



## The Crossroads as a Literary Symbol

### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How have writers, storytellers, and musicians explored the crossroads as a symbol in their work?

#### OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students practice identifying and analyzing symbols in literature by exploring how the image of the crossroads has been used by writers within the African diaspora. Students examine three works: a Yoruba folk legend, Robert Johnson’s song “Cross Road Blues,” and August Wilson’s play Joe Turner’s Come and Gone.*

*Through their examination, they determine the various ways the image of the crossroads has been employed in literature. Finally, students create their own writing inspired by the collages of Romare Bearden which uses the symbol of the crossroads.*



Image: Marion Post Wolcott, Farm Security Administration (Library of Congress)

There are few things more common than a crossroads—each day we are likely to encounter them many times, without considering the experience. And yet, the image of the crossroads has been and remains a powerful symbol. To be at a crossroads often means to be at a place of uncomfortable indecision, at a place where one’s life path might forever change. The crossroads is also a site for encounters, where we come upon friends, strangers, and, in some stories, beings from outside of our reality.

In diasporic communities, the symbol of the crossroads may possess even more significance: for those forcibly displaced from their homelands, traveling through crossroads evokes collective experiences that may define their history.

This lesson examines three literary accounts of the crossroads provided by writers of African descent. The earliest account comes from a Yoruba folktale from West Africa. In this account, Eshu, the Orisha or power that presides over the crossroads, plays a trick on two friends. In American Blues lore, guitarist Robert Johnson meets a being similar to Eshu—often mischaracterized as the Devil—on the crossroads. However, the lyrics to Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues” seem to offer a much more quotidian account of the distress of being a lone traveler on the crossroads. The supernatural and everyday aspects of the crossroads both appear in August Wilson’s play, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. The play revolves around a Black-owned boarding house sheltering people searching for their loved ones after Emancipation. In the drama, the crossroads represents both the daily difficulties confronted by formerly enslaved people in the United States, as well as a more metaphysical space where one is offered meaning, purpose, and possibility.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The symbol as a literary device and its uses
- The definition of the term “diaspora,” and the historical significance of the African diaspora
- The use of the crossroads as a symbol
- Yoruba traditional stories
- August Wilson and his work *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*
- Blues Musician Robert Johnson and his song “Cross Road Blues”

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to identify a symbol in literature and consider the greater ideas and emotions a symbol evokes by examining how Yoruba culture, Robert Johnson, and August Wilson have used the symbol of the crossroads in their work.

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:

- Have you ever heard the phrase “at a crossroads?” What might the phrase mean?
- Can you provide a situation in which someone might use the phrase “I was at a crossroads?”
- What is a crossroads, literally? Why might the geography of a crossroads be a powerful or useful symbol?
- Have you ever encountered a song, story, or other written work that has used the imagery or symbol of a crossroads? If so, how was the crossroads used?

2. Create three columns on the board, labeling one “positive,” one “negative,” and one “neutral.” Ask students:

- What kinds of events might happen to you as a traveler at a crossroads?
- What kind of emotions might you experience at a crossroads, either literally or figuratively?

3. When an emotion or event is named, ask the class which column it would be best positioned, and write the emotion or event in the particular column. (*Alternatively, the teacher could hand each student a few sticky notes, allowing them to write the emotions and events they come up with and posting it in the appropriate column themselves.*)

**PROCEDURE:**

1. Tell students that in this lesson, they will be examining the way the symbol of the crossroads appears in creative expression throughout the African Diaspora. Ask students:
  - Have you heard the term “diaspora” before? Where have you heard it? What might it mean?
2. Show students **Image 1, Diaspora Definition**. Ask students:
  - Can you think of any groups of people that might constitute a diaspora?
  - What kinds of things might people within a diaspora share in common? (for instance, people might share similar music, food, dance, names, style, language, slang, tales, and stories.)
  - What sorts of things might people in the African diaspora have in common? What kind of history might they share?
  - Why might the location of the crossroads be a common symbol among the African Diaspora, or any diaspora?
3. Tell students that they will be splitting into groups to examine works of literature by writers of African ancestry that use the symbol of the crossroads. As they read, ask students to pay attention to how each writer uses the symbol of the crossroads in their work.
4. Split students into groups, and assign each group one of the following stations/handouts:
  - **Station 1: Handout - Yoruba Folk Legend, “Two Friends”**
  - **Station 2: Handout - Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”**
  - **Station 3: Handout - August Wilson, “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone” Excerpt 1**
5. Ask students to respond as a group to the discussion questions in the handout. Pending time, ask students to rotate to new stations and handouts.
6. Pass out **Handout - August Wilson, “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone” Excerpt 2**. Ask students to read the excerpt individually, or stage a dramatic reading as a class. Then ask students:
  - How might this excerpt invoke the symbol of the crossroads? Is the crossroads in this excerpt more literal or metaphorical?
  - What might this excerpt say about what life was like for Black people in the early 1900s?

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Return to the chart the class created during the motivational activity. Discuss with students where the various written accounts of the crossroads they read might best be positioned on the chart. Add each author's account of the crossroads to the chart.
2. Once filled out, review the chart together as a class. Ask students:
  - What similarities and differences do you see between each account of the crossroads?
  - What do these similarities and differences reveal about a literary symbol? Would you say symbols are flexible, or more rigid? Why?
  - Why might a writer choose to use a symbol of the crossroads in their work?
3. Show students **Image 2, “Empress of the Blues” by Romare Bearden**. Tell students that Bearden was an artist, composer, and author who was one of August Wilson's biggest inspirations. Ask students use the image presented as inspiration to write a short story, poem, or song that draws upon the symbol of the crossroads.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Ask students to keep a reading log, and make notes of any symbols they encounter when reading on their own. Ask students to share what they noted after a week of reading.
2. Perform a scene from one of August Wilson's plays. Record it and send to [teachrock.org](http://teachrock.org).

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)*

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Craft and Structure 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)*

Text Types and Purposes 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)*

Comprehension & Collaboration 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Comprehension & Collaboration 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)*

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

## STANDARDS

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in a word meaning.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

### **SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)**

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 9 : Global Connections



## RESOURCES

### HANDOUTS

- Handout - Yoruba Folk Legend, “Two Friends”
- Handout - Robert Johnson, “Cross Road Blues”
- Handout - August Wilson, “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone” Excerpt 1
- Handout - August Wilson, “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone” Excerpt 2