

The Evolving Image of American Womanhood: 1972 – 2002 As Presented In Song

The Basics

Time Required

Two weeks including multi-media presentations

Subject Areas

11th Grade US History (AP)

Contemporary America, 1968-present

Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12

Author

Mark Albright (2004)

The Lesson

Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century the Suffrage Movement gained strength and finally succeeded in its primary goal: the 19th Amendment. The American Women's Party under the leadership of Alice Paul felt the time was right for an Equal Rights Amendment; the natural follow up to the 19th Amendment and female suffrage. This was not achieved and the fledgling Feminist Movement stalled and shrank from the cultural scene by the end of the twenties.

Now fast forward to the 1960s, the residual energy of the Civil Rights movement and the New Feminism. By the beginning of the 1970s American women were focused on equality. A new generation of well educated women, professional women, blue collar working women and even poor welfare mothers were energized and ready to take on the white male status quo.

Enter Helen Reddy. Though she was not happy with the orchestration for the song, "I Am Woman" was the right song at the right time and shot to number one in 1972. Its lyrics spoke to the new generation of women and resonated in their souls, making it the unofficial anthem of the Feminist Movement. (Helen Reddy wrote "I Am Woman" as filler for an album she was working on in 1971-72.)

Guiding Questions

How has the role of women changed over the course of US history?

What is the contemporary perspective on women in the United States?

Learning Objectives

Students will

- read and discuss articles on the image of women in contemporary American culture.
- formulate an opinion as to the impact of media on the image women have of themselves deconstruct Helen Reddy's "I am Woman" and Shania Twain's "Pretty Face" for the image of women contained in each.
- create a compare/contrast chart for the images of women in each song.
- write a personal conjecture as to what events in American History (circa 1972 – 2002) might account for the differences.

- research the progress of women in the time period of 1972 to 2002 and create an annotated timeline of events that contributed to the change in the image of women in American culture.
- discuss the timeline and their decision-making process in selecting the events to be highlighted.
- deconstruct Janis Ian's "At Seventeen" for its images of adolescent women and find a contemporary match in terms of current image as interpreted by the student.
- analyze the previously created timeline for the evolving image of adult women as to its link to the evolving image of adolescent women and write a critical response.
- create a multi-media presentation on their perspective of the image of adolescent women in 2004 to be accompanied by a written analysis. (in groups of 3 or 4)

Preparation Instructions

Songs Used in Lesson:

- "I am Woman"
- "She's Not Just a Pretty Face"
- "At Seventeen"

Lesson Activities

1. Students will be placed in groups of 4 and given various articles to read on the images of women in American culture. They will then discuss their articles and their own thoughts on the image of women. Each group will record their findings and thoughts and report their conclusions to the entire class.

- *Reviving Ophelia Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* by Mary Pipher, Ph.D.
- *Why are There so Few Female Computer Scientists?* © 1991 Ellen Spertus
- How to Evaluate the Media Images of Women by Linda Seger
- Images Of Women online resource from Houghton Mifflin
- Rebecca Zarcgikoff's Home Page

Questions for discussion and reporting:

- What is the thesis/main idea of your reading?
- How does this thesis/main idea link to the imaging of women in American culture?
- What passage(s) would you list as most supportive of this link?
- What are your thoughts on the validity of this reading and its theory? How do all of these articles link together?
- What application does this link have to the issue of the image of women in American culture?

2. Report each group's findings and ideas to the class as a whole.

3. Review the history of the Feminist Movement in the early 20th century and the late 1960s to early 70s with a teacher-created PowerPoint presentation.

4. Following the PowerPoint presentation, students will discuss the images of women in the presentation. Describe the images of women in the PowerPoint.

- What did these images suggest about women?
- What did you think as you saw these images?
- How do they fit with your thoughts on the image of women in American culture?

Song Discussion Questions and Activities:

1. Have students read the lyrics to Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman"
 - What are the words or phrases which create an image of woman in the early 1970s?
 - Why these words?
 - What do you think is the writer/performer trying to say about women?
 - What is the image you get of women from these lyrics?
2. Now brainstorm reasons for its place in American women's cultural history.
 - Why was it a number 1 hit in 1972?
 - How effective/powerful are these words in that time setting?
3. Listen to a recording of Reddy singing this song.
 - What is their response to the song after hearing it?
 - Does the music make a difference to how you respond to the song?
4. Now move to Shania Twain's song "Pretty Face" and repeat objectives 1 – 3 using it as the primary source for analysis. (<http://www.hit-country-music-lyrics.com/shania-twain-pretty.html>).
5. After the discussion for the Twain song, have the students compare/contrast the two songs in pairs for 5 minutes and share their results with the class.
6. For 5 – 10 minutes have the students write a reason why these two songs present such different images of women. Have them include a brain-stormed list of 5 events in US history (circa 1972 – 2002) that could account for the difference in the images and attitudes expressed in the two songs.
7. As a class, have the students discuss their various conclusions and comprise a class list of events which support these conclusions.
8. In groups of 3 or 4, have the students research the class timeline of events and add to it any additional events which they believe to be relevant along with the dates for all events and create an annotated timeline.
9. Repeat activity #7 with the new annotated timelines and craft a single one for the class.
10. Have the students discuss their original writing in #6 and its relationship to the timeline and conclusions they draw from the timeline.
 - Do their opinions change or become more defined?
 - Do they have a different opinion now than earlier about the evolution of the image of women in our culture and its forces?

Assessment

Each group will do all of the following;

- Select a current song that speaks to the group about the image of adolescent girls in 2004. (Song may be selected from the years 2000-2004.)
- Create a multi-media presentation that clearly demonstrates your interpretation of the lyrics and music as they pertain to the image of teenage girls in our society. Use current images and the song. The presentation may be done in PowerPoint but does not need to be restricted to this software. The presentation should be timed to the duration of the song. Song lyrics will accompany the presentation.

- The group will collaborate on a written explanation for their song choice and an explanation of the song's meaning and significance of the images used in the presentation. This writing will incorporate themes from the readings and/or ideas from additional articles or books used for the product.
- Each member of the group will write a 200 – 400 word reflection on the final product and her personal reflections on it as a learning experience (i.e.: What are my personal thoughts on the image of teenage girls at this time in American Cultural History?)
- Each final product will be shown to the class and each showing will be accompanied by a follow up rationale for the work.

Extending the Lesson

1. Hand out the lyrics to "At Seventeen" by Janis Ian and have the students read them as the song is played.

2. Discuss:

- What lyrics speak most powerfully to you as an individual and why?
- What is the image that emerges from these lyrics?
- What is this author trying to convey about the image of adolescent image?
- How is this song and its images different from the other two? Cite specific lyrics to support your response. Why the differences?

3. Divide the class into groups of three or four. These will be the teams for the final product which will also serve as the evaluation for the entire lesson.

Resources

Lyrics

"I Am Woman" available at
<http://www.helenreddy.com/flash.html>

"She's Not Just a Pretty Face" available at
<http://www.shaniatwain.com/lyrics.html>

"At Seventeen" available at
<http://www.janisian.com/lyrics/atseventeen.php>

Other resources:

Helen Reddy, *The Woman I Am* (Tarcher, 2006). Autobiography.

Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (Riverhead Trade, 2005)

"Why are There so Few Female Computer Scientists?" © 1991 Ellen Spertus
 (<http://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/7040/...?sequence=2>)

"How to Evaluate the Media Images of Women" by Linda Seger.
 (<http://www.medialit.org/reading-room/how-evaluate-media-images-women>)