



Emotions in Voice: Singing the Blues in Poetry

Level: 10TH or 11TH grade English
11th grade History
HISTORY -ENGLISH-VISUAL ARTS UNIT (3 lessons)

OVERVIEW

Students will be able to analyze blues music and examine its influence on Langston Hughes' poetry. Students will be able to create their own original poetry and drawings inspired by the blues.

Common Core Reading Standards

Key Ideas and Details 11.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

Craft and Structure 11.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they were used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

California State Standards

VAPA Standard 3.7 Analyze the stylistic features of a given musical work that define its aesthetic traditions and its historical or cultural context

English Standard 3.11 Evaluate the aesthetic qualities of style, including the impact of diction and figurative language on tone, mood, and theme, using the terminology of literary criticism.

OBJECTIVES (SWBAT)

1. Identify and describe elements of blues music.
2. Identify how blues aesthetics are characterized in poetic form.
3. Apply blues elements in the creation of a blues inspired poem and/or communicate the themes of a blues poem visually.

Lesson #1

1. Identify and describe elements of blues music.

MATERIALS

- Pen
- Paper
- Music/video clips of Bessie Smith:
 - “Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out”
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MzU8xM99Uo>)
 - “After You’ve Gone”
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCDOr6au_H8)
- “Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out” and “After You’ve Gone” lyrics (p.3-4)
- Blues singers Guided Listening handout (p. 4)
- Poster paper/poster markers

PROCEDURE:

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| 15 minutes | 1. Introduce blues music by providing historical context on the emergence of the blues born out of the conditions of American slavery and the musical traditions of spirituals, ring shouts, work songs, and chants. (See Historical One Sheet) |
| 10-15 minutes | 2. Introduce Blues Elements and Blues Musicians Handouts (p. 3-4).
Introduce Bessie Smith Lyrics and Guided Practice Handouts (p. 5-7). |
| 6 minutes | 3. Play Bessie Smith’s “Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out” (3:00) and “After You’ve Gone” (3:00). |
| 10 minutes | 4. Students will break into small groups: Each group should answer questions from Guided Practice. |

Blues Elements Handout

History

The blues, as it is now known, can be seen as a musical style based on both European harmonic structure and the West African call-and-response tradition. The blues is a haunting, stylistic type of vocal and instrumental music based on the use of 'blue' notes (the intentional 'bending' of a tone in the scale), which gives the blues its characteristic melody and harmony. Blues follows a repetitive pattern, which is usually a twelve-bar structure. The call-and-response format and the use of blue notes can be traced back to the music of Africa. The use of melisma (vocal runs and riffs) and a wavy, nasal intonation suggest a connection between the music of West and Central Africa and blues.

The Blues evolved in the United States in the communities of former African slaves from spirituals, praise songs, field hollers, shouts, and chants. Stringed instruments were generally allowed because slave owners considered them akin to European instruments like the violin. Therefore, slaves who managed to cobble together a banjo (African in origin) or other instruments could play more widely in public. Early blues frequently took the form of a loose narrative, often with the singer voicing his or her personal woes in a world of harsh reality: a lost love, lack of money, the cruelty of police officers, oppression at the hands of white folk, and hard times.

The phrase *the blues* is a refers to having a fit of *the blue devils*, meaning 'down' spirits, depression and sadness. Though usage of the phrase in African American music may be older, it has been alluded to since 1912 in Memphis, Tennessee with W. C. Handy's "Memphis Blues." In lyrics the phrase is often used to describe a depressed mood. The blues influenced later American and Western popular music, as it became part of the genres of ragtime, jazz, bluegrass, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, hip-hop, country music, and pop songs.

- Adapted from New World Encyclopedia,
Blues Entry

<p>"St. Louis Blues" by W.C. Handy</p> <p>I hate to see that evening sun go down I hate to see that evening sun go down 'Cause my lovin' baby done left this town</p> <p>If I feel tomorrow like I feel today If I feel tomorrow like I feel today I'm gonna pack my trunk and make my getaway</p> <p>Oh, that St. Louis woman with her diamond rings She pulls my man around by her apron strings And if it wasn't for powder and her store-bought hair Oh, that man of mine wouldn't go nowhere</p> <p>I got those St. Louis blues, just as blue as I can be Oh, my man's got a heart like a rock cast in the sea Or else he wouldn't have gone so far from me</p>	<p>Lyric Form</p> <p>A A B</p> <p>A A B</p> <p>A A' B B'</p> <p>Refrain</p>
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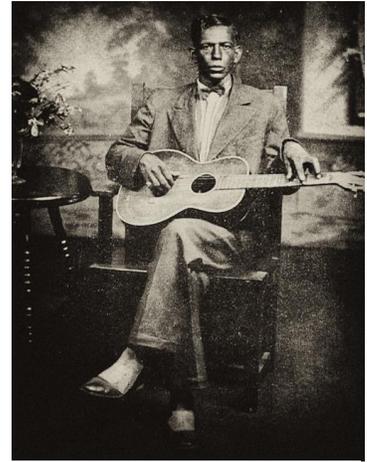
Pioneering Blues Musicians Handout



Bessie Smith (1894-1937)



Son House (1902-1988)



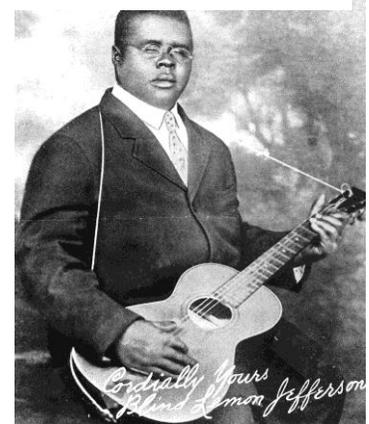
Charlie Patton (1891(?)- 1934)



Howlin' Wolf (1910-1976)



Muddy Waters (1913-1983)



Blind Lemon Jefferson (1893-1929)



Lead Belly (1888-1949)



W.C. Handy (1873-1958)



Robert Johnson (1911-1938)

“Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out” Bessie Smith

Once I lived the life of a millionaire
Spendin' my money, no, I didn't care
Takin' my friends all out for a mighty good time
Buyin' high priced liquor, champagne and wine

Oh, then I fell so low
Didn't have a friend nor a place to go
If I ever get my hands on another dollar again
I'm a hold on to it until the eagle grins

Nobody wants you when you're down and out
Nobody wants you when you're down and out
Down and out, ooh

Soon as I got back up on my feet again
Everybody wants to be my old long lost friend
It's mighty strange without a doubt
Nobody wants you when you're down and out

Said, nobody wants you when you're down and out
Nobody wants you when you're down and out
Down and out, ooh

Nobody wants you, yeah, aah yeah, oh yeah
Nobody wants you, nobody wants you

Nobody wants you when you're down and out
Nobody wants you when you're down and out
Nobody wants you when you're down and out
Nobody wants you when you're down and out

Nobody wants you, yeah, yeah
Nobody, nobody, nobody, nobody wants you
When you're down and out
Oh, nobody wants you

“After You’ve Gone” Bessie Smith

Now listen honey while I'm saying
How can you tell me that you're going away?
Don't say that we must part
Don't break my aching heart

You know I've loved you true for many years
Loved you night and day
How can you leave me, can't you see my tears?
So listen while I say

After you've gone, and left me crying
After you've gone, there's no denying
You'll feel blue, you'll feel sad
You'll miss the dearest pal you ever had

There'll come a time, now don't forget it
There'll come a time, when you'll regret it
Someday, when you grow lonely
Your heart will break like mine and you'll want me only
After you've gone, after you've gone away

After you've gone, left me crying
After you've gone, there's no denying
You'll feel blue, you'll feel sad
You'll miss the best pal you ever had

Lord, there'll come a time, now don't forget it
There'll come a time, when you'll regret it
Someday, when you grow lonely
Your heart will break like mine and you'll want me only
After you've gone, after you've gone away

Guided Practice Handout

Bessie Smith - "The Empress of the Blues"



In 1923, this record which included the popular hit, "Downhearted Blues, sold approximately 800, 000 copies.

- Born April 15, 1894 in Chattanooga, Tennessee.
- Died September 26, 1937.
- In 1912 she performed in the Moses Stokes minstrel show, which ultimately led her to meet Ma Rainey
- In 1923, she married and was discovered by Columbia records while living in Philadelphia
- Collaborated with many other blues/jazz artists throughout her career including Louis Armstrong
- Highest paid African-American performer of her day. Most active in 1923-1928.
- Influenced Billie Holiday and Aretha Franklin

Listening to "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out" and "After You've Gone"

What are some of the lyrics?

Who is she talking about?

Who is she talking to?

Do you agree or disagree with the premise of the song?

Do you feel she uses humor in the song, or is it strictly sad?

What do you notice about the structure of the lyrics?

What are some of the themes in the song?

What elements do you notice in both songs?

Lesson #2

1. Identify how blues aesthetics are characterized in poetic form.

PROCEDURE:

English **Standard 3.7** Recognize and understand the significance of various literary devices including figurative language, imagery, allegory, and symbolism and explain their appeal.

English **Standard 3.11** Evaluate the aesthetic qualities of style, including the impact of diction and figurative language on tone, mood, and theme, using the terminology of literary criticism.

MATERIALS

- Pen/pencil
- Paper
- “Harlem” poem excerpt (p. 8)
- Multiple clips/recordings of the Weary Blues being recited
- Langston Hughes biography (p. 9)
- “Drop Me Off in Harlem” Harlem Renaissance overview (supplementary p.10)
- The Weary Blues handout (p.13)
- Literary Devices handout (p. 14)
- As Befits a Man and When Sue Wears Red (p.15)

- 5 minutes
1. Introduce the topic by asking if anyone has heard of Langston Hughes or the Harlem Renaissance (time frame, styles, people, places). Supplement with images/clips of the Harlem Renaissance and/or the 1920s in the United States (p.8-9).
- 15 minutes
2. Distribute copies of the first stanza of Walter Dean Myers’ poem, “Harlem” (1997) (p.12). Ask a volunteer to read it aloud. Everyone should follow along. Begin a short, introductory class discussion about the Harlem Renaissance based on the poem’s references to migration: What information does the poem provide about where people are coming from? Where are they going? How are they getting there? How could we infer Myers is speaking about African-Americans?

Emphasize 4 key points to get students to understand how the blues has resonated, across time and space, and how it grew out from its Southern roots:

- ❖ African-Americans migrated in large numbers out of the South at the turn of the century for industrial jobs and escape from racist Southern customs
- ❖ New migrants brought their musical traditions with them to Northern cities
- ❖ Concentrated in certain areas largely because of restricted housing and employment, African-Americans began forming distinct communities in cities like New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and St.Louis.
- ❖ African-Americans were deeply disappointed to find that the racism and discrimination they hoped to escape were still prevalent in the North and they lived **de facto** segregated lives.

de facto : ‘by or concurring fact’ in Latin. 3. Exercising power or serving a function without being legally or officially established – from Merriam-Webster dictionary

3. Distribute copies of “When Sue Wears Red” and “As Befits a Man” (p.13). Distribute the Poetic Devices Guide (p.14).

15 minutes

4. Listen & Read:
 - a. Listen to a video of Langston Hughes reciting “The Weary Blues” on a Canadian show in 1958 (3:57)
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uM7HSOwJw20>).
 - b. Listen to another recorded reading of the poem.
<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-weary-blues/>
 - c. Read the poem out loud as a class (p.13).
5. In groups students will complete the handout according to instructions provided at the top of the sheet.

EVALUATION: Review the Weary Blues handout and the Poetic Devices guide.

20 minutes

6. Students will discuss the following questions analyzing the Weary Blues.

What kind of scene does Langston Hughes establish?
How does he reveal it?
What devices are being used?
What effect do those devices have?
How do poetic and literary devices contribute to the blues feel of the poem?

Langston Hughes



James Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902 in Joplin, Missouri. Hughes was raised by his grandmother in Lawrence, KS until her death when he moved to Lincoln, Illinois to live under his mother's care. However, when his step-father got a job in Cleveland, Ohio, the family moved again. Hughes ultimately graduated from Central High School in Cleveland as a distinguished poet, and was influenced by his tense relationship with his father, whom he visited in Mexico one summer, and poets like Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg. Though his father wanted him to become an engineer, Langston was determined to become a poet. He returned to Mexico after graduation in an attempt to convince his father that he should support his education at Columbia towards a writing profession. After some of Hughes' work was published in *Crisis* magazine, his father was impressed and agreed to offer financial support. Hughes only spent a year at Columbia but became a long-term student of Harlem even as he continued his formal education elsewhere and traveled abroad.

Hughes' perceptive and prolific writing about the time and place of Harlem form the basis of what we now know as the Harlem Renaissance. He became friends with the other intellectuals and artists of the time like W.E. B DuBois, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay and James Weldon Johnson. Hughes is credited for creating new forms of writing, which were inspired by jazz and blues culture, to question assumptions about progress in "race relations" and to value the cultural practices and life ways of African-Americans.



Lenox Avenue in Harlem, circa 1920s: Source: [African American Literature \(2011\)](#)



Langston Hughes [far left] with [left to right:] Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, Rudolph Fisher and Hubert T. Delaney, on a Harlem rooftop on the occasion of a party in Hughes' honor, 1924. Source: NYPL

REFERENCE FOR TEACHERS:

HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Drop Me Off in Harlem NYC's Historic Neighborhood

In the early 1930's the great jazz composer/band leader, Duke Ellington wrote a song called "Drop Me Off in Harlem". As the legend goes, he was sharing a cab with a friend who was a lyricist.

"Where to Duke?" asked the friend.

"Drop me off in Harlem," said

Ellington. The friend ended up writing lyrics with those words, and Ellington composed the music. And so the song was born.

It was no wonder that Ellington was headed to Harlem. Harlem had become a hotspot. Everybody was going there.

Early Harlem

Though it might have been hard for Duke to picture at the time, Harlem had not always been hopping with nightlife. A few short centuries before, the only night sounds might have been bobcats and owls. The area was forest and meadow, and home to Native American tribes.

The first European settlers to arrive were Dutch. They named their new village after Haarlem, a city they had left in the Netherlands. When English settlers replaced the Dutch, they kept the name, shortening it to "Harlem". In those days, Harlem was not yet part of New York City. It was small and a separate farming town, far from the bustling life of lower Manhattan, connected only by a road, (now known as Broadway), which had once been a Native American trail.

But of course, New York City grew. The El came to Harlem (elevated trains) – and with the trains came great waves of immigrants who were flowing into the city. Developers couldn't erect new housing – from tenements to townhouses – fast enough. In the 1800s, Harlem welcomed a polyglot population of Jews, Germans, Italians and Irish. Their cultures all bumped up against each other as people learned to live alongside others who spoke different languages, ate different foods and practiced different religions.

But these were all European cultures. In the early days of New York City, people of African descent lived farther downtown. The African Burial Ground recently discovered near Wall Street in 1991 housed remains of nearly 20,000 people buried there during the 17th and 18th centuries. In the mid 19th century, many freed slaves settled in Seneca Village, a thriving community of homes, schools, and churches in what is now the west part of Central Park from 82nd to 88th streets. And at the end of that century, many blacks lived on the Westside, in the 20s, 40s, and 60s. So how did Harlem come to be the large black community that lives there today?

The Great Migration

In the early 1900s, another great migration started. This one did not involve people traveling across the ocean from Europe to America. This was one within America. Blacks who had been living in the South began to come north. When the Civil War ended in 1865, the vast majority of African-Americans lived in the South in states that had been slave-holding. Most struggled to survive on the meager livings they made as rural sharecroppers. However, Blacks soon realized that there was not much economic opportunity in the South, and that the racism there was deeply ingrained. They yearned to escape the South's harsh and punishing Jim Crow laws. The North, on the other hand, was industrializing. It promised factory jobs, service jobs, and life in big cities such as New York, Chicago, and Detroit. And so, in the early part of the 20th century, millions of blacks migrated north. This was a population shift in our country, one we now call The Great Migration. During this same period, people were also arriving from the Caribbean.

The Harlem Renaissance

Many of the migrants ended up in Harlem. When they arrived, something very exciting happened. Sometimes, at certain points in history and in certain places, there is an electric cackle of art and ideas and it sparks into a bright flare of artistic achievement. That happened in Harlem in the years 1919 to the early 30s. It's almost as if a

bolt of lightning flashed, pointed its electric finger at Harlem, and supercharged it. We call that time the Harlem Renaissance. During those years, Harlem was home to a vibrant community of artists and intellectuals. It nurtured prominent writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, famous artists such as Palmer Hayden and Augusta Savage, and progressive thinkers such as W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey. The talented photographer James Van Der Zee was kept busy documenting all the lives of all the well-to-do families living in the proud brownstones of Sugar Hill and Striver's Row.

And the musicians? Their names could fill the page! The new art form called Jazz was in full bloom. People from downtown were flocking to the glittering uptown clubs such as The Cotton Club and Small's Paradise. Should they go to hear Duke Ellington or Cab Calloway? Count Basie or Fletcher Henderson? Ethel Waters or Bessie Smith?

Imagine! All those artists producing groundbreaking work at the same time, all feeding off and inspired by each other. It was a thrilling time to be in Harlem. When Duke Ellington composed the music to the song "Drop Me off in Harlem", he knew he was celebrating something special.

More Changes

But in 1929, the Great Depression hit, and hit hard, all across the country. Suddenly, jobs were scarce as was money, even food. People could no longer spend money on entertainment. Still Harlem continued to be a breeding ground for creativity. In the years following World War II, when the economy again began to grow, the civil rights movement took hold. Harlem, which had come to be

considered the black spiritual and cultural capital of the entire country, was once again electrified by political fervor. preachers used their pulpits to call publicly for an end to segregation, and people were emboldened, demanding their rights. Musically, it was an expansive time as well. In jazz, swing music evolved into bebop. Rhythm and blues flourished giving birth to rock and roll, and evolving further into a style of music called soul. The trends rolled out, and Harlem continued to host them.

El Barrio

After World War II, there were other changes in Harlem. There was a new flow of Spanish-speaking immigrants, many of whom were from Puerto Rico. The eastern part of the neighborhood – from East 96th street-was now called Spanish Harlem. When the writer Piri Thomas wrote his autobiography, *Down These Mean Streets*, the Harlem he illuminated had a new, Latin beat. Latin jazz musicians, such as Ray Barretto and Tito Puente, played alongside and influenced them. Once again, cultures were cross pollinating and it was a fertile time.

What's Next

The history of Harlem is the history of change. As people have flowed into the area and settled, they have enriched it greatly. The culture they have produced has, in turn, flowed out from Harlem and seeded the culture of the entire country, and indeed, of the whole world.

What's next for Harlem? Only time will tell. But if history is any indication we can expect this: the culture it produces, its music and rhythms, its language and poetry will enrich us all.

HARLEM

Walter Dean Myers

They took to the road in Waycross, Georgia
Skipped over the tracks in East St. Louis*
Took the bus from Holly Springs*
Hitched a ride from Gee's Bend*
Took the long way through Memphis*
The third deck down from Trinidad*
A wrench of heart from Goree Island*
A wrench of heart from Goree Island
To a place called Harlem

*East St. Louis, IL

*Holly Springs, GA, MS, NC

*Gee's Bend, AL

*Memphis, TN

*Trinidad is a Caribbean nation

*Goree Island is off the coast of Senegal, a 'point of no return' for some enslaved Africans who would be transported to the New World (the Americas) never to see the African continent again.

Walter Dean Myers is a children and young adults book author who was raised in Harlem.

When Sue Wears Red (1925)

Langston Hughes

When Susanna Jones wears red
Her face is like an ancient cameo
Turned brown with the ages.

Come with a blast of trumpets,
Jesus!

When Susanna Jones wears red
A queen from some time-dead
Egyptian night
Walks once again.

Blow trumpets, Jesus!

And the beauty of Susanna Jones
in red
Burns in my heart a love-fire sharp
like pain

Sweet silver trumpets,
Jesus!

As Befits A Man (1959)

Langston Hughes

I don't mind dying –
But I'd hate to die all alone!
I want a dozen pretty women
To holler, cry, and moan.

I don't mind dying
But I want my funeral to be fine:
A row of long tall mamas
Fainting, fanning and crying.

I want a fish-tail hearse
And sixteen fish-tail cars,
A big brass band
And a whole truck load of flowers.

When they let me down,
Down into the clay,
I want the women to holler:

Please don't take him away!
Ow-ooo-oo-o!
Don't take daddy away!

Poetic Devices

Instructions: Define the following poetic devices and provide an example of each from the poem.

Repetition _____

➤ Example _____

Alliteration _____

➤ Example _____

Simile _____

➤ Example _____

Personification _____

➤ Example _____

Onomatopoeia _____

➤ Example _____

Metaphor _____

➤ Example _____

Hyperbole _____

➤ Example _____

Southern vernacular _____

➤ Example _____

Figurative Language _____

➤ Example _____

Rhyme _____

➤ Example _____

Lesson #3

1. Apply blues elements in the creation of a blues inspired poem and/or communicate the themes of a blues poem visually.

PROCEDURE:

VAPA **Standard 5.1** Create a work of art that communicates a cross-cultural or universal theme taken from literature or history.

MATERIALS

- Colored pencils/crayons/markers/paint for drawing
- Old magazines and papers for collaging
- Glue
- Pencil and paper for writing and editing
- Example of blues art (p.17)

EVALUATION:

1. Create a blues inspired poem. In preparation for composing a blues poem, students should:

- a. consider the devices they would like to use in their poem
- b. compose an outline
- c. use 3 words (adjectives, nouns, verbs) from Hughes' poem

EVALUATION (for poem):

- ✓ Minimum of 2 stanzas
- ✓ Has 3 or more poetic devices
- ✓ Has 3 elements of the blues such as structure, suffering, loss, and phrases or words that describe emotion, melancholy mood, rhythmic pattern.
- ✓ Uses 3 words from Hughes' poem (adjectives, nouns, verbs)
- ✓ Expresses strong, consistent message(s)

Extra Credit: Create a drawing or collage to complement the poem, or a poem to complement drawing or collage. Students may also choose to create a work based on the work of another student. Show students examples of blues art.

EVALUATION (for drawings):

- ✓ Integrates blues elements



Empress of the Blues 1974 [Romare Bearden](#) Born: Charlotte, North Carolina 1912 Died: New York, New York 1988 acrylic and pencil on paper and printed paper on paperboard 36 x 48 in. (91.4 x 121.9 cm.) Smithsonian American Art Museum

EXTENSIONS

Ken Burns Documentary – <http://www.pbs.org/jazz/>

Part 1 on the Blues

W.C. Handy, “Father of the Blues” – Biography

Pictures of instruments – Guitar, fiddle, harmonica, piano, horns

Jelly Roll Morton from Ken Burn’s Jazz Documentary:

http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_morton_jelly_roll.htm– early Blues, stride piano

Field Trips

National Blues Museum – St. Louis, Missouri

Delta Blues Museum – Clarksdale, Mississippi

(Educational Program Links)

What is the Blues (Getty.edu 360)

<http://www.pbs.org/theblues/classroom/essaysblues.html>