding of her city, Chicago, and the urban in general, by "starting small" with a children's book about a transplanted house (gendered female) and ending small with haiku poems written in Paris by Richard Wright, ranging through Sandburg and other Chicagoans in between while invoking strong pedagogical mentors. **Jeff Weathers** writes an exhortation about making connections, reviewing advanced theories of interpretation and cognition with a pedagogical slant while proposing to teach – and in the meantime offering insight on – disparate texts addressing, first, the notion of being an "It," and second, the horror of Jim Crow violence. **William (Miles) Greene** offers a unit on the protest poem, providing some background for this mode, with an emphasis on three interpretive objectives: the author's purpose, the tone, and the poem's mood.

Leilani Esguerra sharpens her students' interpretive skills by approaching a single mandated text, Jon Krakauer's semi-fictional *Into the Wild*, with an emphasis on the narrator's reliability, partly introduced through a contrast with relatives' descriptions of the character described. Her particular focus questions whether the chapter epigraphs confirm or conflict with the chapters' content. **Cheree Charmello** teaches S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* in a unique way: Offering a full survey of the literature on improvisation ("Improv"), she explains how to teach the book by inducing students to "perform" each chapter successively in keeping with the many situations that are standard in Improv, one for each chapter. **Whitney Davis**, finally, engages the interpretive attention of very young students by walking them through the chapters of Roald Dahl's *The BFG*, covertly introducing both folkloric history and the concept of literary allusion by cross-referring to other books about giants, Jack in the Beanstalk (alluded to by Dahl) and Fin M'Coul.

I would encourage all interested teachers to read these provocative and helpful curriculum units.

Paul H. Fry