The Soul of a Man

Overview
This lesson, focused on profile writing and its unique characteristics, considers the profiles developed in the film *The Soul of a Man* while also asking students to consider other profiles they are familiar with and to write some of their own. The film’s profiles of three blues musicians provide the basis for complementary activities that ask students to consider the meaning of a man’s soul and how a person’s life exposes the contents of that soul.

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

- Practice note-taking skills while watching a film.
- Understand the difference between profiles and biographies.
- Explore the symbolic meaning of the soul.
- Write personal, literature-based and/or musician-focused profiles.

RESOURCES NEEDED
- Segments from various television profiles (*optional*)

Web Sites
- [http://cockburnproject.net/songs&music/soam.html](http://cockburnproject.net/songs&music/soam.html)
- [http://www.vh1.com/artists/az/lenoir_j_b_/artist.jhtml](http://www.vh1.com/artists/az/lenoir_j_b_/artist.jhtml)
- [http://www.pbs.org/theblues](http://www.pbs.org/theblues)
Introductory Exercise

Many students are familiar with music profiles from MTV or VH1, but most are probably not familiar with the term “profile” and the characteristics of the form. This exercise is designed to introduce students to profiles and to compare them with more traditional biographies. Start by showing the class the segments of the film *The Soul of a Man* that focus on bluesman J.B. Lenoir. As they watch, ask them to record information that they learn about Lenoir from the segments. After viewing, discuss what students learned about Lenoir, then hand out a written biography of him. Ask students how the depiction of Lenoir in the film differs from that of the biography. [A Lenoir biography can be found at http://www.vh1.com/artists/az/lenoir_j_b_/artist.jhtml.]

If you haven’t already done so, suggest that the film version of Lenoir is known as a profile, whereas the written version is a biography. It’s worth noting that profiles can be written, as well as filmed (in case students wrongly assume a difference to be the medium in which the information is created). Assign students to make a compare/contrast chart that highlights the similarities and differences between profiles and biographies.

**Similarities**

*Both tell facts about a person’s life; both highlight important people, places, and events in the person’s life; both focus on struggles and successes; both present the information in an organized way.*

**Differences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profile</th>
<th>Biography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More often topically organized</td>
<td>More often chronologically organized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focuses closely on small amount of information</td>
<td>Includes a large amount of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers interpretation</td>
<td>Presents facts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured around a theme</td>
<td>Structured around factual information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based largely on observation and interviews</td>
<td>Based largely on research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative and entertaining</td>
<td>Informative, less emphasis on entertaining</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclude this exercise by asking students to discuss the profiles they viewed the previous night for homework. Assign prior to starting this exercise. MTV, VH1, Fox Sports, and *60 Minutes* are all good places to find profiles. Discuss how the viewed profiles illustrate the profile characteristics discussed in class.
Focus Exercise

The title of Wim Wenders’ film The Soul of a Man suggests a theme around which the film’s profiles are focused. This exercise explores the idea of a human’s soul, using song lyrics, the film, and literature. Start by asking students to write out a definition for “soul.” Then, read a dictionary definition that defines soul as largely synonymous with self. Other common synonyms are spirit, courage, life, and ardor. Ask students, given these definitions, to share what they think the soul of a human represents.

Hand out lyrics to the Blind Willie Johnson song “The Soul of a Man” (featured in the film). Ask students what the song is about, how it relates to the class discussion, and what literary devices are employed in the song. If you haven’t already watched the J.B. Lenoir segments of the film, view them now. If you watched them in the Introductory Exercise, review them with students briefly. After viewing and/or reviewing, ask students:

- What is the theme of the profile? What unique perspective on Lenoir does the director present?
- Does the director suggest an answer to Johnson’s question “What is the soul of a man?” for Lenoir? Or, does he support the song’s notion that the soul of a man—and Lenoir’s soul, in particular—is impossible to define?

[Lyrics to Johnson’s song can be found at http://cockburnproject.net/songs&music/soam.html.]

Conclude this exercise by asking students to compose a piece of writing which describes either the soul of a character in a book they are currently reading, using quotations to support their assertions, or their own soul.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The Soul of a Man, in addition to profiling the life of J.B. Lenoir, profiles two other bluesmen: Blind Willie Johnson and Skip James. Ask students to research the life and music of one of these two men. Students should read a variety of print and Web sources on their performer, read a variety of song lyrics written by the artist and, if possible, listen to this person’s music. Once students have compiled ample information, they should write a short profile of their musician, making sure to focus on a particular theme. When they’ve finished writing these original pieces, view the profiles from the film and then discuss how Wenders’ view of the performer was similar to and different from their own.

Good starting points for research include:

- The Songs and Artists at http://www.pbs.org/theblues

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

Many colleges and universities ask students to write a personal essay as part of their application. People reading these essays don’t want to read straight biography after straight biography, so you can suggest to students that writing a personal profile could help their applications stand out. Assign students to write such a personal profile, focusing on some theme in their life. Regardless of their grade level or college ambitions, this piece could be of use in the future, either in the college-application process or in a job application.
Extensions

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Willie Dixon has said, “The blues is the facts of life.” Using this statement, have students research the life and the songs of Johnson, James, and Lenoir. These songs can include, but should not be limited to, songs in the film. Students should also research the time periods during which the musicians lived. Following their research, ask students to either agree or disagree with Dixon’s assertion, using historic information, song titles and lyrics, and facts from each musician’s life for support.

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

The narrator at the end of The Soul of a Man comments that the two men featured in the film, Skip James and J.B. Lenoir, both left a legacy. Assign students an essay in which their thesis focuses on what they believe that legacy to be, using biographical information, as well as music to support their assertions.

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Readings

Web Sites