



Identity, Oppression, and Protest:

To Kill a Mockingbird and the Blues

STANDARDS

Addresses the following
National Curriculum Standards
for the **English Language Arts**

Primary: 1, 2

Secondary: 6, 9

Overview

African American history during the Jim Crow era includes encounters with poverty, racism, disrespect, and protest. Harper Lee develops all four of these themes in her famous 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. To help students understand these ideas, this lesson incorporates the blues and other literature of the time. Ultimately, students will be asked to consider both African American oppression and activism through a variety of lenses.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By completing this lesson, the student will be able to:

- Explore life for African Americans during the Jim Crow era.
- Consider terms of respect and disrespect.
- Analyze the effectiveness of different forms of cultural protest.

RESOURCES NEEDED

Music

- **The Blues Teacher's Guide** CD
 - Big Bill Broonzy, "When Will I Get to Be Called a Man"
 - Muddy Waters, "Mannish Boy"
 - "John Henry"
 - Skip James, "Hard Time Killin' Floor Blues"
 - J.B. Lenoir, "Shot on James Meredith"

Readings

- Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Richard Wright, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man"

Web Sites

- http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/l_m/MWaters/jmeno36.html
- http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/l_m/Broonzy/jmeno06.html
- <http://www.geocities.com/BourbonStreet/Delta/2541/bljlenoi.htm>
- <http://www.nobelprizes.com/nobel/peace/MLK-jail.html>

VIEWING GUIDE

Visit www.pbs.org/theblues for index of film segment start times and lengths.

FILM TIE-INS

Blues Music as Protest

The Soul of a Man (second segment on J.B. Lenoir)

Introductory Exercise

Considering the notion of manhood provides one way to compare the blues to literature about the African American experience. This exercise explores the notion of manhood and what it takes to become a man, using Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Richard Wright's story "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," and two blues songs—Big Bill Broonzy's "When Will I Get to Be Called a Man" and Muddy Waters' "Mannish Boy"—as examples.

Divide the class into six groups, with each group being responsible for one person's definition of manhood. The six people to consider are:

- Atticus Finch *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Jem Finch *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Tom Robinson *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Dave "The Man Who Was Almost a Man"
- Big Bill Broonzy "When Will I Get to Be Called a Man"
- Muddy Waters "Mannish Boy"

Student answers should include:

- Atticus Finch
Atticus believes that manhood should be determined by a person's character and mind rather than by the color of his skin. In Chapters 10 and 11, he makes it clear that manhood is not defined by the strong hurting the weak, which he did when he shot the one-eyed dog.
- Jem Finch
Much of the story explores Jem's coming of age and learning about manhood. In Chapter 10, he clearly equates manhood with power, respecting his father more once Atticus has killed the dog. As the story progresses, he learns more about his father's definition of manhood.
- Tom Robinson
By the end of the story, it is clear that Tom equates manhood with being responsible for one's own life and fate. Plagued with a limp that defies manhood, Tom still makes an attempt to escape the prison in which he has been unjustly placed following the trial.
- Dave
Tired of being treated with disrespect, Dave comes to equate a gun with manhood and respect.
- Big Bill Broonzy
In the song, Broonzy laments the disrespect accorded to him by white society, being called "boy" even into his 50s. He feels that manhood should be defined by what a person has accomplished—going to war, working hard, being educated—rather than by the color of his skin. By doing all of these things, Broonzy feels he has earned the right to be considered a man.
- Muddy Waters
In the song, Waters defines manhood as being respected by being addressed as "man" rather than "boy," being dominant in relationships with women, and being sexually accomplished. It seems that to become a man, Waters would suggest that age plays a role, as well as sexual encounters.

Once student groups have identified their character's or individual's definition of man and found quotations to support their assertions, the class should have a discussion of manhood. Students speak in the voices of the characters they have studied. Ask the following questions and remind students to remain in character as they answer:

- How do you define manhood?
- What does it take to become a man?
- How does society define manhood? Does the definition vary by the color of a man's skin? Explain.

- Does society have its definitions right? Why or why not?
- What would you like to see changed in the way society regards manhood?
- How are women involved in or impacted by your definition of what it takes to be a real man?

This exercise can be concluded by asking students to speak to these questions as themselves, broadening the term “manhood” to “adulthood.” As part of this discussion, consider how society’s definitions may have changed and whether or not race still plays a factor. *[Prior to starting this exercise, make sure students are familiar with all materials to be studied. Wright’s story is in the Norton Anthology of American Literature. Lyrics to Waters’ song can be found at http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/_m/MWaters/jmeno36.html, while Broonzy’s are available at http://www.bluesrock.webz.cz/_m/Broonzy/jmeno06.html.]*

Focus Exercise

Despite the racist society in which they lived, many African Americans in the first half of the 20th century fought against the established norms, asserting themselves even as white society failed to give them respect. This exercise explores examples of such self-assertion. Start by reading the quotation from Chapter 24 of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in which Atticus states, “I guess Tom was tired of white men’s chances and preferred to take his own.” Discuss the meaning of this quotation with students. What does “white men’s chances” refer to? Why might Tom have given up on such chances? What do you think about Tom trying to escape? When a society is unjust, is it okay for a person to break the law and take justice into his or her own hands? *[If students have not previously studied African American history, it would be worth reviewing what life was like for many blacks during the Jim Crow era (late 1800s–mid-1900s) at this point in the lesson.]*

Suggest that many blacks, like Tom, chose to assert themselves rather than to endure racism, oppression, and poverty quietly. Start by asking students to identify other examples of such assertion in the novel. Then, suggest that the blues provided a way for African American musicians to speak out against the conditions in which they lived. To introduce this idea, show the second J.B. Lenoir segment from the film *The Soul of a Man*. Subsequently, ask students to consider why music provided a good outlet for African Americans to express their frustrations. As a class, listen to three blues songs from different time periods to illustrate this point: “John Henry” (early 1900s), “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues” (1930), and “Shot on James Meredith” (1966). Ask students how each song illustrates African American unwillingness to accept the conditions in which they found themselves.

Finally, consider African American activists who took a stand against oppression. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail” would be a good document to consider. Compare the letter, blues songs, and fictional literature as means of protest. Which form do students think would have most inspired African Americans? Which would have had the biggest impact on whites and on the country’s leaders in particular? Which appeals to them most today as a forum for expressing discontent? *[King’s letter can be found online at <http://www.nobelprizes.com/nobel/peace/MLK-jail.html>.]*

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The **Focus Exercise** considers the use of writing and song to address societal inequities. The music of J.B. Lenoir provides a wonderful example of how musicians protested through music. Introduce this idea by watching the second segment on Lenoir in *The Soul of a Man*. After viewing, ask students to research Lenoir’s songs. Specifically have them consider “Alabama Blues,” “Born Dead,” “Eisenhower Blues,” and “Vietnam” (1966 version). Once students read the song lyrics, they should research the references to social injustice in each song. Student research can be presented in a paper or in a visual. Either way, student projects should clearly demonstrate student understanding of how Lenoir’s lyrics openly criticize the racial realities of the country in the 1950s and ’60s.

Good starting points for research include:

- Blues Lyrics: J.B. Lenoir at <http://www.geocities.com/BourbonStreet/Delta/2541/bljlenoi.htm>
- Williams, Juan. *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965*. New York: Penguin USA, 1988

SYNTHESIS AND ASSESSMENT

1. To assess student understanding of life for African Americans in the Jim Crow era, have them write a newspaper editorial about the unjust treatment and lack of respect given to Tom Robinson in the courtroom. Divide the class so that students write for different audiences or perspectives, like a black paper or a white paper, or a Northern or Southern paper.
2. Assign students an essay in which they support the following assertion: Black culture in music and literature reflects the time in which it is written. Proof should include quotations from Lee’s novel and Wright’s short story, blues song lyrics, and historic references.

Extensions

ADDITIONAL EXERCISE

Many of the conditions explored in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, set in the 1930s, are depicted in the film *Warming by the Devil's Fire*. The film is set in 1956, closer to the time the novel was written (1960). Show the film up through the singing of "Dead Letter Blues" by Son House, asking students to record their observations on the following:

- Segregation
- Poverty
- Death
- Unfair "justice"
- Farm troubles

After discussing the above, ask students to identify how the novel explores the same issues. For each issue, have students identify at least one quotation from the book that illustrates it. Conclude the exercise by asking students how much seemed to change for blacks between 1930s, the time period in which the novel is set, and 1956. Do things seem to have improved? If so, what? How?

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

As discussed in the **Introductory Exercise**, "When Will I Get to Be Called a Man" and "Mannish Boy" address issues of respect and dignity. Assign students to research modern songs that address these same problems. Once students have identified four or five such songs, they should:

- Analyze each song's meaning
- Discuss the tone of each song
- Suggest why the song appeals to a modern audience
- State what modern conditions the song addresses

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

Films

- *Eyes on the Prize*. Boston, Mass.: Blackside, Inc., 1986.
- *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*. Berkeley, CA: Quest Productions, 2002.

Readings

- Broonzy, William. *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story*. New York: Oak, 1964.
- De Jong, Greta. *A Different Day: African American Struggles for Justice in Rural Louisiana, 1900–1970*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Kirby, John B. *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism and Race*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1980.
- Litwack, Leon. *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*. New York: Knopf, 1998.
- Sitkoff, Harvard. *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Weiss, Nancy J. *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Web Sites

- *African American History: Activist*. The African American Registry. http://www.aaregistry.com/african_american_history/category/2/Activist.
- *The History of Jim Crow*. Public Broadcasting Station. <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/home.htm>.
- "Jim Crow" Laws. National Park Service. http://www.nps.gov/malu/documents/jim_crow_laws.htm.
- *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*. Ferris State University. <http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/menu.htm>.