AN OPUS-CENTERED UNIT FOR EIGHTH GRADE LANGUAGE ARTS

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V. SUMMARY

BIBLIOGRAPHY
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It was the purpose of this study to prepare an opus-centered unit for eighth grade language arts classes, based on a single longer work of literature.

I. JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

Teachers of language arts in junior high school who hope to instill in their pupils a love of good reading through the enjoyment of a complete novel as a class generally have to make a special effort to plan for such an experience. The literature usually provided for class work is an anthology made up of short works of various types of writing and excerpts from novels, but no novel in its entirety.

Dwight L. Burton, an English education and reading specialist, stated:

The value of at least occasional experiences in a class's reading the same novel at the same time is universally acknowledged. At least one novel should be read in common in each grade, seven through twelve.1

The choice of reading material for use with junior high students is of crucial importance. A novel or other longer work

to be used for class reading must be interesting to the group, worthwhile, and available in quantities needed.

Numerous studies of improving reading ability have shown that all pupils gain more from their reading if it is interesting to them. Margery E. Bernstein reported, as the result of a study, "The relationship between interest and comprehension existed for pupils of high and low reading ability and for retarded and non-retarded readers alike."¹

Arnie Jewett, a specialist in language arts in the United States Office of Education, wrote that boys and girls in junior high especially enjoyed animal stories that had a hero or heroine about the same age as the reader or slightly older. He then listed four titles, including Old Yeller, by Fred Gipson, as "seldom resting on library shelves."²

Jewett also included Old Yeller in his list of novels recommended for common reading in junior high.³

Old Yeller is highly regarded as a well-written fiction work, is available in paperback, and hence was selected as the

¹Margery E. Bernstein, "Relationship Between Interest and Reading Comprehension," Journal of Educational Research, XLIX (December, 1956), 266.


³Jewett, op. cit., p. 134.
novel to be used in this study.

The values of a unit approach to teaching junior high English are widely recognized. In The English Language Arts in the Secondary School it was stated:

Teachers seek some means of organizing instruction that implements the principle of learning through use in purposeful activities and at the same time recognizes the relatedness of all the language skills and literature. One effective organizational pattern is the unit method of teaching.1

An interesting variation of the unit method was suggested by Dr. Arnold Lazarus, Professor of English and Director of English Education at Purdue University, namely the opus-centered unit, in which the study of language arts skills was based on a single longer work of literature or a selected body of work by a given author. This plan will be tested in eighteen communities, six in Indiana, twelve in neighboring states. Its chief purpose is to help students, through the context of reading, to develop a sense of the interrelationships among language, literature, and communication.2

II. DEFINITION OF TERMS

Unit method. As defined by the Commission on the English


2Report from Group V-English Education Conference, Indiana University, 1963 (Dittoed).
Curriculum of the National Council of Teachers of English, "unit method" means that:

Varied activities in the language arts are developed around a central theme or purpose, clear and significant to the student. It must be sufficiently broad to involve in some measure all four of the language arts and to permit each individual (1) to work in co-operation with his class and (2) to pursue certain special interests in a wide range of materials and experiences suited to his ability.

Copus-centered unit. An copus-centered unit for language arts classes is one in which the primary text of a longer piece of literature, or a selected body of the works of one author, is used as a basis on which to build all the learning activities.

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1The Commission on the English Curriculum, National Council of the Teachers of English, op. cit., p. 70.
There is much published material about the unit method of instruction in the textbooks for teacher preparation and publications of educational and English teacher organizations. Most of it is in praise of the unit approach to classroom instruction.

Jewett, in a survey of the published courses of study of language arts in the United States, found:

One of the significant characteristics of the courses of study included in this survey is the use of the unit method as a means of organizing learning experiences in the language arts.1

Even though there has been a trend from the traditional classroom procedure of "assign-study-recite-test" toward the unit method in the published courses of study for language arts, however, many teachers prefer to continue the use of traditional procedures.

as a promising way to teach the language arts.

Berry believed the teaching unit to be the core of the language arts program, and wrote:

Teaching units not only provide for teaching the language arts in the context of meaningful experiences; by helping students define, explore, and find solutions to their problems, they also provide vital opportunities for growth toward self-realization, the ultimate goal of the teaching of all English.¹

She deplored the English classes in which the same things were repeated year after year in a monotonous, meaningless fashion, and found units to have the advantage of allowing more flexibility and creativity.²

Burton viewed the methods of classroom teaching from the standpoint of the basic attitudes toward society and the individual's place in it. He believed that the traditional form of "assign-study-recite" teaching, for beginning learners and general education, established the teacher as a task-setter and drill-master for students who were passive and receptive, and that these teachers using this method view society as static and authoritarian.

Those teachers who use the modern unit with beginning learners and for general education seemed to Burton to indicate a belief that society and education are dynamic and democratic.

²Ibid.
The teacher's role is that of a participating guide to learners who actively participate in their own education. In this situation the learning process is thought of as being continuous, interactive and purposeful experiencing. Burton firmly believed the place for traditional teaching is with mature learners, those who can learn through abstractions, and in areas of specialization.

He expressed his view of the different long-term results of the two approaches to classroom teaching when he wrote:

The two procedures indiscriminately applied cannot possibly produce the same results. The application of the traditional assignment method can result only in molding, indoctrinating, or coercing individuals into conformity with accepted beliefs and values through unrelieved imposition of selected segments of the cultural heritage. The proper use of modern assignments and units aims at developing responsible, creative individuals who will realize their unique possibilities within a flexible, cooperatively determined society. The cultural heritage will be discovered, but not thrust upon the learners. Learners will discover how the cultural heritage was produced and hence what it means.¹

There are also immediate, day-to-day reasons concerning the needs and interests of the individual student for using the unit method. In any language arts classroom, even those on the track system, there is a wide variation of background experience related to the subject matter. As another example, in any one class the reading ability of the students may have a range of six or seven years.

Because work on a unit likely involves many types of activity, from preparing a bulletin board to writing a skit or participating on a panel, Rivlin found:

Of all the basic methods of teaching, it is the unit plan that recognizes most fully that each student has individual needs that must be met and individual interests that must be respected. When the unit plan is used, it is unnecessary to introduce special devices to adjust the curriculum to the individual, for it is the individual students who shape the unit.¹

Alwin recommended the unit method as a way of enabling the students to work together as a group molding an idea into spoken then written expression, yet each working as an individual also, going as deeply as he can in the direction in which he is inclined, and in the manner best suited for him.²

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The study of English was an important part of the curriculum of the academies started in the United States in the 1820's and the secondary schools thereafter. It was divided into courses in composition, rhetoric, literature, and grammar. Reading and writing were stressed in the lower grades.³

Literature study in the secondary schools was dominated


by the classics, the history of literature, or the types of literature. The classics to be studied were largely determined by college entrance requirements. The courses were centered on the literary materials, not the needs and interests of the students.  

With the concern for new approaches to teaching, brought on by studies in psychology, experimental schools, and emphasis of democratic values, there evolved teaching units with a theme or center of interest based on the needs and motivations of the students themselves. By the 1920's, especially at the junior high level, such themes as adventure, hobbies, pioneer life, and animals were developed. During the 1930's there was a particular interest in language arts units based on social problems.  

With this change also came the unification of the four competencies of English, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, into one course in junior high, and named English language arts. The specialization of the study of literature, usually English, or American, but sometimes world, was reserved for the two upper secondary grades.  

During the first three decades of the twentieth century there was a change in attitude toward the purposes of learning from that of facts to be "covered" or memorized to that of the

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1 Ibid., p. 239.
2 Ibid., p. 242.
3 Ibid., p. 236.
development of the learner and the meeting of his needs in his growth of intellect and character. Significant understandings, appreciations, attitudes, insights, and concepts became the goal of teaching.¹

Morrison interpreted the goals of the "unit concept" and was influential in bringing about reorganization of the language arts curricula. The fundamental characteristic of his plan was that teachers organize the subject matter materials to make them capable of being understood, rather than capable of merely being remembered.²

Another educator, V. T. Thayer, contributed much to advancing the appreciation of unit teaching. He emphasized the importance of individual differences. The teacher was to encourage each student to pursue his special interest and achieve a higher level of learning above the mastery of the common essentials learned by all in the class.³

III. LANGUAGE ARTS UNITS FOR EIGHTH GRADE

Although there are many types of units, the one found by a survey of some published courses of study to be used most often in the junior high language arts programs is the resource unit. In this type of unit, learning is achieved by relating the

²Ibid., p. 274-79.
³Ibid., p. 287.
activities to an author and his works, a theme, a basic need, or a human problem.¹

A wide variety of suggestions is made in the published resource units as to sources of related materials, activities possible to develop the theme, audio-visual aids, creative writing possibilities, and community sources to enrich the educational outcomes. It is not intended that any teacher use all the suggestions of one unit in a class. There is to be adaptation to fit the needs and interests of each group and the individuals in it.

Most junior high language arts resource units are literature-centered and provide learning experiences in reading, speaking, listening, and writing. Reading, however, is their core. The grammar, usage, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation to be taught are often determined by the scope and sequence chart of the school and then related to the unit.²

The emphasis of units planned for eighth grade is frequently on American life, ideals, humor, recreation, and people, with such titles as "American Heritage," "The Westward Movement," "America Dares," and "American Tall Tales and Legends."³

The Language Arts Curriculum for the Des Moines, Iowa public schools has these units planned for eighth grade:

¹Jewett, op. cit., p. 53.
²Ibid., p. 54.
³Ibid., p. 59.
1. Knowing Ourselves and Others  
2. Amazing Adventures  
3. The Weird and Mysterious  
4. World of Sports  
5. Americans from Other Lands  
6. This Modern World  
7. Stop! Look! Listen!  

All of these are literature-centered, except the last one, which emphasizes observation and listening.

Bennett suggested a unit on "Courage," in which the teacher read the beginning of a story to the eighth graders and they creatively completed the story showing courageous action. They collected and read other stories about courage and reported on them to the class.

Kegler and Simmons described a junior high unit, "What Is a Hero?" The purpose of this unit was to analyze the qualities of heroism as demonstrated by subjects of biographies. Each student read a biography and noted the specific qualities of the subject. He had taken notes from periodicals to develop the thesis. Students learned the relationship of details to the main idea of the paragraph. They also considered the relationship of the biographer to his subject.

"Discover Poetry" was another published unit for eighth-

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1Dorothy Public Schools, Language Arts, Junior High School (mimeographed).

2Robert A. Bennett, "Unit Ideas for the New School Year," English Journal, XLIX (September, 1960), 400.

grades. One suggested activity was to show colored scenes on a screen as a record of poetry was played or poetry was read. Each student selected a poem and the colored pictures to accompany it. Another time students wrote the words and feelings that flashed through their minds as they looked at a colored picture.¹

Eighth grade students will have little, if any, difficulty in understanding the story of Old Yeller. They will be interested in Travis' life and adventures as a pioneer Texas boy in the 1860's.

The teacher, however, can enrich their experience of reading Old Yeller by helping them gain some insights into the deeper meanings of the novel, and by guiding them to a higher level of literary understanding and discrimination.

The theme of the story could be brought out by reading significant passages aloud and discussing them. One such passage is at the end of the book when Papa is talking to Travis to help him overcome his despondency about having to shoot Old Yeller. He had asked Travis to "forget about it," which Travis didn't think could be done. Then Papa says,

It's not a thing you can forget. I don't guess it's a thing that you ought to forget. What I mean is, things like that happen. They may seem mighty cruel and unfair, but that's how life is a part of the time.

But that isn't the only way life is. A part of the time, it's mighty good. And a man can't afford to waste all the good part, worrying about the bad parts. That makes it all bad... You understand?

Life is good—but there are pains and sorrows, too, and

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some of the deepest sorrows come from loss of things that brought the most pleasure. But the bad parts must not be allowed to blind us to the delight of the good. These truths Travis learned, and an understanding of them will enrich the students.

This theme is developed through the story of a critical period of Travis' growing up. During this period he first faced the responsibilities of the adult world, experienced their satisfactions and pains, and had to make a heart-breaking decision as to what the highest value of life is. That it was human life itself cannot be doubted. At several points in the story Travis shows his respect for the life of animals. Though he liked to hunt, he would not shoot them for pleasure--only to sustain human life, or protect it, and then to inflict as little pain as possible upon the animal. He was upset when he thought the doe he shot had only been injured, not killed.

I didn't like that. I never minded killing for meat. Like Papa had told me, every creature has to kill to live. But to wound an animal was something else. Especially one as pretty and harmless as a deer. It made me sick to think of the doe's escaping, maybe to hurt for days before she finally died.1

When he realized the full implications of the mad wolf's bitin' Old Yeller, and the risk the dog would become to human life--the family--he unhesitatingly did what had to be done--shoot Old Yeller--but with great pain to himself.

The changes that came about in Travis as he faced the

1Ibid., p. 24.
responsibilities of looking after the welfare of his family, after
the father left on the cattle drive, should be noted.

His first indication of having a man's status came when
his father took him to the spring and asked him to be the "man
of the family" in the father's absence. The father shook hands
with him in farewell, rather than "loving him up" as he had the
mother and Arliss. This gave Travis a new dignity and he responded
to the manly treatment, and from then on did his best to live up
to his new role.

The fact that his father had promised him a horse if he
"acted a man's part while I'm gone" did not seem to be the moti-
vation of his maturing. It was his sense of duty to those de-
pendent on him that kept him giving his best, a higher level of
maturity.

His efforts to protect the drinking water from Arliss' and
the dog's robbing in it became symbolic of the family's
struggle to survive. Man cannot take his pleasure without regard
for the welfare of others. Arliss, childlike, thought only of
his own comfort, and playing in the waterhole was fun.

The mother responded to Travis' new role of authority by
backing him up in disciplining Arliss.

Another indication of Travis' developing maturity was
his seeing the work needing to be done and proceeding to do
it without admonition from his mother. "I didn't wait for 'ama
to tell me that I needed to finish running out the corn
Travis' authority was challenged by Jumper, the mule, when he refused to finish plowing. Travis took strong and immediate measures. "I drew back my green cedar club and whacked him so hard across the jawbone that I nearly dropped him in his tracks."2 After that there was no doubt in Jumper's mind that Travis was boss.

The mother's waiting supper for him until he finished plowing reinforced his confidence in being able to live up to his family's expectations of him.

His shooting the doe for the family meat established him as the provider--the traditional responsibility of the male head of the family--and he even felt able to provide a dog for Arliss' pleasure, too.

Travis regressed to toyishness when the range bulls fought in front of the cabin. His lack of caution in watching the exciting battle was nearly disastrous for the family and damaged their rail fence. Travis paid the price for his pleasure, though, by splitting logs and rebuilding the fence.

Another indication of his regression to childish character in this scene was that he blamed Old Yeller for not chasing the bulls away. Travis had chased the dog off when he did not want the fun of seeing a fight interfered with.

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1Ibid., p. 10. 2Ibid., p. 11.
Travis' attitudes toward his five-year-old brother, little Arliss, reflected his growth. At first he grudgingly tolerated keeping the dog as a companion for Arliss because the mother insisted. Arliss' need for a playmate did not really concern him. He thought Arliss a "mess" because of his collecting bugs, snakes, and lizards. He was impatient with Arliss' "windies"—exaggerations of prowess in catching creatures that Old Yeller really had caught. Arliss was a nuisance on Travis' hunting trips: "... it didn't seem to me like he was hardly worth the bother of putting up with."1

The turning point in this relationship occurred when Travis became fully aware of Arliss' helplessness and risked his own life to save Arliss from the bear. "I knew then that I loved him as much as I did Mama and Papa, maybe in some ways even a little bit more."2

This is a doubly significant episode, as it was out of gratitude to Old Yeller for saving Arliss' life that Travis also came to love the dog. He became aware that where love is, faults are overlooked and accepted.

After this, Travis took Arliss hunting, as an adult would a child; and he showed Arliss how to assist with the hunting. Travis used poor judgment, however, in having Arliss run around the tree for Travis to shoot squirrels. The risk of shooting

1Ibid., p. 54.  
2Ibid.
Arliss was too great.

When Travis was worrying about the hydrophobia plague, he thought only of others. His greatest fear was that some animal with the disease might bite Yama or Little Arliss and make them sick.

Travis took a mature attitude toward his brother at the close of the story. When he saw Arliss and the new pup cavorting in the drinking water hole, he resisted ordering them out. Instead, he seemed to sense their need to play and the futility of fighting with them about it. Rather, he thought of diverting Arliss from the pool tomorrow by taking him and the pup on a squirrel hunt which would be a pleasure to all of them.

Students should be made aware of the author's style. The story is told from Travis' point of view, and it is through his sensitivity to beauty and alertness to nature, people, and events that the reader can visualize the life of the Coates family.

The language used is rich in figures of speech, dialect, and colloquialism. It provides insight into the character of these people and adds color to the story. Consider such figures of speech as: (1) "The other (horn) hung down like a tallow candle that had drooped in the heat;" (2) "I slung him (Arliss) toward Yama like he was a half empty sack of corn;" or (3) "I could have wrung his neck like a frying chicken's."

Many examples of dialect could be pointed out, such as: (1) "bait of black-eyed peas," (2) "shad-bellied horse," (3)
"yarmint," (4) "cow brute," (5) "younguns," and (6) "y' all."

Students who enjoy Old Yeller will be motivated to further reading and can be directed to other books that would be satisfying. Some to call to their attention are: (1) The Yearling, by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings; (2) Tom Sawyer, by Mark Twain; (3) Swiftwater, by Paul Annixter; and (4) Johnny Tremain, by Esther Forbes.

Through these books, as through Old Yeller, students can gain not only pleasure, but a better understanding of themselves and a more mature outlook on life.
CHAPTER IV

OLD YELLER UNIT

This chapter describes a method of discussing literature in class to gain insight into the lives of literary characters and a better understanding of oneself; a plan for stimulating writing; and the unit for teaching Old Yeller in an eighth grade language arts class.

I. OVERVIEW

By combining skillful teaching techniques with the opus-centered unit the language arts learnings are coordinated into a meaningful whole. The guidance of the teacher during class discussions and creative writing periods can do much to help the students better understand themselves and their problems. This guidance is essential in this unit based on Old Yeller, as it is unlikely that eighth grade students have ever before had a complete novel as the basis of class work.

Heaton and Lewis have tested and found effective a sequence plan for discussion of literature being studied to develop social sensitivity.¹ This plan could be used in the class discussions

of problems found in Old Yeller.

Step 1. Retell the incident to be discussed. Ask the students, "What happened in the story?" Ask the student called on to tell it as vividly as possible in his own words. This will identify the incidents, feelings, and relationships under consideration. For a deeper interpretation of the incident ask, "What do you think the author meant to tell us in that incident?"

Step 2. Analyze what happened in terms of feelings of characters, in shifts in relationships, or changes in behavior. This can be done by asking the students, "What did the character do?", "Why did he do that?", "In what ways did he show his feelings?", "How do you feel about what he did?", "How would you have felt had you been in his shoes?" This probing aims at making vivid identification with the feelings of the book's characters.

Step 3. Recall similar incidents from the experience of the students or from other stories. Such questions as these will stimulate recall: "Have you ever seen anything like this happen?", "When and where?", "In what way was the incident you describe like or different from this?" The students will come to realize that fiction does extend experience.

Step 4. Explore the consequences of certain behaviors and feelings. This might be done by asking, "In what ways did
s feeling or behavior make a difference?", "Who in the story had a happier or more difficult time because this happened?"

Step 5. Come to a conclusion or generalization about the consequences of certain behaviors and feelings. This gives the student the opportunity to decide which of several possibilities of behaviors or feeling is more desirable or helpful. The following questions may help arrive at conclusions: "What kind of behavior, feeling, or arrangement makes the situation better for people?", "If you could re-live one of your own experiences, what would you do differently?"

A list of problems and topics for class discussions about Old Yeller is included in this unit. The interests and needs of the class will determine which ones to use, and the way in which this discussion sequence is adapted.

The first writing project could be a development of ideas brought out in Step 3 of the discussion sequence--similar incidents in the experiences of the pupils. The incident could begin "I remember..." Read from the second paragraph of Old Yeller:

I remember like yesterday how he strayed in out of nowhere to our log cabin on Birdsong Creek. He made me so mad at first that I wanted to kill him. Then, later, when I had

1Adapted from: Mary Glenn Hamilton, A Creative Approach to Writing (Pleasantville, New York: Reader's Digest Services, Inc., Educational Division).
to kill him, it was like having to shoot some of my own folks. That's how much I'd come to think of the big yeller dog.

Call attention not only to the facts given in this paragraph but also to the feelings that are revealed.

Another paragraph that could stimulate this student writing project is this:

I remember how it was the day Papa left. I remember his standing in front of the cabin with his horse saddled, his gun in his scabbard, and his bedroll tied on back of his cantle. I remember how tall and straight and handsome he looked, with his high-crowned hat and his black mustaches drooping in cow-horn curves past the corners of his mouth. And I remember how Mama was trying to keep from crying because he was leaving and how Little Arliss, who was only five and didn't know much, wasn't trying to keep from crying at all. In fact, he was howling his head off; not because Papa was leaving, but because he couldn't go too.

This could illustrate how character can be created through well-chosen details.

Give the students time to make a list of significant incidents from their experiences. Have them select one they would like to write about. Have them write quickly and without interruption, in class, vividly and with as much detail as they can recall. Tell them that at this time the grammar is not stressed, but rather speed and idea. This first draft is to be kept, for comparison later with the revision.

Teach the students to revise this writing by checking the opening sentence. Have a student read his aloud and ask the class, "Does it make the reader want to go further?" Illustrate effective first sentences with some chapter openings in Old Yeller.
such as: "All right, I was willing to go make a try for a fat
doe." "That Little Arliss! If he wasn't a mess!" "It looked
like I'd never get back to where I'd left Old Yeller." Ask the
students to notice how each of these opening sentences arouses
interest and draws the reader on.

Next check the last sentence. Have a student read his.
Is the conclusion effective? Read chapter endings from Old Yeller
for well-written closing sentences, as:

I guessed that I could handle things while Papa was gone
just about as good as he could.

But they sure had made a wreck of the yard fence.

The way he acted, you might have thought that bear fight
hadn't been anything more than a rowdy romp that we'd all
taken part in for the fun of it.

Then have the students read their entire opening paragraph.

Have one student read his aloud. List all the ideas or details
presented in this paragraph. Do they all belong? Is enough de-
tail given so the incident is clear? Is it well arranged?

Many paragraphs from Old Yeller could be used to show the
unity of good paragraphs, with specific details, but all illuminat-
ing one idea. This one does it well:

"Well, you can't hardly tell at first," he said. "Not
until they have already gone to foaming at the mouth and are
reeling with the blind staggers. Any time you see a critter
acting that way, you know for sure. But you watch for others
that aren't that far along. You take a pet cat. If he takes
'do spitting and fighting at you for no reason, you shoot him.
Sure with a dog. He'll get mad at nothing and want to bite
you. Take a fox or a wildcat. You know they'll run from
you; when they don't run, and try to make fight at you, shoot
'em. Shoot anything that acts unnatural, and don't feel around
The effectiveness of descriptive words can be noted in references from *Old Yeller* such as:

I waited, my nerves on edge, while Old Yeller and the big wolf fought there in the firelight, whirling and leaping and snarling and slashing, their bared fangs gleaming white, their eyes burning green in the half light.

Bud Searcy was a red-faced man with a bulging middle.

They were big solemn brown eyes and right pretty to look at, only when she fixed them on me, it always seemed like they looked clear through me and saw everything I was thinking.

Her white hair was all curly and rippling in the sun.

Character sketches could be suggested by the last three of the above selections. These could be a second project or an
alternate for the "I Remember" paper. Another choice might be "I Wonder," suggested by Travis' saying:

"...we'd lie there on the cowhide and look up at the stars and listen to the warm night breeze rustling the corn blades. Sometimes I'd wonder what the stars were and what kept them hanging up there so high and bright and if Papa, 'way off up under in Kansas, could see the same stars I could see."

Some students might choose to write about "If Only I'd Done It Differently," speculating on the outcome of his own actions as Travis did when he said:

"...only afterward, I wished a thousand times that I could have had some way of looking ahead to what was going to happen. Then I would have done everything I could to keep them from going."

Individual differences as to interests and needs can be met by an opus-centered language arts unit, and all students can be guided to better use of the English language. Through guided discussion and writing, they can come to a better understanding of their own feelings and actions--and human nature.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE UNIT

The objectives of the unit are outlined as follows:

I. Attitudes and Insights
   A. To gain an insight into the lives of a pioneer Texas family, whose situation is very different from ours.
   B. To discover in what ways the members of this family are like us in their aspirations, loves, and fears.

II. Reading and Literature
   A. To discover how a good book can make the characters
come alive in our minds, not only through their actions, but also through their thoughts and feelings.

B. To appreciate the effect of dialect in creating character and establishing time and place in a story.

III. Speaking and Listening

A. To think clearly about the problems discussed and to contribute our thoughts to help arrive at intelligent answers.

B. To learn to tell an experience interestingly.

C. To read aloud with real interpretation.

IV. Writing

A. To improve our creative writing by telling what we thought and felt about the incident.

B. To proofread and correct our own written work.

C. To use a variety of sentence patterns in our writing.

D. To enliven our writing with direct conversation.

V. Language Usage and Grammar

A. To use appropriate English, properly punctuated.

B. To appreciate variety and resourcefulness in written and spoken expression.

III. INITIATING ACTIVITIES

The following is a listing of initiating activities:

1. Consider the reasons for reading good fiction. It enlarges our horizons, giving us an understanding of the
lives of people with different cultures, living in other parts of the world and at other times than ours.

2. Introduce the book *Old Yeller* by giving a little of its background. It was written by Fred Gipson in 1956. It was made into a movie by Walt Disney in 1957.

3. Give a brief biography of the author. He was born in Texas in 1898, was reared and now lives in the hill country similar to the setting of the story. He studied journalism at the University of Texas and has done newspaper work. He is married and has two sons.

4. Discuss criteria for evaluating a novel, such as:
   Do the characters seem real? Do people really act as the characters in the novel do? Could this story have happened?

5. A student committee could prepare a bulletin board—perhaps a sketched scene from *Old Yeller*.

6. Briefly discuss the long association of man and dog and reasons for it.

7. The teacher should explain the plan of the unit in coordinating the four areas of language arts around story and text of the novel.

8. Explain routine of short daily drill on grammar and composition as needed.

IV. DEVELOPMENTAL ACTIVITIES

Developmental activities for the unit are outlined as
Read the novel *Old Yeller*. The first chapter might be read aloud by the teacher. Class time would be given to finishing the book, interspersing silent reading with some oral reading.

II. List, on the chalkboard, suggestions from the class of individual and small group activities to enrich the unit.

Those might include:

A. Panel or round table discussions on such topics as:
   1. Courage, as shown by Lama and Travis
   2. Comparison of the Coates' family life with present-day family life
   3. Standards for judging a novel
   4. Comparison of Travis' work responsibilities with those of the boys in the class
   5. Travis' sensitivity to beauty

B. Oral reports, some requiring reference reading, about:
   1. Texas history
   2. Hydrophobia
   3. The long association of man and dog, the proof that has been found, and the reasons for this association.
   4. Figures of speech in *Old Yeller* and their contribution to its literary value
   5. Foods the Coates family ate, and reasons for
regional preferences

C. Art work such as:
   1. A mural for the bulletin board
   2. Sketches of story scenes for a room border
   3. Corn husk dolls
   4. A sketch for the cover of a booklet of students' written work

D. Dramatic presentations
   1. Skits developed from story incidents
   2. Pantomimes, having the students guess the characters depicted and their activities

III. Each student choose an interest area. Divide the class into small groups according to the student choices. Seating can be rearranged to facilitate these groups working together in preparing their projects to present to the class.

IV. Discuss Old Yeller--its story-line, incidents, characters, setting, tone, theme, and language. Avoid class discussion of any topics that have been selected by a group until that presentation has been made. Use the discussion sequence described in the Overview, section I of this chapter. Record some of the discussions on tape for future evaluation.

V. Select class reporters to take notes and make summaries of discussions.

VI. Read selected passages of the story to illustrate various
aspects of good writing. Follow the plan given in the
Overview for teaching creative writing. The plan would be
adapted to the writing problems of each class. For example,
if the students needed help in making the action in their
incidents seem vivid, this passage would be helpful:

As I raced past them, I saw the bear lunge up to
stand on her hind feet like a man while she clawed at
the body of the yeller dog hanging to her throat. I
didn’t wait to see more. Without ever checking my
stride, I ran in and jerked Little Arliss loose from
the cub. I grabbed him by the wrist and yanked him
up out of that water and slung him toward Mama like
he was a half-empty sack of corn.

Substitute a weak verb for the forceful one, such as "went"
for "raced," "comp" for "lunge," or "pushed" for "clawed,"
and get the students’ reaction to the change.

If they were using indirect rather than direct quotations,
read further in the paragraph:

I screamed at Mama. "Grab him, Mama! Grab him
and run!"

Change this to: "I asked Mama to grab him and run," and
the students will realize how much more effective a direct
quotation can be than an indirect one.

VII. Have each student write in class at least one composition
on an experience with which he is familiar and which is
related to the experiences of the fictional characters in
Old Yeller.

VIII. Teach correct grammar by daily short practice drill. These
exercises are short excerpts from Old Yeller or student
papers illustrating principles that class work has shown need to be taught. Sample exercises are in section IX of this chapter.

IX. Students will confer with the teacher individually or in groups for guidance on work, as needed.

X. Encourage students to read other good fiction. Make specific suggestions of stories about pioneer boys and their pets. Have students report on books read.

XI. Encourage extra writing.

V. CULMINATING ACTIVITIES

Culminating activities are listed as follows:

1. Class reporters read summaries of discussions. Evaluate them.

2. Interest groups present their projects to the class.

   These presentations can be interspersed through the unit, not more than two a period, and arranged for variety.

3. Some students read their revised writings to the class.

   A committee can select which are to be read orally.

   The class can evaluate them or make suggestions for their improvement.

4. Some papers will be passed around to be read silently.

5. A representative sampling of papers can be mimeographed and made into booklets for the classroom file and the
school library.

6. Students will give individual talks on their selected interest areas, in appropriate cases.

7. Tapes of class discussions and individual presentations may be played back, and suggestions made for improvement.

VI. EVALUATION

Students and teacher would establish evaluative criteria for each type of work early in the unit. The standards would be considered closely following each presentation. The criteria would include:

I. Oral Presentations

A. Could the speaker be heard by all in the class?

B. Was the contribution related to the unit?

C. Were any conclusions or generalizations based on the examples given?

D. If it was the retelling of an incident, was it interestingly and clearly told?

II. Discussions

A. Was there general participation, or was it dominated by a few individuals?

B. Were the contributions related to the problem being discussed?

C. Were the contributions clearly stated?
III. Writing

A. Did the writer put himself into the composition, telling how he felt and thought about the incident?
B. Did he proofread his work and correct any errors in capitalization, spelling and punctuation?
C. Was a variety of sentence patterns used with complete sentences?
D. Were forceful action words used?
E. Was a variety of descriptive words used?
F. Was direct conversation used to make the incident seem realistic?

IV. Group Presentations

A. Did all members of the group contribute to the project?

V. Reading

A. Was the story understood?
B. Was the ability to relate what was read in fiction to previous experience or reading developed?
C. Was there a deeper understanding of self and human nature as a result of coming to know the characters in Old Yeller so well?
D. Was the desire to read other good books stimulated?

VI. In addition to the previous criteria listed, the teacher would consider these questions:

A. Did the story Old Yeller provide a real unity, a natural
relatedness, for teaching the communication skills?

B. Did the students have a high level of interest in the story and activities that developed from it?

C. Did the unit help foster permanent good reading habits?

D. Did it give the students standards of discrimination in reading tastes?

E. Are the students better able to interpret literature?

F. Did the students come to a greater realization that dignity and nobility of character can be found in humble people?

G. Did the students gain a satisfaction in sharing their experiences, thoughts, and feelings in well-written or spoken English?

VII. STUDY AIDS

The following questions could be written on the board prior to the student's reading a given chapter and be read to find the answers, or they could be given after the reading, to be answered either orally or in writing:

Chapter One. What was "cash money" and if the Coates family didn't have enough, how had they been able to provide for their needs?

"Hat" work did Travis have to do when his father left?

Why was it so important that Travis save the "bread corn?"
Why isn't it as important to your family?

Why didn't Travis' father "love him up" when he left?

What bargain did Travis' father make him?

Why didn't Travis want a new dog?

In what ways did Travis show he was growing up in Chapter One?

Chapter Two. Why was Travis so upset by Old Yeller's eating their middling meat?

Chapter Three. Why was killing the deer a triumph for Travis?

Why was it so important that Arliss stay out of the spring water?

That was Travis' attitude toward hunting? Was it a sport to him?

Chapter Four. What risk did the family take when they cut on the rail fence to watch the bull fight?

Chapter Five. In what ways is Arliss an interesting youngster?

Should we have made Arliss tell the truth about catching animals?

Is it possible that Travis could be exhausted from rail-splitting and yet have so much energy in getting to Arliss when he was in trouble with the cub bear?
Chapter Six. What change has there been in Travis by now? What brought it about? What significance is there in his taking Arliss and Old Yeller on a squirrel hunt?

Chapter Seven. Do you ever wonder about the stars as Travis did?

Chapter Eight. What price did the Coates family pay for Old Yeller? Did Travis have any reason, other than Burn Sanderson's notion, to believe that there was a hydrophobia plague?

Chapter Nine. Why did Travis rather enjoy marking pigs?

Chapter Ten. Do you think it believable that a dog would risk its own life to save his master's?

Was Travis in any way responsible for the accident with the range hogs?

Chapter Eleven. Sadly hurt as he was, why did Travis make the painful trip back to get Old Yeller? What admirable qualities did Mama have at the time of the accident?

Chapter Twelve. What work did Mama have to do? How did Travis' accident make life harder for others?

Chapter Thirteen. Why was it such a disappointment to
the Coates family that Spot got hydrophobia?

Chapter Fourteen. What was the main reason that Travis was eager for his father's return?

Chapter Fifteen. Travis had a heartbreaking decision to make in either shooting Old Yeller or risking the lives of the family. Did he make the right decision?

Could this kind of problem exist today? Do family pets ever get hydrophobia now?

Chapter Sixteen. Why wasn't Travis enthusiastic at first about the horse his father gave him?

What was there about the sight of the new pup with the stolen cornbread that changed Travis' feelings?

Should he have continued to be unhappy or happy most of the time? How would each condition affect him and the rest of the family?

VIII. DISCUSSION AND COMPOSITION TOPICS

Some topics can be adapted for individual or group presentation, or for class discussion. Some would involve all four activities—writing, reading, speaking and listening. A few might involve some research, be prepared as compositions, then read or told to the class. A listing follows:

1. Travis hoped to have a horse of his own. What comparable
2. Travis said, "I always like to go see far places and strange sights." Does this interest you? Why are people fascinated by travel?

3. What characteristics did Arliss have that made him so interesting? Describe the character traits of a five-year-old boy you know.

4. Compare Lana's responsibilities with those of your mother.

5. How does the dialect used help us enjoy Old Yeller?

6. In what ways was Travis different at the end of the story from what he was at the beginning?

7. What home medical treatment was used by the Coateses?

8. Would you enjoy knowing Lisbeth? Why?

9. Though the Coates family had many hardships, they had many fine things about their way of life. What were some of them?

10. The family used cowhide for the boy's bed and chair seats. In what other ways did they show resourcefulness?

11. Travis had no boy friends his own age in the story. Some people would think this a lonely life. Did it seem to bother Travis? What made up for his lack of companionship with boys his own age?

12. How do Iowa farmers identify their own pigs? Compare the ways in which the Coates family and Iowa farmers take
17. Travis suffered two types of pain—physical, when he was cut by the hogs, and mental, when he had to shoot Old Yeller. Which do you think was the harder for him?

14. Do you think Travis went to school? Did his parents? Were they well enough educated to take care of themselves?

15. Some people think it is wrong to take the life of any animal. What did Travis think about this? Why did he feel so bad when he had to shoot Old Yeller?

16. What do you think will seem quaint about our life to a boy of 2063 who reads a story about our family life? Will our life be more of a change from his than Travis' is from ours?

18. Does the story Old Yeller remind you of any other books you have enjoyed? Compare them.

IX. GRAMMAR DRILL

These exercises are suggestive of ways in which the story text can be coordinated with whatever grammar drill is needed.

A short practice drill of a few sentences could be done each day at the beginning of the period. Definitions and explanations would be found in the grammar text used by the class.

Exercise 1. Identify each group of words as a compound or simple sentence, or not a sentence.
1. Old Yeller saved my life and I can't go off and leave him.

2. He's bound to be dead, but it would look mighty shabby to go home without finding out for sure.

3. I have to go back.

4. Even if my hurt leg gives out on me before I get home.

5. I didn't think.

6. Anything like that.

7. I just started walking in that direction and kept walking till I found him.

Exercise 2. Find the prepositional phrases.

1. A big diamond-backed rattler struck at Papa.

Papa chopped his head off with one quick lick of his

scythe.

2. The head dropped to the ground three or four feet away from the writhing body.

Exercise 3. Underline each main clause once and each subordinate clause twice.

1. We first heard the bulls while we were eating our dinner of cornbread, roasted venison, and green watercress gathered from below the spring.

2. One bull came from off a high rocky ridge to the south of the cabin.

3. We could hear his angry rumbling as he moved down through
the thickets of catclaw and scrub oak.

Exercise 4. Capitalize all words that should be: the man's name was burn sanderson, he told mama who he was. he said he as a newcomer to salt licks. he said he's come from down san antonio way with a little bunch of cattle that he was grazing over in devil's river country.

Exercise 5. Use commas and quotation marks where needed.

why that old rascal mama said. he's just clawing those pea vines all to pieces.

rush mama i said. don't scare him. i'll have him ready for the pot in just a minute.

'whatcha shootin' at travis? arliss yelled at the top of his voice. 'whatcha shootin' at?'

Exercise 6. gipson used these sentences as they are the language old yeller characters would use. write them as a well-educated character, who spoke standard english, would say them.

1. I had me a dog.

2. I brung you a surprise.

3. I been setting out here all evening.

4. He had done chewed them in two.

5. I don't hardly throw a shadow.

6. After dinner, he sat around for a while talking to me and
They're feeding on pear apples in them prickly-pear flats.

In the morning or late evenings, and those were the best times to come for meat. The killer animals, like bear and panther and bobcats, knew this and came to the licks at the same time. Sometimes we'd get a shot at them. I'd killed two bobcats and a wolf there while waiting for deer, and once Papa shot a big panther right after it had leaped on a mule colt and broken its neck with one slap of its heavy forepaw. It was worth at least a one-eared yellow dog. Don't you?
4. My mind wheeled this way and that, like a scared rat trying to find its way out of a trap. I was just numb all over like a dead man walking.

6. The long ride to Kansas and back had Papa drawn down till he was as thin and knotty as a fence rail.

8. Jumper didn't have any more sense than a red ant in a hot skillet.

10. I was as weak as a rain-chilled chicken.

12. I could have wrung his neck like a frying chicken's.

Exercise 10. How would you say it?

1. bait of blackeyed peas
2. right pretty
3. coon's age
4. shad-bellied horse
5. run clean out of salt
6. take a scare
7. like I'd figured
8. she blessed me out good
9. payed no more mind
10. she kept doing me that way
11. cow brute
12. we'll get in the cabin
13. real jam-up meal
14. younguns
15. pile of trouble
16. if they've got a lick of sense
17. All I could do was turn tail
18. that spooked me
  he was too sorry and no account to keep
  the dog got off scot free
It was the purpose of this study to develop an opus-centered unit for eighth grade language arts classes based on a single longer work of literature.

The unit plan of teaching is a method whereby skills and appreciations of the four areas of language arts, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, can be brought together and taught in a meaningful context. Special interests can be stimulated, and the language arts needs of individual pupils met, so that a higher level of learning can be achieved by this approach.

An opus-centered unit based on a novel is a variation of the unit method with particular advantages. There is a fuller development of character and theme in a novel than in shorter literary works, with opportunities for fuller understandings and more development of the communications skills.

The writer developed a unit based on the novel *Old Yeller* by Fred Gipson. The novel's literary qualities were analyzed and related to the problems of eighth graders. A sequence for class discussion of literature to heighten awareness of human motivation and self-understanding was explained. A method for stimulating writing was described. A variety of related learning activities were suggested. Specific *Old Yeller* based topics for written
work, class discussions, and oral reports were listed. Grammar exercises suitable for the eighth grade were devised from the text of the story.

In these ways a literary opus can be used as the unifying center of meaningful language arts learnings.
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