Strange Fruit, Analyzing the Lyrics

GRADE LEVEL 6-12
ESTIMATED DURATION 2 hours

OVERVIEW
Southern trees bear a strange fruit...blood on the leaves and blood at the root. These are the opening words to one of the world’s most famous protest songs. Its music and lyrics were written by Abel Meeropol (pen name Lewis Allan), a Bronx public school teacher but are often attributed to Billie Holiday, who first sang Strange Fruit in 1939 at Café Society, New York’s first integrated nightclub. The film looks at the history of the anti-lynching campaign in the United States, the history of the song Strange Fruit and explores the impact of Strange Fruit today.

ASSOCIATED KQED LESSONS
• Strange Fruit, Lynching in America (6-12) http://uw.kqed.org/edresources/plan.php?id=276
• Strange Fruit, Reconstruction to Jim Crow (6-12) http://uw.kqed.org/edresources/plan.php?id=277
• Flash activity, The Road to Equality (6-12) http://www.kqed.org/w/mosaic/africanamerican/strangefruit.html
• The Life and Times of Strange Fruit (4-8) http://uw.kqed.org/edresources/plan.php?id=275

MATERIALS
• DVD copy of Strange Fruit, directed by Joel Katz, 2002, 57 minutes. (For information on ordering this film please visit California Newsreel at www.newsreel.org.)
• Companion Website for KQED’s Bay Area Mosaic project at www.kqed.org/mosaic/.
• Companion Website for Strange Fruit at http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/.

PROCEDURE
Activity 1 – Warm Up (Connecting students to music in their lives) (45 min.)
1. Write the following warm up questions on the board:
   1.) How important is music too you in your daily life?
   2.) Approximately how much time a day do you spend listening to music? Do you make your own music or write lyrics? If yes, why do you produce your own form of music? How does it make you feel?
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3.) What kind of music do you listen to? Which recording artists do you like to listen to the most?

4a.) Have any of the songs you like made you aware of a problem or issue in our society? What problems or issues have the songs brought to your attention?

4b.) How does the song make you feel about the problem or issue? What role do the lyrics play? What role does the music play?

2. Facilitate the class discussion and focus your attention on the students’ answers to question 4. Explain the important role of music and social protest in America. You can refer to the companion Website for Strange Fruit. Write down the different songs that the students came up with and the social issues the songs highlighted. Have students share lyrics from the songs to contextualize the issue.

Activity 2 – Analyzing Billy Holiday’s Strange Fruit (45 min.)
* For this activity you will need the DVD of Strange Fruit. Forward it to Chapter 12 and cue it at 38:00 to watch Billy Holiday’s performance of Strange Fruit. The performance is less than five minutes long. After watching the clip, have students answer the following questions and facilitate the class discussion. Use student handout “Strange Fruit” lyrics and Handout 1 to supplement this activity.

Media Literacy
1. What is the message of the song?
2. What is the purpose of the song (is it to instruct, inform, persuade, argue, explain, entertain, or a combination)?
3. How do you know what the message or purpose is, that is, what elements contribute to the message (pay attention to the form of media, arrangement of music and lyrics, emotion, delivery, rhythm and language)?
4. Who is the intended audience of the song?
5. The original song writer was a Jewish American teacher named Abel Meeropol (pen name Lewis Allan). Knowing this and the fact that Billie Holiday was a Black Jazz singer, does this affect how you respond to the respective renditions of the song? Do the message, purpose and intended audience of the different versions change?

Content of the lyrics
1. What are the “strange” fruit? Why is it that Southern trees bear “strange” fruit?
2. What kind of fruit do trees usually bear? Explain the cycle of a fruit-bearing tree and compare it to the “strange” fruit-bearing tree.
3. What is ironic about the words “gallant South” and the South that bears “strange” fruit?
4. You will notice that the word “lynching” never appears in the song-why? Is the song more or less effective because the message is implied instead of stated?

Content of the music
1. In what genre does Billy Holiday’s arrangement fit?
2. What is “blue” or sad about the song? Is there anything joyous about the song?

Analyze the relationship between the music and the lyrics- rhythm, tempo, vocal style, instrumentation, arrangement and delivery.

Activity 3- Learning Extensions
1. Ask students to bring in other songs of protest (it can be the same songs from Activity 1). Have them analyze the lyrics and music, what the social issue being addressed is, and
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the effectiveness of the message and purpose. Compare and contrast it to Strange Fruit or to each other’s songs of protest.

2. Billy Holiday’s record label refused to release the song because of its controversial content. Discuss the issue of censorship with your students—should music be censored, what music should be censored, what other mediums need regulation, who decides what is censored or not?

3. Songs of protest have always been central to social movements in the United States. Refer students to [http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/protest.html](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/protest.html). Have students examine songs from the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-war movement regarding Vietnam. How are these songs reflective of the political and social climates of the times? How effective were these songs in getting the message out? Compare and contrast it to current issues such as the War on Terror, environmentalism, economic justice, and media and corporate takeovers.
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RESOURCES

- Companion Website for Strange Fruit at http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/strangefruit/.

STANDARDS

Grades 6-12 Correlating California State Content Standards

Grade 6—World History and Geography: Ancient Civilizations
- Ancient Grecian idea of citizenship

Grade 8—United States History and Geography: Growth and Conflict
- Reconstruction, “Jim Crow” laws, rise of the Ku Klux Klan, 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, the Great Migration

Grade 10—World History, Culture and Geography: The Modern World
- Enlightenment thinkers, Armenian genocide, British colonization of India, Mahatma Gandhi, Nazi Germany and WWII
- Cases: (1) Asia: the Killing Fields in Cambodia and genocide in East Timor; (2) the Middle East: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; (3) Africa: apartheid in South Africa and genocide in Sudan; (4) Latin and South America: indigenous land rights in Mexico and Brazil; (5) Europe: ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia.

Grade 11—United States History and Geography: Continuity and Change in the 20th Century

Grade 12—Principles of American Democracy (Government)
- U. S. Constitution, Bill of Rights, civil rights, principles of civil society

LESSON CREDITS

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Ken Garcia-Gonzales has been a teacher for nine years and last taught at Berkeley High School as a History and Ethnic Studies teacher. He also taught abroad in Japan for two years and has been recognized in the national publication, Who’s Who Among American Teachers. He is currently the Project Supervisor for School Services at KQED and manages the Bay Area Mosaic project.
Strange Fruit
By Lewis Allan (1939)

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and twisted mouth,
The scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.
Handout 1
Strange Fruit, Analyzing the Lyrics

**Media Literacy**

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**Content of the music**

1. In what genre does Billy Holiday’s arrangement fit?

2. What is “blue” or sad about the song? Is there anything joyous about the song? Analyze the relationship between the music and the lyrics- rhythm, tempo, vocal style, instrumentation, arrangement and delivery.