

AP English and American Government Joint Unit on Civil Rights and the Poetry of Langston Hughes

Cynthia Webb/Summer 2010

This unit would take place over a period of several weeks. English meets four times a week and American History meets three times a week.

Essential Questions:

What are our moral obligations to our fellow human beings in regard to civil rights?

How does Langston Hughes's poetry use elements of the blues and for what purpose?

How does poetry and music embody our most important ideas?

Materials:

AP Literature and Composition, poems and essay by Langston Hughes and short biography of him

The American Promise, section on civil rights movement

Blues songs

Material collected from NEH workshop "The Most Southern Place on Earth"

Evaluation:

Formative evaluations: class discussions, quizzes on readings, short responses to poems and songs, short writing assignments

Final evaluation:

Written essay exam in US History on Civil Rights Movement (a required *Klausur*)

Written essay exam in English (a required *Klausur*)

Understandings to be expressed in History exam: The basic facts of the civil rights movement as set forth in readings and discussions, along with an understanding of how the oppression leading up the civil rights movement gave rise to cultural expressions from the blues to the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance

Understanding to be expressed in English exam: A basic understanding of the structure, relevance, and themes of the blues and of Langston Hughes's poetry. A well-thought out comparison of the two in terms of structure and emotional content

and a discussion about how the purposes served by the two forms, the differences and similarities.

Sample Lesson Plan for English class

Objective: How can we begin to understand the blues and their importance in relation to the civil rights issues we have been studying in early 20th century history?

Do Now: Listen to the music playing and write in your journal whatever comes to mind.

Follow up: Students share their responses. Teacher will guide discussion to highlight sadness, simplicity of music, rhythm, repetition. Some of the students are fairly sophisticated in music studies and may come up with more. Some of the more simple questions would be: Is it sad or happy? How does it make you feel?

Teacher then reveals the name and time of the recording and tells the students that this is an example of Delta blues.

Teacher ask what was happening historically at this time regarding race relations.

Teacher shows a map of the Delta on the whiteboard and explains how the situation in the Delta fits in with the discussion of cotton-growing in the South which has already been discussed in depth in the History class.

Sharecropping has already been discussed in detail, but the variations in the practice in the Delta will be presented at this time.

Students will pair off and discuss the reasons why the blues might have originated in the Delta.

Students then get in groups of four and combine their ideas.

Groups share their ideas with the class.

Conclusion: Teacher plays another blues song and ask the student to begin to consider ways in which it might be related to Langston Hughes' poetry.

Homework: Students bring in a list of similarities and differences between Hughes' poetry and the two blues songs they have heard.

Evaluation: The teacher should evaluate the class participation to determine whether the students understand the direction the content is taking or whether she needs to go back and reinforce some of the basic information.

