

This activity is a part of an interdisciplinary unit about the birth and migration of the Blues from the MS Delta, into our culture, and into our own lives.

Prior to these activities students will have:

- Discussed and explored through art, movement, OR various genres of writing the universal concept of 'blue' as a mood, an emotion, a feeling that unifies all humans
- Read WC Handy's firsthand account of hearing the blues for the first time while waiting at a train depot in Tutwiler, MS.
- Read/listened to/discussed various blues poems and songs from the likes of Langston Hughes and Robert Johnson. After studying "Crossroad Blues" students will have written about a time in their lives when they have come to a critical *crossroads*, described that issue and how they ended up resolving it.
- (In Earth Science class) read about the MS River, the alluvial plane, levees, and the dynamics of current, force, etc.
- (In SS class) read and viewed primary source accounts of the Levee break of 1927

This lesson is designed for a 60 – 90 minute block of time. It can easily be adapted to 2 class periods.

Essential Questions for English component:

1. How do blues musicians utilize the MS River levee in their poetry/songs?
2. What literary elements can we identify and interpret in their songs/poems?
3. How can we apply the metaphoric concept of a levee or levee break to our own lives?

Procedure:

After reviewing with the students the concepts and facts revealed and discussed in their SS and science classes introduce the concept of the levee and the levee break of 1927 as theme for blues songs.

Distribute lyrics (below), read aloud having individual students read a stanza, then play the Memphis Minnie version of the song while class follows along.

Note: **highlighted** phrases in both songs denote literary concepts to explore.

When The Levee Breaks

by Memphis Minnie

If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break
If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break
And the water gonna come in, have no place to stay

Well all last night I sat on the levee and moan
Well all last night I sat on the levee and moan
Thinkin' 'bout my baby and my happy home

If it keeps on rainin', levee's goin' to break
If it keeps on **rainin'**, levee's goin' to **break**
And all these people have no place to stay

Now look here mama what am I to do
Now look here mama what am I to do
I **ain't got nobody** to tell my troubles to

I works on the levee mama both night and day
I works on the levee mama both night and day
I ain't got nobody, keep the water away

Oh cryin' won't help you, prayin' won't do no good
Oh cryin' won't help you, prayin' won't do no good
When the levee breaks, mama, you got to lose

I works on the levee, mama both night and day
I works on the levee, mama both night and day
I works so hard, to keep the water away

I had a woman, she wouldn't do for me
I had a woman, she wouldn't do for me
I'm **goin' back to my used to be**

It's a mean old levee, cause me to weep and moan
It's a mean old levee, cause me to weep and moan
Gonna leave my baby, and my happy home

After listening ask:

1. What is the basic, historical story here?
2. What problems, both literal and figurative, does the narrator seem to have? How do you know? Cite the lyrics that showed you that.
3. What is the *tone* of voice used throughout the song?
4. What **images/imagery** supports that observation?
5. By using the idiom **goin' back to my used to be** what is the narrator planning to do?
6. Where can we locate an example of *personification*?
 - a. What human characteristic has the narrator given the levee?

If time allows play the Led Zeppelin version of this song and compare/contrast the two.

Transition – let's take a look/listen to another blues song about the levee. This one written by a contemporary blues musician, Little Toby Walker.

Follow procedure as above.

Son Of A Mule Skinner Man – Little Toby Walker

Up from the river comes a **motherless child**
Working on the levees since the tender age of nine
Crusty old shoes and a ragged gunny sack
Lightin' in his eyes and the **wind at his back**

Chorus:

He was the son, Son of a Mule Skinner Man
He labored in the Delta, **leaving his blood on the land**

Scarred from the Delta, **hardened by the sun**
He saw 50 years of **hardships** by the age of 21
In the wash of Mississippi where the fields of cotton grows
Sweat glistened on his back as he worked between the rows

Chorus:

The gangs that worked the levees, sure were pretty mean
And that old Charley Moody was the **bully of the stream**
One day he drew his pistol, several shots were fired
When the smoke had cleared, that skinner's son lay dying

Chorus:

They laid his body in shallow grave
The spot long forgotten in a row that tractors made
But up in the heavens, where the canebrakes meet the sky
If you listen closely you can **hear the angels cry**

Chorus:

After listening ask:

1. What is the basic, historical story here? How is it similar/different to the previous song?
2. What problems, both literal and figurative, does the 'son' seem to have? How do you know? What **images/imagery** supports that observation?
3. How is Charly Moody described? What evil deed has he perpetrated?

Post song discussion/transition:

Students should have their journals at the ready.

Distribute a handout on which something like below is written. A graphic organizer can be created to assist students in the prewriting of this journal piece as well.

Say: Each of these songs shows the levee as a distinctly different idea. In the first song, the levee is a protective wall that literally gives way to the overwhelming forces of nature. In the second, the levee is a place of painstaking labor and violence where horrible things happen to ‘good’ people.

Let’s consider the levee now in the metaphorical sense and apply it to our own lives.

Consider a time in your life when either

A) Your personal levee broke. This could be a time when emotions/events built up to a point when your levee couldn’t take it anymore and burst.

OR

B) You experienced a startling and somewhat violent occurrence that just should not have happened and *the angels cried* when it was over.

Note: This lesson can be adapted or augmented by swapping for or adding any of the these blues songs.

***Broken Levee Blues* – Lonnie Johnson**

***Greenville Levee Blues* – Alice Pearson (piano blues)**

***Floodwater Blues* – Casey Bill Whedon**