



The Juke Joint: Where Oral Literature Comes Alive

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What role do Blues lyrics and juke joints play in Black American literature and life?

OVERVIEW

In this lesson students will consider song lyrics as a literary form and discover a traditional poetic structure of the Blues. They will then create a “classroom juke joint” and experiment with expressing themselves by writing a Blues.



Image: Marion Post Wolcott

The Blues is more than a musical genre—it is also a kind of literature. In the quote below, writer and activist James Baldwin identifies the Blues as the songs that bear witness to a people’s unlikely survival. In the face of difficult circumstances, the Blues name the hardships of Black Americans who have lived through the specific experience of a people that have withstood systemic oppression and exclusions as well as the general experience of humanity.

“I want to suggest that the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy. Now joy is a true state, it is a reality; it has nothing to do with what most people have in mind when they talk of happiness, which is not a real state and does not really exist. Consider some of the things the blues are about. They’re about work, love, death, floods, lynchings; in fact, a series of disasters which can be summed up under the arbitrary heading “Facts of Life.” -“The Uses of the Blues” by James Baldwin (1964)

“I wanted to anchor Black music and the Blues in joy, which I believe is a kind of radical reading of a kind of music mistakenly understood as being rooted in unbearable misery. Baldwin says, we’ve made this music based on these experiences designed to break us, which means that the blues and its uses or its function as a cultural product is kind of... a stylized way of expressing survival. He also uses the blues to think about Black music as a lived experience and not simply a musicological topic...Blues as a form of social explanation or Blues as an analytical tool through which we can begin to understand the Black experience.” - DJ Lynnée Denise on James Baldwin’s “The Uses of the Blues”

The Blues are often seen through a lens of assumptions. We might assume that they are a relic of the past; that they are sorrow songs; that they are mostly sung by men who also play guitars. But the Blues are musically richer and deeper than any of these simple explanations.

While each listener might interpret the music of the Blues in their own way, the Blues singer and composer uses the lyrics to convey a specific meaning. For this reason, the Blues have inspired writers including Zora Neale Hurston and August Wilson, as well as visual artists like Romare Bearden. We can read the lyrics as literature. This lesson invites students to read song lyrics alongside Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and a poem by a new young poet from Mississippi, Alana Brown-Davis, to find the common threads that connect all three.

In Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the poem by Alana Brown-Davis, students will read about juke joints: informal establishments, like small nightclubs, in the rural South where Black Americans gather to play and hear live music, dance and spend their free time. Students learn about A-A-B form and write and recite or spontaneously perform original Blues in the juke joint that they create in their classroom. The lesson incorporates reflections on the Blues by Black artists including playwright August Wilson, Blues musician Howlin' Wolf, writers James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, and Thomas A. Dorsey, the Bluesman who was Ma Rainey's pianist and arranger before becoming known as the "Father of Gospel Music."

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- About lyrical forms of the Blues
- That the Blues are equally literature, music, and aesthetics
- How to identify the Blues as a throughline in literature
- About the physical space and atmosphere of a juke joint
- The works of Zora Neale Hurston, Alana Brown-Davis, Howlin' Wolf, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Thomas A. Dorsey

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to write Blues lyrics in A-A-B form, know the meaning and function of oral literature in and identify the influence of the Blues on American literature.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:

- Have you ever heard of "the Blues"? What are "the Blues"? Record student answers on the board.

2. Show students **Image 1, Morrison and Wilson on the Blues**. Explain to students that these quotes come from Toni Morrison (1931-2019) and August Wilson (1945-2005), two

Pulitzer Prize-winning American authors who used the present and historical experience of the Black community to create groundbreaking literature. Ask students:

- Where do the ideas we listed on the board match what Toni Morrison and August Wilson said about the Blues? How are they different?

3. Play **Clip 1, Dorsey and Howlin' Wolf on the Blues**. Tell students they will be watching Bluesman Thomas A. Dorsey and Mississippi Blues architect Howlin' Wolf define the Blues. After watching the clip, ask students:

- What are these Blues musicians saying about the Blues?
- Where do the ideas listed on the board match what these musicians are saying about the Blues? How are they different?

PROCEDURE:

1. Play **Clip 2, West African Origins of Blues**. Then share with students that they will be learning about the Blues and writing their own Blues in class.
 - What do you see while reading or thinking about it?
 - What were some of the words or phrases that were new to you?
2. Distribute **Handout – Excerpt from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston**. Ask for volunteers who are willing to read a paragraph each of the excerpt. After the reading, ask students:
 - Which of the characters is new to spending time in the juke joint?
 - What are the activities that take place in the juke joint? Where else are people doing the same thing?
 - Is there anything required to enter the juke joint?
3. Distribute **Handout – “Hidden jukejoint after B.B. King” by Alana Brown-Davis**. Direct students to underline any new words or phrases using their pen or pencil while reading the handout. Ask students:
 - What is the mood of the poem?
 - How does it sound?
4. Distribute **Handout – AAB Form in Blues Lyrics**. Work through the handout as a class. Emphasize to students the pivot between lines A and B in the lyrics. For instance, in the A line, Ma Rainey is facing a dilemma but in the B line she claims her agency and plots her next move.
5. After completing the handout, ask students to tell students to write down on the handout one word to describe the action or mood of the A section of Ma Rainey's “Runaway Blues,” and a contrasting word to describe the action or mood in the B section of the lyrics. When finished, share and discuss the one word summaries. If time, pursue the same activity for Billie Holiday's “Stormy Blues.”
6. Play **Clip 3, “Stranger Blues.”** Tell students they will be analyzing the poetic form of the music performed in the clip.

7. Distribute **Handout - Mad Lib Blues**. After students complete the handout, ask volunteers to share their Mad Lib Blues.
8. Inform students that one feature of the Blues is improvisation, which can also be described as spontaneous composition. Spontaneous composition allows the artist to use their imagination and express their ideas in the moment. Ask students:
 - Can you name another art form in which the creators come up with lyrics or music on the spot? (*Answers include Jazz, Hip Hop, or slam poetry.*) Inform students that in Hip Hop, an emcee's ability to freestyle or spontaneously compose rhymes in the moment is one way that their skill is measured.
9. Ask if any students want to create a Mad Lib Blues on the spot. Inform students that they can recite or sing a blues with instrumental accompaniment. If students volunteer, play **Clip 4, Blues (Instrumental)** as an accompaniment.
10. Inform students, now we will write an AAB Blues of our own. Your first Blues will be personal. Think of it as "My Blues."
11. Display **Image 2, Four Definitions of the Blues**. Ask students to choose a definition of the Blues (Morrison, Wilson, Dorsey, or Howlin' Wolf) that they would like to use to create their own Blues lyrics. Ask students to identify a hard truth that causes them to feel worried or sad, and write a Blues based on that experience in AAB form. Remind students that while they are welcome to share this Blues, it is not required.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Divide the class into groups of 3 or 4 to work on the next Blues they will write.
2. Inform students: Choose a different definition than you used in your personal Blues. Identify a collective concern, something that affects a group, community or the planet. Share your concern and your definition with your group and then write your Blues or organize it orally. Share it with your group. When finished, provide feedback.
3. Play **Clip 5, Blues (Vocal)**. While the clip is playing, arrange the classroom into a juke joint with a section being the stage and the seats and desks arranged to create an audience. After the class is arranged as a juke joint, stop playing **Clip 5, Blues (Vocal)**, and invite students to read or recite their Blues in the juke joint with each group taking a turn on stage. If desired, play **Clip 4, Blues (Instrumental)** as an accompaniment.
4. After each Blues is recited, sung or read, the creator asks the class two questions:
 - Can you identify the definition of the Blues that I chose?
 - What was my concern and how are you feeling about my concern now?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Encourage students to learn more about one of the musicians featured in this lesson. Assign students to choose and read a TeachRock - Trace It Back entry for either: **Thomas A. Dorsey** (<https://teachrock.org/traceitback/thomas-a-dorsey>), **Howlin' Wolf** (<https://teachrock.org/traceitback/howlin-wolf>), or **Ma Rainey** (<https://teachrock.org/traceitback/ma-rainey>). Once chosen and read, students will create an infographic about their chosen musician.
2. Explore the relationship between the Blues and literature according to either James Baldwin or Toni Morrison:
 - Summarize the life, career, and creative and social contributions of either James Baldwin or Toni Morrison.
 - Read an essay by the author you've chosen, either James Baldwin's "**The Uses of the Blues**" (1964) in the essay collection *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* (2010) or Toni Morrison's "**The Language Must Not Sweat**" (1981) (<https://newrepublic.com/article/95923/the-language-must-not-sweat>).
 - Identify the ways in which their writing about the literature incorporates concepts and practices that define the Blues. Share biographical details about them with the class (either in person or with a video).
3. Explore **Blues in Art: Romare Bearden** (<https://nationalbluesmuseum.org/blues-in-art-romare-bearden>) and the **Blow Top Blues The Fire Next Time by Betye Saar** (<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/betye-saar-blow-top-blues-the-fire-next-time>).
 - Explore the **Bearden** (<https://beardenfoundation.org>) and **Saar** (<http://www.betyesaar.net/>) websites to learn about the life, career, and creative and social contributions of Romare Bearden and Betye Saar.
 - Write a brief paper, make a video, or create a presentation considering how Bearden and Saar, artists who lived and worked in New York and Los Angeles, respectively, represent The Blues visually.
 - Look at more work by each of these visual artists. Describe how the pieces you first examined fits into and/or contrasts with their larger body of work.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

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

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.

Craft and Structure 5: Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

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 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

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.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.



STANDARDS

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 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Dorsey and Howlin' Wolf on the Blues
- West African Origins of Blues
- "Stranger Blues"
- Blues (Instrumental)
- Blues (Vocal)

HANDOUTS

- Handout - Excerpt from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
- Handout - "Hidden jukejoint after B.B. King" by Alana Brown-Davis
- Handout - AAB Form in Blues Lyrics
- Handout - Mad Lib Blues