
Langston Hughes in the Jazz Age: Connecting to the Legacy of the Underground Railroad

Intermediate (3rd - 5th grade)

Time required: 40-50 minutes

Specific recommendation: 4th grade Music/Language Arts

Goals/Objectives:

- Identify instruments and sounds associated with blues and jazz music
- Explain the meaning of the “northern road” in Langston Hughes’s poem “Bound No’t h Blues”
- Identify the mood of the song “Bound No’t h Blues” based on text and sound

Common Core Standards:

- RL.4.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text
- RL.4.7: Make connections between the text of a story or drama and a visual or oral representation of the text, identifying where each version reflects specific descriptions and directions in the text.

Materials:

- **Song of America Links**

Basic Musical Elements handout: <https://songofamerica.net/downloads/basic-musical-elements-handout/>

Song of America online timeline (Expansion & Reform): <http://songofamerica.net/timeline/>

Song of America Langston Hughes radio program:

<https://songofamerica.net/program/langston-hughes-and-the-harlem-renaissance/>

Song of America “Bound No’t h Blues” song page: <http://songofamerica.net/song/bound-noth-blues>

- Rhythm sticks (optional)

Instruction:

- The teacher briefly reviews the Underground Railroad using the *Song of America* timeline [<http://songofamerica.net/timeline/> (Expansion & Reform)]
Other helpful websites could include:
<http://aasc.oupexplore.com/undergroundrailroad/>
<https://www.nps.gov/woi/learn/historyculture/significant-events-of-the-underground-railroad.htm>
http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/bhistory/underground_railroad/
(The slideshow on the Underground Railroad via the Scholastic website is particularly useful)
- The teacher reads aloud the poem and explain its connection to the underground railroad

- The teacher reads the poem again with the students repeating each line. The teacher could mention that call-and-response is an important aspect of blues/jazz music and of the African American tradition.
- The teacher introduces the sound of blues/jazz music by playing the “Bound No’t h Blues” [<https://songofamerica.net/program/langston-hughes-and-the-harlem-renaissance/> at 20:55, or 19:55 with Thomas Hampson introduction]
 - This introduction could include a “warm-up” listening by playing some of Louis Armstrong’s performance from 1925-1925 available here— “Poplar St. Blues” and “12th St. Blues” (Side B, starting at 42:09):
https://archive.org/details/Louis_Armstrong_Tape_2_1924-1925
- Class discussion: What is the mood of the song “Bound No’t h Blues”?
- After a class discussion, students write down the instruments they hear during the song. Students may write sounds they heard or general descriptions (ex. “strings”) instead of specific instruments. Students share their findings with the class.
 - The teacher explains that the instruments played during the song included a piano and a harp; further discussion could explore:
 - how the piano imitates the sounds and colors of other instruments, like the descending bass line during the third verse sounds like a string bass
 - why the composer chose to use a harp to play the higher notes that sound like “plucking”—what does this sound remind you of or make you think of?
 - how the composer used other elements of jazz and blues music: repetition, “swing” rhythm, rhyming words, plucking strings on a guitar or banjo, etc. As noted before, students do not need to use technical language; they can describe the music in their own words.
 - Refer to the *Song of America* Basic Musical Elements handout for an easy guide to talking about music:
<https://songofamerica.net/downloads/basic-musical-elements-handout/>
- The teacher plays the song again so that the students can listen specifically for the instruments and sounds discussed
- The teacher explains how Langston Hughes read aloud his poetry while jazz musicians improvised music to accompany him
 - As an example, the teacher could play Smithsonian Folkways recordings of Hughes reading his poetry with music in the background, such as:
 - “The Story of the Blues” from the following album:
<https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/the-voice-of-langston-hughes/id83507975>

- *Guided Practice*
 - The teacher gives each student a set of rhythm sticks [or a group of students, depending on class size and materials available] If rhythm sticks are not available, students can instead use body percussion: hand clapping, patting, patting their legs, etc.
 - The teacher reads aloud the text while students together tap out the beat.
 - The teacher asks the students to choose one phrase of the text (ex.: “road’s in front of me”) and either tap out the beat or create a new beat. Students may share their rhythms with the class.
 - Students listen again to the song and the teacher asks, “How do you think the music changed the feeling of the poetry?”

- *Independent Practice*
 - Students are paired and given at least one set of rhythm sticks
 - One student reads aloud the poem while the other creates a rhythm and then switch roles
 - Class discussion: How did your rhythm affect how your partner read? Did he/she read faster? Did the rhythm change the mood of the poem?

- *Assessment:*
 - Students are given an exit slip to answer the question: “What was the ‘northern road’ Langston Hughes wrote about?”

Extension: If the teacher wishes to connect this song with the Great Migration, and the Harlem Renaissance more directly, he/she could augment this lesson with part of the following lesson, available via the Kennedy Center’s ArtsEdge website:

https://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/educators/lessons/grade-3-4/Great_Migration.aspx