

## Iconography of Circuses

### The Basics

#### Time Required

2 hours

#### Subject Areas

12<sup>th</sup> Grade Literature

Emergence of Modern America, 1890-1930

#### Skills

Song analysis

Literary comparison

#### Author

Chris Ross (2011)

### The Lesson

#### Introduction

The overall objective of this lesson is for students to become familiar and comfortable with the concepts of iconography, icons, and their close cousin, the adjective “iconic,” through analyzing how Sara Gruen’s *Water for Elephants* (and other historical novels) utilizes historical elements, such as trains, hoboes, and circuses to invest her novel with the strength of these powerful symbols. Ultimately, the student will be able to identify other icons in America’s past, but will also develop the ability to identify iconic symbols of their own day. Ideally, the students will also gain a sense of empathy for the “rambling man,” and be able to discern the difference between the romantic notion of hitting the road, and having to move on out of dire necessity. The study of songs, sheet music, lyrics, short stories, and poetry will also reinforce the iconography theme, as the students will gain fluency in navigating such sites as Smithsonian Folkways, the Levy Collection at Johns Hopkins University, and the Library of Congress’ National Jukebox resources in order to compile their own iconic “songster” by the end of the unit on the novel.

#### Guiding Questions

Students will write an introductory passage on their connections, feelings, or memories of the circus. What does it mean to them? What does the circus symbolize in the book and in life in general? Why does the phrase, “go off and join the circus” resonate so steadily in the American consciousness? Does the phrase reflect a positive or a negative connotation? What’s iconic about the notion of running away and joining the circus?

## **Learning Objectives**

Students will become familiar with the cultural importance circuses held in the early to mid-1900s and will connect this knowledge to their reading of *Water for Elephants* via a study of iconic imagery and songs.

## **Preparation Instructions**

CIRCUS SONGS:

All from Library of Congress, National Jukebox

“Hannibal Hope & the Circus Parade” by Arthur Collins

“A Trip to the Circus” by Len Spencer and Gilbert Girard

“The Passing of the Circus Parade” by Len Spencer and Gilbert Girard

SONGSTER:

John Foster’s Great New York Circus Songster, “The Tramp”

## **Lesson Activities**

Circus Song Activity #1: Play “Hannibal Hope & the Circus Parade” and utilize CHARTING THE STORY graphic organizer. What is the setting? What is the story being told? Who are the characters? What conflict is introduced? How do they see this tune fitting in to the narrative of *Water for Elephants*? What instruments do they hear?

Circus Song Activity #2: Play “A Trip to the Circus” and have the students engage in the I Can Hear It Now song activity. How do they imagine the setting of this song? The animals? The people? What’s strange or funny about the whole song?

## **Assessment**

Activity #2 may be used as an assessment.

## **Extending the Lesson**

Reintroduce the Library of Congress National Jukebox site and the Levy Collection site and have students pair up and choose 1 song from each that has thematic links to one another. Then, have them create their own “songster” playlist that would accompany at least two plot points in *Water for Elephants*.