

Connecting to Literature through Music



The Rationale

Work with literature can come in many different forms. Sometimes we read and then sit around and simply discuss what we read. This certainly has its value for some, but for others it lacks what is needed to get them truly engaged with the literature—truly thinking about it, working hard to interpret it, making it personal and meaningful. Good literature touches on what it means to be human on many levels. It is rich in meaning and has significance beyond the moment.

Last week, we used dramatic activities to work with and connect with the literature we were studying. This week, we will use music. With hope, this activity will lead to greater appreciation of the theme we are exploring as well as an appreciation and understanding of the literature on both intellectual and emotional levels.

The Activity

This activity will be completed collaboratively with your peer groups.

STEP #1: Listening to Men, Women, and the Blues

Most blues songs are about the relationships between men and women, as are many songs in American popular music. But blues artists have always addressed love with a directness and realism absent in many mainstream songs. Between 1923 and 1945, women blues singers in particular offered a powerful alternative to the narrow, mainstream image of women as domesticated wives and mothers, creating a new feminism that drew on the fight for women's rights in the voting booth and the work place that took place between 1913 and 1919, and prefiguring the later women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. By looking at both men's and women's performances of the blues, you can learn much about sexual differences, identity, changing gender roles, and patriarchy throughout American history. In this step of the activity, you will listen to a number of blues songs. Listen carefully to each as they are played in class considering the following questions as you listen. Jot down notes as you listen.

- What are the circumstances in the song? Who is to blame for the problems between the couple?
- How are men and women portrayed in the song? Specifically, how are the actions of men and women portrayed?
- What gender stereotypes, if any, are evident in the song?
- How, if at all, does the song present an alternative to gender stereotypes?

STEP #2: Making connections to the reading

Now, as a group, I want you to consider the literature we are studying within this unit. Your group will be assigned a specific selection for this step of the activity. For your selected piece of literature, consider the following questions as a group and be prepared to share your findings with the class.

- What are the circumstances of the work?
- How does the work portray gender roles and what does it seem to say about these roles? Is it critical? Casual? Indifferent?
- Describe the significance of this work of literature as it pertains to the roles of men and women. Is there a point to be made?

STEP #3: Making Musical Links

As a group, discuss some of the music you enjoy listening to and think of some songs you know that address in some way the roles of men and women in our society/culture. What does the music reveal or say about these roles? As a group, discuss some options and then agree on one song you'd like to bring in to share with the class.

For our next class meeting, bring in the song. Your group will play a thirty second clip from the song and then present briefly to the class, answering the following questions.

- Why did your group select this song?
- How does it portray gender roles? What does it say about these roles?
- Does the song refute or present an alternative to what we saw in the literature? Does it reinforce or present something similar to what we saw depicted in the literature? Explain with specific examples from both the song and the literature.