

Chapter 12

Strange Fruit: Raising Students' Awareness of Racism through Song

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Key Words

Abel Meeropol, Billie Holiday, imagery, lynching, migration, racism, segregation

Intended Learners

Due to the subject's seriousness and its delicate topic, it would be advisable to present and deliver this lesson to high school students aged between 16 and 18; their level of awareness and maturity is likely to be more developed.

Level of Learner Proficiency

In consideration of its language, imagery, and symbolic meaning, the song can be used with groups of students who are at upper intermediate or advanced levels of language proficiency. This ensures that their responses to the nuances and subtleties of the language are more realized.

Song Title and Lyricist

“Strange Fruit” (poem) by Abel Meeropol, performed by Billie Holiday (1939)

The song became well-known not due to a social movement, although it did eventually trigger one. The poem and song were inspired by a lynching incident in the American South in 1930; this was captured on film by an iconic photograph taken at the scene. Meeropol was moved by the photograph and the story behind it. He was prompted to speak out against the injustices carried out by lynch mobs, who incited hatred and intolerance on the basis of race.

Origin

The poem—originally entitled ‘Bitter Fruit’—was written by a Jewish teacher in the Bronx, New York City. However, the story that inspired it occurred and unfolded in Marion, Indiana, in the heartland of the American South. There segregation and lynching were the order of the day. The poem was written in 1937; two years later the song was performed by Billie Holiday and recorded by Commodore (Classics in Swing). Initially, Holiday was afraid that singing ‘Strange Fruit’ would bring unwanted attention and possibly lead to some form of attack or vengeance. Although the language brought back memories of her father, she embraced it and included it in her singing repertoire on a regular basis. The founder of New York’s first non-segregated nightclub, Barney Josephson, accepted this song as part of the live repertoire, as long as Billie Holiday would not perform an encore. He also insisted that food service would stop during the performance. Such was the power of the song that it had a telling impact on the civil rights movement.



Figure 1. Billie Holiday (1915–1959) at the Downbeat Club, a jazz club in New York City, in January 1947. (Source: Gottlieb, 1947).

Genre

The genre under which the song falls is Jazz and Blues, which Billie Holiday was famous for. In fact, the poem was adapted to accommodate Billie Holiday’s preferred style of music.

Background Knowledge and Context¹

The year is 1930. In Marion, Indiana, a white factory worker is attacked, and his girlfriend is assaulted and raped. The man succumbs to his injuries, but it is not long before his bloodied shirt is paraded on a pole, a declaration of war that incites a lynch mob to break into the jail where the alleged assaulters are being held. Before anyone is taken to trial, J. Thomas Shipp and Abraham S. Smith, barely out of their teenage years, are apprehended by the lynch mob and hanged, presumed guilty. Another young man, 16-year-old James Cameron, is nearly lynched but manages to escape. A photograph taken at the scene by Lawrence Beitler captures the lynching; it is said that copies of the photograph were sold in large amounts.

Seven years later, Abel Meeropol (who is also known as Lewis Allan), comes across the above mentioned photograph of a lynch mob. Reading the expressions of the crowd, Meeropol is triggered emotively; he eventually pens ‘Strange Fruit’. The poem goes beyond the written page because Meeropol decides to transform it into a song. Full of anger and indignation, ‘Strange Fruit’ is poetic and evocative in its extended metaphorical meaning and visceral imagery.

It is two years later, in 1939, that the poem becomes a song. The renowned singer Billie Holiday performs ‘Strange Fruit’ at Café Society, the first nightclub to dispense with strict segregation rules. Eventually, Billie Holiday records the song. It sells a million copies, rendering it her best-selling record. Through the record, the poem becomes so well-known that the idea of song

¹ In this section, the present tense is used to refer to historical events (in the past) beginning in 1930. The use of the present tense is a literary device that is often used by historians to bring the listener or reader into the moment that he/she is describing.

(and poetry) as a form of protest is realized. It allows the song to be perceived as a mouthpiece against the injustices suffered by people because of their skin color and race.

Context-Building Activities Before Introducing the Song

The choice of lyrics is inspired by the idea of song as a form of protest. The aims are to push students out of their comfort zone and raise their awareness of the issues that underscore today's social fabric where racism is anything but defunct. In connection with contemporary issues such as migration, 'Strange Fruit' serves to sensitize students who are often desensitized by the media. The suggested lesson follows a number of stages that incorporate a multimodal approach and trigger creative reader response.

Pre-reading

Students are familiarized with the context, which can be done by showing them images of the American South in the 1930s. Alternatively, they may be asked to conduct research about the song's socio-cultural background. Another activity could involve storytelling. For example, students could watch a video that weaves a narrative around the event that led to the text (the video [Strange Fruit: The Story Behind the Song of the Century](#) was filmed to mark the 75th anniversary since the lynching incident).

Historical/Cultural Background

Students may research the American South in the 1930s (e.g. the Jim Crow Laws; segregation and lynching practices).

Vocabulary Building

Students could be familiarized with key words in the lyrics (e.g. lynching; pastoral; gallant) so as to explore and better understand the imagery and symbolic meaning in the song.

Lessons for the Teaching of Vocabulary, Grammar, or Pronunciation for Which the Song is Appropriate

Vocabulary

Students are invited to comment on and explain the use of adjectives and imagery (and their effect). They could be made aware of the repetition of key words, whereupon they reflect on the effect achieved by such a cohesive device.

Grammar

Students are encouraged to note and comment on the use of tenses, consolidating a stylistic analysis (e.g. the -ing verb forms and their effect in the lyrics).

Pronunciation

Students can focus on where the stress is placed on certain words that are key to understanding the lyrics (hearing the sung performance helps to clarify pronunciation). Students can be asked to decide where they think the stress of certain words should be placed and to practice by scanning the text while noting meter and stress.

Classroom Activities and Homework Assignments Based on the Song

Stage 1

Culture/context building: Play a video of America in the 1930s with music in the background to set the scene. Introduce the lyrics by means of the narrative that surrounds it, giving importance to setting, place, and time. Discuss and explore terms and practices, such as segregation and lynching in the American South.

Stage 2

Working with the lyrics: Students get an incomplete version of the song lyrics and have to work out the last word of each line. The aim is to make sense of the meaning of the words, while a focus on the rhyme scheme enables them to understand and appreciate the rhythm of the lyrics. The latter is useful in sessions that involve scansion.

STRANGE FRUIT (excerpt)

Southern trees bear a strange _____

Blood on the leaves and blood at the _____

Black body swinging in the southern _____

Stage 3

After the gap-fill exercise, students could watch two video versions of the song. First, they watch a video of the story that led to the poem and to its performance by Billie Holiday. Before viewing the Billie Holiday performance itself, they could watch the commemorative video that was made about the song and the message behind it: *Strange Fruit: The Story Behind the Song of the Century*. Whilst they are watching the video, students could be encouraged to listen carefully for how the lyrics have been rapped and adapted to contemporary times. Following that, students view the original performance by Billie Holiday. Students may discuss and point out the difference between the original and the rap adaptation, as well as comment on the verses added by the rap artist. This might be significant as an example of creative response (see Stage 6).

Stage 4

This stage could involve a discussion of the song's language (i.e. vocabulary, grammar, and pro-

nunciation teaching), with specific foci on imagery, metaphoric and symbolic meaning, and other stylistic techniques used for effect.

Stage 5

Before any follow-up activities are suggested, one could consider a discussion of the lyric's meaning and the effect they have on students on a personal level when compared to the sung performance. Two types of discussions may ensue. On the one hand, a formal analytical exercise where students point out the imagery and language that convey meaning, justifying their reasoning and explaining what the language conveys. This could be done by writing a brief response to the text. The second type of discussion could encourage students to form a personal response in an informal manner; for example, via a spoken class discussion revolving around the question, 'How do the lyrics and their performance affect you on a personal level?'

Stage 6

In connection with the last point in stage 5, follow-up activities could be assigned. This would involve reacting to the poem either individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Students would be asked to complete two types of home assignments:

1. A written assignment with the following questions:
 - In what way are the lyrics stylistically effective in conveying meaning
 - Can a song like 'Strange Fruit' be relevant to today's discussion on issues such as racism and migration?
 - In what way does 'Strange Fruit' affect you on a personal and social level? Does it push you to reflect on the causes and consequences of racism?
2. A creative response assignment: students are invited to respond to the lyrics and song through different media of their own choice (e.g. the visual arts could be used to interpret the song; poetry writing; writing a short film script; filming a spoken response; finding and bringing to class a song about a similar theme; presenting a personal response to the song to their peers in class; creating a video that connects the song's themes to current social issues).

Supplementary Materials

Students may continue researching and reading about the story behind 'Strange Fruit' and other similar stories.

[Strange Fruit: A protest song with enduring relevance](#)

[Strange Fruit | Story of a Protest Song | Independent Lens](#)

[California Newsreel - STRANGE FRUIT](#)

Caveats

It is very important that students are introduced to the lesson and its material sensitively, bearing in mind students' backgrounds and different personalities. The aim is not to shock or cause discomfort in students. Hence, it is advisable to first build a good rapport with students prior to tackling the song and its lyrics. If some students feel uncomfortable or shocked, it is important to discuss this with them and console them by pointing out that being shocked is not a bad thing. On the contrary, it is an indication that they are not completely desensitized.

The learning outcomes of the lesson vary. Some may be linguistic (enabling students to understand how vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation work together in different genres, i.e. poetry and song). Another involves connecting language learning with cultural accretion, which leads to an appreciation of history and its people. Facilitating students' creative response is another important outcome. Whatever the learning outcome is, it has to be discussed and clarified with students from the very start while also allowing for any other unintended outcomes to emerge.

After delivering the above lesson with a number of classes, some examples of students' creative output included the following:

1. A student produced a song that combined the original lyrics and her own words just like the rap artist mentioned above.
2. A group of students collaboratively wrote a poem connecting 'Strange Fruit' to contemporary issues such as migration and racism.
3. A student created a PowerPoint presentation by juxtaposing photos of the racism and lynching mentioned in the song with photos delineating migration. The editing involved music and a choice of striking images showing migrants at sea, arriving in ports, or being locked up. Through the artful combination of images and music, she managed to convey how the poem affected her and made her go beyond the text. It made her reflect on contemporary society's issues and make a link with migration and other social issues.
4. A student created the painting and explained her creative process and the media she utilized. Combining charcoal and oils, she interpreted the song by replacing the noose with the tree's branches. According to her, the people who committed the lynching transformed nature into an unwitting accomplice. The charcoal image is faceless not only to convey that a huge number of Black people were lynched but also to indicate the dehumanization that results from this.

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