Crossroads Blues

Overview

The crossroads—and the decisions made and entities met there—are a common theme in literature, pushing readers to examine the choices and encounters that shape life experience. The theme has also been explored in blues music, most famously by Robert Johnson, who, according to bluesman Son House, must have “sold his soul to play like that.” This lesson uses Johnson and his music as an entry point into the study of crossroads literature.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- Recognize the crossroads as a prevalent theme in literature, blues music, and world mythology.
- Analyze the decisions made by people, fictional and real, when at the crossroads.
- Explore the depiction of the devil and the bargains made with him in music and in literature.

RESOURCES NEEDED

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

Readings
- Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken”
- Gwendolyn Brooks, “We Real Cool”

Web Sites
- http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?pmiID=1233
Introductory Exercise

Start by asking students what they think of when they envision a crossroads. Encourage them to consider a crossroads in literal terms—a place where two roads intersect—and figurative terms—a place where two options stand before a person. Suggest to students that in figurative terms, a crossroads implies significant or weighty decisions (life-altering/determining) that must be made; in other words, the term probably wouldn’t be used to describe a student’s decision about what to have for lunch.

Ask students to complete a journal entry in which they describe a time that they stood at the crossroads. The writing should include what options existed, what went through their minds in weighing the options, what choice they made, and what the consequences of the choice were.

The notion of life’s intersections is common to music, as well as literature. Introduce this point by playing the segment in Warming by the Devil’s Fire that reenacts Robert Johnson at the crossroads. Inform students that this segment refers to perhaps the most famous song dealing with the crossroads, Robert Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues.” Distribute the words to this song and play it for students. After listening, discuss the song’s literal and figurative meanings. To encourage students to think figuratively, have them consider the lines:

■ “Asked the Lord above, ‘Have mercy now; save poor Bob, if you please.’”
■ “I’m standing at the crossroad, babe. I believe I’m sinkin’ down.”

By focusing on these lines, students should pick up on the idea that the speaker is worried about his soul because of a willingness to deal with the devil; the crossroads thus represents the choice either to deal with the devil or to turn away. Once the figurative meaning has been discussed, ask students what decision they think the character in the song makes. Does he go down the path with the devil or stay on the “righteous” road? What evidence supports either interpretation? To help students answer this question, distribute the lyrics to another Johnson song, “Me and the Devil Blues.” Ask students whether these lyrics help finish out the story begun in “Cross Road Blues.” [See Film Tie-Ins for detailed film information. Lyrics to both Johnson songs can be found at http://www.deltahaze.com/johnson/lyrics.html.]

Instruct the class about the legend surrounding Johnson as someone who did indeed sell his soul to the devil in order to become an amazing musician. This legend was fueled by the fact that he possessed amazing musical talent and skill, he had the “evil eye” (most likely a cataract), and his guitar teacher, like Zimmermann, supposedly learned to play guitar at night sitting atop tombstones in old country churchyards. The legend was also supported by a statement made by bluesman Son House, who once said about Johnson, “He sold his soul to play like that.”

After providing this background, assign students to complete the story begun in “Cross Road Blues.” Students can either write additional verses to the song or compose a narrative conclusion.
Focus Exercise

The concept of the crossroads as a place where one makes important decisions is not foreign to American poetry. This exercise explores the idea by asking students to consider two poems with a crossroads theme. First, ask students to read Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken.” As a class, analyze the poem, considering tone and prominent poetic devices. Then, consider the theme of the poem—both literal and figurative. Questions to consider when thinking about the poem’s figurative meaning:

- Does the speaker think that he/she will ever be able travel the other path? Why not?
- Why do you think he/she might be telling the story with a “sigh” in the future?
- What does the speaker mean by “that has made all the difference”?
- What less-traveled paths can you (students) choose to take when at life’s crossroads?

Contrast this with Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “We Real Cool.” This poem provides a nice contrast to Frost’s in how it discusses what happens after the crossroads. Discussion questions can include:

- What might the crossroads in this poem have looked like? What paths do the characters face? What factors might determine their options and motivate their decisions?
- What point does Brooks make about the choices of the characters in the poem?
- Do the characters in this poem take the path less traveled? Why or why not?
- Have you faced decisions similar to the characters in this poem?

[The poem can be found online at http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?prmID=1233.]

Conclude by asking students to critically examine what societal, economic, and cultural factors might inhibit the characters in “We Real Cool” from taking the more promising road less traveled.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Legends like that of Robert Johnson and others such as Tommy Johnson and Peetie Wheatstraw have resulted in the blues being labeled “the devil’s music,” contrasted frequently with gospel, or “God’s music.” Introduce this idea by showing the beginning of Warming by the Devil’s Fire, which suggests that the blues is what the young boy in the film needs to be “saved from,” and/or the segment “Saturday Night Sunday Morning” from the film The Road to Memphis, in which Bobby Rush discusses the relationship between church music and the blues. After this introduction, assign students to research:

- The history of the blues’ association with “the devil’s music.”
- Those responsible for making the connection between the blues and “the devil’s music.”
- The feeling in the blues community about the blues being “the devil’s music.”
- Blues lyrics that connect blues with sin, evil, and the devil.
- Blues lyrics that contradict the term “the devil’s music” in their thematic elements.
- The relationship between blues and gospel.

Ultimately, most bluesmen reject the connection between the blues and the devil. Ask students to be prepared, with evidence, to support and to refute this association in a paper or in a class debate.

Good starting points for research include:


SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

The phrase “standing at the crossroads,” present in Robert Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues,” is used today in a variety of contexts. Ask students to research a variety of ways the term has been used, starting by searching for the phrase online. Once students have uncovered a variety of meanings, assign them to create posters that explore the term. The posters should include visuals, as well as text. Older students could also write an accompanying paper in which they describe how the term “standing at the crossroads” has become widespread and multilayered.
INTERPRETIVE LESSONS: What Are the Meanings of the Blues?  Blues as Culture

Extensions

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES

1. The theme of selling one’s soul at the crossroads is prevalent not only in blues music such as Johnson’s, but in literature as well. Using the Introductory Exercise as a springboard, teachers can tie Johnson’s predicament in the song to a dilemma facing the character or characters in a piece of American literature. Good short-story choices include Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” Washington Irving’s “The Devil and Tom Walker,” and Stephen Vincent Benet’s “The Devil and Daniel Webster.” Assign one of the stories for homework or divide the class in three, with each group reading one of the selections. As students read, ask them to identify the crossroads, the choice, the implications of that choice, the depiction of the devil (clues to his identity, physical description, symbolic details, etc.), and ultimately how the story comments on temptation, evil, and human nature. In class, compare and contrast the three stories to one another and/or to the legend of Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues,” and “Me and the Devil Blues.” As part of this discussion, the class should consider:

- What outside pressures might impact the choices made by each character?
- How would each of the four assess the choices made by the other three?
- How do each of the four authors depict the devil? How might each writer’s personal and cultural background, as well as his time in history, have impacted these depictions?
- Who, in your opinion, makes the best choice? The worst choice?

Conclude this exercise by having students illustrate the journeys of the characters studied in the literature and songs. The illustration should depict a crossroads and the decisions the various parties make. Students should incorporate quotations from the short stories and song lyrics into the visuals.

2. The exercises described above can be modified for a variety of literature dealing with crossroads decisions and/or selling one’s soul to the devil. African American literature like August Wilson’s The Piano Lesson and Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun can be used to further the discussion of crossroads-type decisions people make. Arthur Miller’s play The Crucible could also easily be used, while Sophocles’ tragedy Oedipus provides a contrasting depiction of the crossroads as a location of choice. Robert Johnson’s song “Cross Road Blues” can serve as an introduction to any of this literature.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

While Puritan-influenced Anglo American culture tends to depict crossroads decisions as relating to the devil, many other cultures have gods associated with the crossroads who bear different characteristics. Assign students to research these gods. Research can focus on the crossroad gods of Africa (Eshu or Esu in Yoruban mythology and Legba in Benin mythology), Japan (Chimata-no-kami), Greece (Hermes), or Rome (Janus). Expanding research to include gods of beginnings could allow the inclusion of the Hindu god Ganesha. For each god researched, students should note all of the responsibilities of this god, discover myths associated with the deity, and investigate the god’s societal function. Research should also consider: How do these gods differ from one another and from the Christian view of the devil? What do these differences suggest about how the various cultures view the crossroads? What do these various views of the crossroads imply about each cultures’ differing attitudes toward human choice and responsibility? To assess student learning, you could ask individuals to retell the crossroads story of Young Goodman Brown, Daniel Webster, Tom Walker, or Robert Johnson from the viewpoint of one of the crossroads gods. How would the story change with a different type of crossroads deity involved?

The following book is a good starting point for research:

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Film

Readings

Web Sites