Poetry: Blues Style

Overview

This lesson focuses on how the blues both operates as poetry and informs the poetry of many prominent African American poets. Students consider the poetic devices and recurring themes in blues lyrics and the significance of the poetry of the blues as part of the African American oral tradition. Given the tie to this tradition, blues music inevitably impacted the writing of many African American poets, both formally and thematically.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Consider songs as poetry.
- Identify poetic devices used in blues songs and African American poetry.
- Consider prominent themes in blues lyrics and how these themes influenced African American poets.

RESOURCES NEEDED

Music
- The Blues Teacher’s Guide CD
  - Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”

Readings
- Langston Hughes’ “The Weary Blues,” “To Midnight at Leroy’s,” “Blues Fantasy,” and “Po’ Boy Blues”

Web Sites
- http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/crossroadblues.html
- http://mathrisc1.lunet.edu/blues/L_Hughes.html
- http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?prmID=1472
- http://www.mtsu.edu/~vvesper/afampoet.htm
Introductory Exercise

As a way to reinforce student understanding of poetic devices, this exercise considers the use of these devices in song lyrics, from both popular music and the blues. Start by asking students to bring in the lyrics to one of their favorite songs (reminding them, of course, of the importance of selecting a song appropriate for classroom study). Using their song selections, have students identify poetic devices within the lyrics. Some devices to include: alliteration, imagery, metaphor, personification, simile, rhyme, repetition, apostrophe, echo, allusion, hyperbole, euphemism, and paradox.

Similar to the devices in the songs brought in by students, a wealth of poetic devices appear in blues songs. To reinforce student understanding of both poetic devices and the use of these devices in song lyrics, write the following blues lyrics on the board. Then, as a class, identify the devices evident in each:

- “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child” simile
- “Sun going down, dark gonna catch me here” personification, imagery
- “They got me accused of forgery and I can’t even write my name” paradox
- “You’ve got a good cotton crop, but it’s just like shootin’ dice” simile, paradox
- “I had religion this very day, but the whiskey and women would not let me pray” internal rhyme, personification
- “I can hear the Delta calling by the light of a distant star” personification, imagery
- “Woke up this morning with the jinx all around my bed” metaphor
- “Go down, old Hannah; don’t you rise no more. If you rise in the morning, bring judgment sure” personification, apostrophe

To further discuss the notion of blues as poetry, play Robert Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues.” As students listen, ask them to write down all of the devices they hear employed. Students should recognize the use of rhyme, repetition, allusion, apostrophe, and personification. If necessary, distribute lyrics to the song, which can be found at [http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/crossroadblues.html](http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/crossroadblues.html).

Conclude the exercise by discussing song lyrics as poetry. How do such lyrics compare to other poetry studied in school? Can all song lyrics be considered poetry? Why or why not? Should teachers incorporate song lyrics into their poetry units?
Focus Exercise

The blues impacted the writing of many African American authors, perhaps most famously Langston Hughes. Pass out copies of the poem “The Weary Blues” without telling students that Hughes is the author. Ask students to analyze the poem as they have examined blues songs in the previous exercise, specifically identifying poetic devices.

Inform students that the “song” they just analyzed is actually a poem by Langston Hughes. Discuss why poets like Hughes would have been so influenced by the blues. Sharing facts from Hughes’ life can help explain Hughes’ connection to the blues.

- Hughes came from humble origins, which gave him an appreciation for poor people who worked hard to rise above their circumstances. These people had a tremendous impact on his poetry.
- Hughes loved African American music, especially the blues, which he listened to in Chicago, New York City, Kansas City, and Washington, DC, clubs. He recalled first hearing the blues in Kansas City with his grandmother when he was six.
- Hughes lived at a time when blues music was popular. He hoped to capitalize on its popularity by connecting his poetry to the blues.
- In 1927, he accompanied author Zora Neale Hurston, a close friend, on travels through the South. She introduced him to rural folk artists while she collected and recorded their folklore. This trip helped Hughes to unite oral and written traditions.

Inform students that several elements of the blues can be found in works of African American literature. Specifically, much of this literature uses the traditional blues song forms (refer to the “Understanding the 12-Bar Blues” essay in this guide for a brief description of blues song form); shares the subject matter of the blues, including hard times, love, oppression, alienation, and the search for identity; honors blues singers, places, and instruments; addresses the suffering of African Americans; incorporates the rhythm and music of African American vernacular speech. After introducing these elements, briefly discuss how “The Weary Blues” uses all four of them.

Finally, distribute copies of three additional poems by Hughes—“To Midnight at Leroy’s,” “Blues Fantasy,” and “Po’ Boy Blues”—which incorporate blues elements. Ask students, in small groups, to analyze these poems in terms of their incorporation of the blues elements discussed above. Discuss student findings as a whole class. [Copies of the first two poems can be found at http://matrisc1.lunet.edu/blues/L_Hughes.html. The third can be found at http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?prmID=1472.]

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

In addition to the Langston Hughes poems studied in the Focus Exercise, many of Hughes’ other poems explore the same themes prevalent in blues lyrics. Introduce prevalent blues themes by showing several segments from The Blues films. After viewing, assign students to research Hughes’ work, looking specifically for poems that illustrate the following themes: North vs. South, physical violence, skin color, death, travel (and the train). Students should be prepared to share their findings with the class in either a written paper or oral presentation. [See Film Tie-Ins section for recommended viewing segments.]

Good starting points for research include:

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Assign students to select a prominent theme in society today and write either a poem or blues song about it. Whether students select a poem or song, they should make sure to incorporate a blues format (AAB blues format is easiest; “Po’ Boy Blues” could serve as a poetry model, while “Cross Road Blues” represents a good blues song model), as well as poetic devices. For students struggling to identify a prominent societal theme, assign them to write their pieces about an event or daily occurrence in life.
Extensions

ADDITIONAL EXERCISE

As the Introductory Exercise points out, the blues are an excellent vehicle for considering poetic devices. Blues lyrics also serve another poetic purpose: the telling of stories. Specifically, blues songs are part of the African American oral tradition, a tradition rooted in slavery in which the stories, emotions, and history of the African American people were passed down through storytelling and songs. Start this exercise by discussing the value of storytelling through song. Ask students why songs provide an effective way for a group of people to recall a particular story, history, and/or cultural lesson.

As a class, listen to two blues songs that clearly represent the storytelling legacy of the blues: “John Henry” and “Stack O’ Lee.” As the students listen, ask them to note what story the song is attempting to commemorate. After students have listened to both songs, divide the class in half, asking one half to recreate the story of John Henry and the second, that of Stack O’ Lee. The groups should write the story in the format of a newspaper article, including as many details as they can recall from the songs. Ask students to share their pieces and then, as a class, discuss which format—blues song or news story—would be easier to pass down orally.

Reinforce the notion of poetic devices, as studied in the Introductory Exercise, by suggesting that part of what makes the songs memorable is the very use of these devices. Pass out lyrics to the class and discuss the devices in each. ["John Henry" lyrics can be found at http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/Grand-Jean/Hurston/LOC/music/jhlyrics.html, with Mississippi John Hurt’s “Stack O’ Lee” lyrics at http://web.tiscali.it/no-redirect-tiscali/weatherthestorm/_private/nt.htm.]

Conclude the exercise by providing students with additional information about each song and accompanying legend. Information to include:

- “John Henry”—The song is about a railroad worker, specifically a steel driver who, also known as a hammer man, was responsible for driving holes into rock by hitting thick steel drills or spikes. This steel driver, John Henry, became famous for trying to drive faster than a steam drill and, in the process, drove himself to death. The story has come to symbolize heroism as well as defeat—the power of one man to rise up against deplorable conditions in order to make his mark, and the power of those very conditions to eventually bring about his, and many others’ downfalls.

- “Stack O’ Lee”—Known by many names—Stagolee, Staggerlee, Stack-o-lee, Stackalee—this legendary bad man was a gambler and a murderer who, according to this version of the legend, killed Billy Lyons and was ultimately put to death in the electric chair. While many believe the legend of Stack O’ Lee started with the incident of a man named Lee Sheldon killing his friend William Lyons, others suggest that the legend may date back as far as the Civil War.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

1. Poets other than Langston Hughes have also been inspired by the blues. Assign students to research one of these African American poets, specifically considering the person’s connection to the blues and use of blues elements in his work:

- Sterling Brown
- Countee Cullen
- Etheridge Knight
- Sterling Plumpp

Students should present their findings to the class, making the connections between the poet and the blues and sharing pertinent poetry.
2. Blues songs capture issues, incidents, and struggles important to the black community. Ask students to individually identify a song—blues or otherwise—that captures some element of African American history, past or present. Some suggestions include:

- Tommy Johnson, “Canned Heat Blues” substance addiction
- Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit” lynching
- Charlie Patton, “High Water Everywhere” the 1927 Mississippi River flood
- Bob Dylan, “Hurricane” racist police force
- Lenny Kravitz, “Mr. Cab Driver” racial profiling
- Chris Thomas King, “Da Thrill Is Gone From Here” life in inner-city America

Once students have selected a song for study, they should investigate the issues and historic events behind the song. Student research can be presented in a poster, which includes the song’s lyrics and facts about the song’s historic background.

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Writer Zora Neale Hurston, in reflecting upon African American folklore as a whole, remarked that it represented “the greatest cultural wealth of the continent.” Assign students an essay in which they agree or disagree with Hurston's comment, using blues songs as evidence.

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Readings

Web Sites