

Migrant Melodies: Narratives and Ballads in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

The Basics

Time Required

3-4 class meetings

Subject Areas

11th Grade English

The Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945

Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards for English Language Arts 6-12

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The Lesson

Introduction

Woody Guthrie (1912-1967) wrote the ballad “Tom Joad” right after seeing the motion picture. He went to the place on East Fourth Street in New York where Pete Seeger was staying — because it had a typewriter — and armed with a half-gallon jug of wine typed away for the most of the night. When he was done, he had completed one of his masterpieces: about twenty verses and six minutes long. Guthrie said that the film was the “best cussed pitcher I ever seen.” The result, as it turns out, was one of the best ballads in American folk music.

The song was recorded on April 26, 1940, in the RCA Studios located in Camden, New Jersey. It was released on the album set titled *Dust Bowl Ballads* which debuted in early July of 1940. The set consisted of six discs released in two volumes (Victor P-27 and P-28). It was later re-issued as an LP in 1964.

One of the first full-time professional songwriters in country music, Bob Miller (1895-1955) wrote “Seven-Cent Cotton and Forty-Cent Meat” in 1930. The song is a commentary on the struggles of Southern cotton growers who, during the 1920s, suffered through a boll weevil infestation and falling commodity prices.

Two years later, Miller responded to worsening economic conditions with another version of the song titled “Five-Cent Cotton.” This version reflected the increasing despair of farmers who had no network of federal support that would arrive only with the New Deal beginning in 1933.

Guiding Questions

What was the Dust Bowl?

How do natural disasters affect the lives of people?

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to

- recognize the characteristics of narratives and ballads
- understand the economic factors that caused the Dust Bowl migration
- create a ballad to reflect their experiences in high school

Preparation Instructions

Woody Guthrie's "The Ballad of Tom Joad"

Bob Miller and Emma Dermer's "Seven-Cent Cotton and Forty-Cent Meat"

Lesson Activities

Introductory Learning Activities:

Begin the unit by playing two video clips from the film *The Grapes of Wrath*: Preacher Casey's murder by the growers' goons and Tom's farewell to Ma Joad. Ask students to do a five-minute quickwrite on Tom's character based on these two brief clips. Ask for volunteers to read their quickwrites. List Tom's characteristics on the overhead, emphasizing his heroic nature. Next, present students with an overview of the function and structure of the ballad form.

Song Discussion Questions and Activities:

"Tom Joad"

- Where has Tom been the previous four years?
- Whom does Tom and Preacher Casey find on their family's homestead?
- Who was the first of the Joads to die on the trip west? Where was he buried?
- Why was Casey handcuffed and taken to jail?
- Tom tells Ma that he will be "Everywhere that you look." Specifically, what three locations does Tom say he will be in the last stanza? What is the significance of these locations?

"Seven-Cent Cotton and Forty-Cent Meat"

- Why is the farmer frustrated?
- What economic problem does the title of the song refer to?
- What natural disasters compounded the problems of cotton farmers in the 1920s and '30s?
- What New Deal programs would try to relieve the pressures on farmers?
- What advice would you give this farmer to improve his situation?

Perhaps the earliest type of narrative is the ballad. Traditionally passed on orally from generation to generation, ballads are usually divided into two major types: the folk ballad and the literary ballad. The

folk ballad is meant to be sung while the literary ballad is meant to be printed and read. In many cases, folk ballads eventually become literary ballads.

The most common themes in ballads include love, death, courage and enmity. Most ballads have a tragic tone and emphasize the story or plot rather than the characters or setting. In addition, ballads usually contain dialogue, refrains and incremental repetition.

Ballads are usually composed of four-line stanzas known as quatrains. Generally, the second and fourth lines rhyme (abcb), and all four lines have an iambic meter. Two other patterns that are used are abac and aabb. Some ballads will differ in structure, however. For example, Woody Guthrie's "Tom Joad" uses a five-line stanza (called a cinquain), and has variants in the rhythm.

Folk ballads usually follow one of two basic metrical patterns: 4-3-4-3 or 4-4-4-4. In the former, the first and third lines have four accented syllables alternating with lines containing three accented syllables. In the latter, all four lines contain four accented syllables. Perfect meter isn't essential in folk ballads.

What's important is that the meter works with the music. In many ballads, especially older ones, much of the essential action occurs in the non-rhyming lines. This makes on-the-spot improvisation easier for the balladeer. Some notable ballads in English include Stephen Foster's "Oh! Susanna," Johnny Horton's "The Battle of New Orleans," and Gordon Lightfoot's "Canadian Railway Trilogy."

After learning about the structure of ballads, students will compose a ballad of their own reflecting their experiences during high school. The ballad will consist of at least three verses. This activity will be done early in the unit on *The Grapes of Wrath*.

After students have finished reading Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, divide them into pairs and have them complete one of the following. Be sure to distribute and go over the handout titled "How to Create Superior Visual Aids" to help them in crafting their posters.

- Have students imagine that they are migrant workers at a camp in California. In that role, have each student write a letter home to Oklahoma describing the songs they sing in camp and why familiar songs and songs about common themes are important to the migrant workers. Mount the letters on a poster board and use photos, illustrations or other graphics to supplement the points of the letters. Be prepared to read passages to the class.
- Have students research the conditions of one of the Farm Services Administration camps run by the Department of Agriculture in California. Be sure to include the history of the particular camp as well as the geographic location, physical layout and activities provided for the migrant workers. Create a poster and present your findings to the class.
- Have students research and find one other song performed by the migrants. Present a recording and have lyrics for class members. Describe the background of the song and explain its purpose: entertainment, informative or both. Present your findings on a poster board. Begin by accessing the "Voices from the Dust Bowl" section of the Library of Congress site listed above.
- Have students research the history of Highway 66—the Mother Road—and its impact on the Dust Bowl migration during the 1930s. Create a map that traces the route of the Joads in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Use documented quotes to tie the map to events in the novel. Put the map on a poster board and present your map to the class.

Students will have one class session to work on their projects as well as two nights to finish their projects and practice their presentations.

Resources

Lyrics

“The Ballad of Tom Joad” available at:

http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Tom_Joad.htm

“Seven Cent Cotton and Forty Cent Meat” available at

http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/bluegrass-lyrics/Seven_cent_cotton_and_forty_cent_meat.html