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11th Grade U.S. History / English Cross-Curricular Lesson

Subject/Topic Taught: History and Language of the Blues

- I. Theme: Crossroads in the Blues and today

- II. Essential Questions:
 - How does the music of the blues reflect the social and economic situation of the Mississippi Delta’s African American population after Reconstruction?
 - What connections can students draw between the crossroads faced in the Mississippi Delta and those in their own lives?

- III. Learning Objective: Students will be able to analyze lyrics of blues songs and interpret the historical context as well as the literary device of using metaphor to reflect a theme.

- IV. Procedures
 - a. Introduction/Motivation: Discussion of the following questions:
 - i. What is a crossroad? Brainstorm.
 - ii. What was one crossroad you faced in your life? Where did each road lead? How did you make the decision? What was the outcome? What crossroads do you expect to face in the future?
 - b. Study/Learning:
 - i. Ask students the day before to bring in their favorite song lyric. Share-out of what those lyrics mean. What themes or metaphors appear in their lyrics? How do they reflect social norms and economic conditions of life today?
 - ii. Short presentation and discussion using the following images to explain the history of the blues as musical form. Connect the lives of sharecroppers to the decisions and crossroads they may face as prejudice and industrialization affect their lives in the 20th Century.
 1. Cotton fields/Plantations
 2. Sharecroppers
 3. Churches
 4. Blues Musicians
 5. Juke Joints
 6. Great Migration photos
 7. Read the lyrics from Robert Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues” and identify the literary device of using metaphor to reflect the theme and meaning of the song. Discuss how the lyrics connect to the plight of African American sharecroppers.

Activities:

1. As students read, they will circle the most important words in the song. Short discussion on why students chose those words.
 2. Students will choose the most important two lines in the song and analyze the meaning of these lines.
 3. Write one sentence on what they think is the main idea of the song.
 4. Answer one of the following critical questions in a structured paragraph:
 - What does Robert Johnson “going to the crossroads” reflect about time period he was singing in?
 - Why does Robert Johnson go to the crossroads?
 - What is the “crossroads” a metaphor for? How does the metaphor reflect the theme of the song?
 - Why does he end the song with the words “babe, I’m sinking down”?
- c. Culmination: Discuss connection of the blues to modern music, both in musical styling and themes. What themes would come up in a modern “blues” today?

V. Materials/Resources:

- a. Slide Show
- b. Copies of Lyrics

VI. Evaluation related to objectives: Write lyrics to your own blues song that a sharecropper could have played in the early 20th century OR a blues song about a current theme in society today. Identify a metaphor to reflect that theme in your song. Share songs in a blues “concert” the following day in.

Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”

I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
 I went to the crossroad, fell down on my knees
 Asked the Lord above "Have mercy, now save poor Bob, if you please"

Yeoo, standin' at the crossroad, tried to flag a ride
 Ooo eeee, I tried to flag a ride
 Didn't nobody seem to know me, babe, everybody pass me by

Standin' at the crossroad, baby, risin' sun goin' down
 Standin' at the crossroad, baby, eee, eee, risin' sun goin' down
 I believe to my soul, now, poor Bob is sinkin' down

You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
 You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown
 That I got the crossroad blues this mornin', Lord, babe, I'm sinkin' down

And I went to the crossroad, mama, I looked east and west
 I went to the crossroad, baby, I looked east and west
 Lord, I didn't have no sweet woman, ooh well, babe, in my distress