



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2010 Volume II: The Art of Reading People: Character, Expression, Interpretation

Ellen Foster: A Character Study from the Inside Out

Guide for Curriculum Unit 10.02.02
by Sandra K. Friday

One of the five Habits of Mind that we focus on at New Haven Academy is "Who is speaking?" My unit, based on the novel *Ellen Foster* by Kaye Gibbons, addresses how the narrator, a twelve-year-old girl, Ellen, expresses her emotions and inner make-up through the clarity and candor of her voice, her perspective, her prejudices, her innocence, and the challenges she faces as an orphan trying to make a place for herself, in an often indifferent and sometimes hostile world, the rural South of the 1970s.

The central tool that my students will use for close reading the character of Ellen is the technique known as Marking and Discussing a Passage. Through this technique students will collaborate to create a composite of Ellen as she narrates the story of the past two harrowing years of her young life. My unit focuses on several threads that run through Ellen's narrative, beginning with the first sentence in which she confides, "When I was little I would think up ways to kill my daddy." Two strong threads are her desperate need to escape her destructively dysfunctional family, and her equally desperate need to search out a home where she feels safe. Another thread that makes the fabric of her story poignant is her journey out of racial prejudice.

While the essence of her character remains intact, Ellen also undergoes changes as she takes on the challenges a runaway orphan must face. Exploring Ellen's character is an ideal practice for my tenth-grade students who will take the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT), and will be asked to read a story in the test and use their skills to answer the question: "How does the main character change from the beginning of the story to the end, and what do you think causes this change?"

(Recommended for English, grades 9-12)

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