



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2008 Volume IV: Representations of Democracy in Literature, History and Film

Historical Representations of American Democracy through Literature and Film

Guide for Curriculum Unit 08.04.06
by Shannon Ortiz

This unit was created for Honors Junior English and Advanced Placement English Language courses. It is designed to teach students different ways of understanding and interpreting democracy. Students will begin by analyzing excerpts of early American ideology of democracy written by Thomas Paine and Alexis de Tocqueville. Then they will move to the major text of the unit, *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. Students will then view Henry Ford's cinematic version of the novel and compare the similarities and differences between the two. The last section of the unit will be the poem, "Let America be American Again," by Langston Hughes, where students will judge Hughes' beliefs about the possibilities of America's future.

This unit will bridge a connection between early political theory of American democracy and John Steinbeck's message of democracy in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Students will first identify Paine's and Tocqueville's beliefs about what American democracy is. Then they will examine how these ideals change over the course of the country's history. As students read *The Grapes of Wrath* they will continue connecting the three authors' beliefs and how they are, or are not, evident in Steinbeck's novel.

The unit will end with the students evaluating the possible direction of the country based on all the readings and their own experiences. Students will produce various works to demonstrate comprehension of the material, with guidance included in this unit.

(Recommended for English and A.P. Language and Composition, grades 11 and 12)

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