

Iconography of Trains

The Basics

Time Required

2-3 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 main character hears a train in the distance, and will be split up into groups to answer the question, “What important role did trains and the railroads play in the age of American Industrialization and why?”

Learning Objectives

This lesson will give some background on the iconic importance of trains from the late 1800's through the Depression.

Preparation Instructions

TRAIN SONGS:

"Iron Horse" Words by Harry Frances Music by Alfred von Rochow (Levy Collection)
"Sounds of Steam Locomotives, No. 4: The Great New York Central-Hudson, Mohawk, Niagara" recorded by Harold S. Ludlow (Smithsonian Folkways Records)
Old Train Caller: "Calling Trains", "Train Blues" (instrumental)
Library of Congress Archive of Folk Culture "Railroad Songs and Ballads" Rounder Records
"Train Medley Ride" (part 2)
"A Long Ways to Travel" Woodie Guthrie (Unreleased Fourways Masters 1944-49)

POEMS, MOVIE CLIP:

"Call Boy" (poem) by Sterling A. Brown, *The Great Machines: Poems and Songs of the American Railroad* edited by Robert Hedin (p. 27-28)
"Calling Trains" (poem) (Anonymous) from *American Folk Poetry: An Anthology* Ed. By Duncan Emrich
Little, Brown & Company (Canada) Limited 1974
Opening train scene from Jim Jarmusch's film *Dead Man*

Lesson Activities

Trains Song Activity #1:

Students will be asked to close their eyes and listen to Tracks 1-3 of "Sounds of Steam Locomotives, No. 4: The Great New York Central-Hudson, Mohawk, Niagara" recorded by Harold S. Ludlow
Old Train Caller: "Calling Trains", "Train Blues" (instrumental)
Library of Congress Archive of Folk Culture "Railroad Songs and Ballads" (Rounder Records)

Teacher will utilize the *Imagine the Story Teaching Tool* in order to answer the following questions:
What are they hearing? How do these sounds make them feel? What list of adjectives would they match to the music? Where do they see themselves or other characters according to the music?
What's *iconic* about what they are hearing?

Students will compose their own train calling using Google.map of their own list of familiar towns and cities, and then will be asked to perform this train call list.

Trains Song Activity #2:

While reviewing "The Iron Horse" sheet music, students will fill out a Word Web Graphic Organizer that pays particular attention to the song's use of metaphor. Once again, they are focusing on what's *iconic* about both the illustration and the lyrics. Students will then write a stanza that utilizes metaphor about their favorite mode of transportation, a la, their "dream car."

Assessment

Either design and create their own train illustration while listening to "Train Blues" and "Train Medley Ride" (Part 2), or will fill in the Plot the Story Graphic Organizer according to what happens in the song.

Resources

Lyrics:

“A Long Ways to Travel” available at
http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Long_Ways_To_Travel.htm

“Calling Trains” available at
http://www.loc.gov/folklife/LP/AFS_L61_opt.pdf

“Iron Horse” available at
<https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/31908>

Song Backgrounds:

“Calling Trains”: *Sung by an unidentified old train-caller of New Orleans, La., 1936. Recorded by John A. Lomax at State Penitentiary, Parchman, Miss. No formal study of the tradition of calling trains is known to me. Each listener may know something of parallel forms: street vendor calls, circus roustabout chants, midway barker spiels, tobacco auctioneer patter.* (Liner notes from *Railroad Songs and Ballads*, *The Library of Congress Archive of Folk Culture*, Rounder Records).

“Sounds of Steam Locomotives, No. 4: The Great New York Central-Hudson, Mohawk, Niagara” recorded by Harold S. Ludlow (Smithsonian Folkways Records) includes extensive liner notes.