

Iconography of Hoboes

The Basics

Time Required

7 hours

Subject Areas

12th Grade Literature

Emergence of Modern America, 1890-1930

Skills

Song analysis

Literary comparison

Author

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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 have read the portion of *Water for Elephants* when a main character is exposed to a hobo who is looking for work and food on the circus train, and will be asked to write a brief passage on their opinions on homelessness in this country, and, to write about how they imagined the homeless problem during the Great Depression.

Learning Objectives

Students will become familiar with the economic and social conditions that gave rise to a “transient” race of men who relied on hopping trains to get them from place to place in this country primarily in search of work and how the plight of these travelers were represented in artwork, music, and poetry. In particular, students will focus on such questions as, “What’s iconic about hoboes? What’s the stereotype of a hobo? Do we still have hoboes? What’s the difference between hoboes and the homeless?”

Preparation Instructions

HOBO SONGS:

“Beans, Bacon, and Gravy” *Songs of Work and Protest: 100 Favorite Songs of American Workers*
Edited by Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer (Dover Press) p. 132-133

“Big Rock Candy Mountain” by Harry McClintock

Library of Congress Archive of Folk Culture *Railroad Songs and Ballads* Rounder Records

“Train Narration” by Woodie Guthrie

“A Long Ways to Travel” by Woodie Guthrie Unreleased Fourways Masters 1944-49

POEMS, SHORT STORIES, REFERENCE TEXT, AND DOCUMENTARY:

“The Battler” by Ernest Hemingway

“The Road” by Jack London

“In Between the Boxcars” (poem) by Robert Penn Warren from *The Great Machines* ed. Robert Hedin, page 47

“Railroad Bill” (anonymous poem) from *The Great Machines*, page 46

Bound for Glory by Woodie Guthrie

Riding the Rails: Teenagers on the Move During the Great Depression by Errol Lincoln Uys, *Riding the Rails* documentary film from 1997

Web Resources: In Search of the American Hobo constructed by Sarah White for The American Studies Program at The University of Virginia

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/white/hobo/firstpage.html>

Library of Congress American Memory site; American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1940

Lesson Activities

Hoboes Song Activity #1:

Students will be asked to close their eyes and listen to “Beans, Bacon and Gravy” and complete the I Can Hear It Now song activity. Where do they picture themselves in this song? Who might be singing? After answering these questions, the students will compile a list of their 15 favorite things to eat, and then narrow them down to three.

The students will then read the opening chapter of *Bound for Glory* by Woodie Guthrie and then listen to his song, “Train Narration. Extension Activity: Write a follow-up mini-chapter to Guthrie’s narrative incorporating his voice and setting.

Hoboes Song Activity #2:

Play the song “Big Rock Candy Mountain” (show art image) and complete the Chart the Story Graphic Organizer. What is the significance of this mythical place? Why is it important to the singer? What does what he thinks he’ll find there say about him? Is it a real place? What role does the make-believe have in the romanticism of being “on the road”? Students imagine themselves “hitting the stem” and create their own song lyrics describing their ideal place at the “end of the line”. Show students image of Hobo signs and symbols and have them design and create 3 of their own symbols and explain what they symbolize.

Assessment

Split class up into groups and have one group read Hemingway’s “The Battler” another London’s “The Road” and the third Penn Warren’s “In Between the Boxcars” and “Railroad Bill”.

Each group will write a brief analysis or character study and report out to the rest of the class the iconic elements of plot, themes, and imagery.

Extending the Lesson

Watch portions of the award winning 1997 documentary, "Riding the Rails."

Research and read "Tramp Poet" and "Hobo Lore" from the Library of Congress American Memory site; American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1940 and use a graphic organizer to record similarities between the stories and those of "Riding the Rails."

Resources

Song Backgrounds:

"Beans, Bacon, and Gravy" Songs of Work and Protest: 100 Favorite Songs of American Workers Edited by Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer (Dover Press) p. 132-133 includes notes on the song.

Lyrics available at

http://www.ciscohouston.com/lyrics/beans_bacon_gravy.shtml

"Big Rock Candy Mountain" by Harry McClintock Library of Congress Archive of Folk Culture Railroad Songs and Ballads Rounder Records; *It is likely that the piece was in tradition before 1906, for in that year a version by Marshall Locke and Charles Tyner was published by the Rock Candy Music Co. in Indianapolis. The story of "The Big Rock Candy Mountain" has not been written nor is Harry McClintock's role in disseminating it fully known. Collectors will enjoy comparing this 1951 rendition with Mac's original recording of 1928.* (Liner notes).

Lyrics available at

<http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/b/bigrockcandymountain.shtml>