

Audra Rys
Berne-Knox-Westerlo High School
Albany (Berne), New York
NEH Summer Seminar

Gospel/Blues Music in Literature: The Mix of Religion and Life

Overview

Part I-In the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* the two main characters, Scout and Jem, go to services with Calpurnia, their maid (mother figure). Both children learn valuable lessons about life and society on this day. One of these lessons has Gospel music as its background and shows the children the difference and difficulty of being African-American in the Jim Crowe South. This lesson will expose students to Gospel music, its history in the South, and the cultural story of the 1930s in the songs themselves. Students will also relate the Gospel music to songs they might sing in their own churches or services.

Part II-To extend the lesson and to show the connection/progression in musical history of the Delta, the Blues will be discussed as a musical genre. Students will come to understand how Gospel and the Blues shaped the lives of African Americans in the South during the 1930s and after. They will also be able to make the connection to their own lives today and how much of the music and even they enjoy had/has its roots in the Delta.

Standards

NYS Standards in Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking for Information and Understanding

Essential Questions

What are the elements/story of Gospel Music in the Delta and the South during the 1930s/40s?

What is the history of Gospel Music?

What role did religion play in the lives of African Americans?

How was Gospel music the basis and the antithesis of the Blues?

How did the Blues shape and reflect the lives of African Americans in the Delta?

What is the connection of either Gospel or Blues music to your lives today?

Lesson 1-Gospel Music in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Procedure:

Students will read Chapter 12 where Jem and Scout go to Calpurnia's church (First Purchase) with her.

Students will discuss what Scout learns by going to the service in small groups and then as a whole group discussion.

*Students should realize that Scout learns that although the sermons are basically the same as in her church, the music is different: Zeebo gets up and sings/reads a line from the hymnal and the congregation repeats what he says. Cal explains that this is called "linin" *

Students will break up into groups of no more than 4 (ideally 3) and read within their groups "Like a River Flowing with Living Water" by Joyce Marie Jackson (<http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/Festival1997/likeariv.htm>) about worshipping in the Mississippi Delta; writing the most important facts on large poster paper

Students will tack their posters on the front board and then each group will present one fact to the class about what they read

After students have discussed worshipping in the Delta, they will each write a brief paragraph about how the research compares and contrasts to what they read in *To Kill a Mockingbird* in their reading logs.

Lesson 2

Students will listen to examples of Negro spirituals and other gospel music from the 1930s and 1940s.

Rev. A.W. Nix "Black Diamond Express to Hell"

The Staples "Amazing Grace" & "This Little Light of Mine"

Some Negro spirituals

Students will discuss in groups of two or three, the important components/elements of Gospel music. Within their groups, students will read "Mary Gordon" and "Reverend Issac Thomas" from *Give My Poor Heart Ease*. Whole group discussion follows including a discussion of why music was important to the African-Americans during slavery and in the 1930s which is when *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes place.

Students will then think about their own worship or possible worship if they do not go to services and write in their reading logs how the Gospel music of the South is similar and/or different to the music they sing today in church services.

Allow time for discussion of this after the students finish.

Lesson 3

Students will use the laptops to research some of the history of blues music using the PBS website <http://www.pbs.org/theblues/roadtrip/deltahist.html>

Students must come up with 10 written facts about what they have researched.

Whole class discussion of facts

Students will spend a class period listening to Blues of the Delta(using the laptops) and choose one song to present to the class.

Presentation must include playing the song. Explaining why the song is a good representation of the Blues. Explain why the song was significant for them in that they chose it.

Final Assessment

Students will write a short paper (1-2 pages typed) making the connection of Gospel and Blues to the music they choose to listen to today.

***Optional Presentation**-playing examples of music they listen to and its connection to the Blues*

Sources

Ferris, William. *Give My Poor Heart Ease*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

Jackson, Joyce Marie. "Like a River Flowing With Living Water: Worshipping in the Mississippi Delta". Articles from the Festival of American Folklife Program Book.
<http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/Festival1997/likeariv.htm>

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*.