

Strange Fruit: the power of a protest song NCSS trade book investigation

266

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Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday and the Power of a Protest Song (2017)

by Gary Golio

Millbrook Press

Minneapolis, MI

Recommended for ages 8-12.

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Recommended for grades 3–7.

This plan has been adapted for grades 7 and up.

This plan will require 30–45 min per day over a span of 3 days.

Book summary

Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday and the Power of a Protest Song is an illustrated biography of jazz and blues artist Billie Holiday and the origin of her most famous song, *Strange Fruit*. Beautifully illustrated by Charlotte Riley–Webb, this book examines how Billie Holiday, a young African-American woman and Abel Meeropol, a son of Jewish immigrants, collaborated to create a song during the Harlem Renaissance era that challenged racism and paved the way for the civil rights movement.

NCSS standards

- (1) Time, Continuity and Change
- (2) Peoples, Places and Environments
- (3) Individual Development and Identity
- (4) Individuals, Groups and Institutions
- (5) Power, Authority and Governance

Materials

- (1) *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday and the Power of a Protest Song*
- (2) Interactive whiteboard or chart paper
- (3) Harlem Renaissance sources
- (4) Harlem Renaissance Works Analysis Handout
- (5) Wall Walk resources



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- (6) Wall Walk 3-2-1 Handout
 - (7) Protest Song/Poem Final Assessment Rubric

Strange Fruit:
the power of a
protest song

Objectives

- (1) Students will use the text and primary sources to learn about methods of protest to fight injustices such as lynching and segregation.
- (2) Students will create their own protest song or poem about a current injustice.

267

Procedures

Exploration/introduction

Exploration/introduction objective.

- (1) Students will observe and interpret primary sources from the Harlem Renaissance era.
 - Have images of the Cotton Club (<https://allthatsinteresting.com/cotton-club#31>) in a slide show and 1920s and 1930s jazz/blues music playing when students walk into the classroom. On an interactive whiteboard or chart paper have Billie Holiday's quote posted, "Somebody once said we never know what is enough until we know what's more than enough."
 - Once seated, ask the students if they know what type of music is being played, who originated it, era it became popularized and if they know any famous musicians/singers of this type of music?
 - Ask students about the Cotton Club slide show and if they know what it was and where it was located. Provide brief history of the Harlem Renaissance and note the Cotton Club was Harlem's premier nightclub during the 1920s and 1930s.
 - Explain to students they are going to learn about one jazz singer from this era named Billie Holiday and direct their attention to her quote. Ask the students if there has ever been a time in their life when they reached a point where they did not think they could take it anymore? Post responses on an interactive whiteboard, chart paper or computer program to create a visual word wall and ask students to identify common themes or patterns of the responses.
 - Have students select one of the issues identified and to think and share with a partner how they would address the situation.
 - Read together the text up until "Two months after leaving Artie's band, Billie got her wish."
 - Have students re-watch the Cotton Club slide show and ask them how these images better help them to understand Billie Holiday and what she had enough of already? Think-pair-share.
 - Ask students what Billie Holiday did because she had enough; how did she handle her situation? Record answers on the interactive whiteboard or chart paper.
 - Ask students what wish came true for Billie?
 - Read the rest of the text up until "Yeah, but I'll feel it. I'll know it in my grave."
 - Give each student a copy of the *Strange Fruit* lyrics. Have the students read it silently. Show the 1959 video of Billie Holiday singing the song (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bckob0AyKCA>)

Exploration/introduction assessment.

- (1) Provide students with a 4 × 6 notecard and ask they record at least three adjectives to describe the emotions they feel after reading and hearing the lyrics. Collect the notecard as an exit slip and explain to the students in the next part of the lesson they will discuss the song, the historical basis for its creation and its lasting impact.

Development

Development objective.

- (1) Students will analyze primary sources related to the anti-lynching movement.
 - Display the exit slip adjectives the students recorded and project on the interactive whiteboard or chart paper. Have an audio recording of *Strange Fruit* played at the same time.
 - Ask the students why a 1939 song that evokes such negative or pessimistic feelings is still talked about today? Share Billie Holiday Timeline <https://billieholiday.com/billie-holiday-timeline/>.
 - Have students read “What happened next” in the text.
 - Have five stations set up around the classroom and at each station have one source from the sources listed in [Appendix 1](#) along with the *Strange Fruit* lyrics from the text.
 - Divide the class up into five equal groups and have the groups visit each station to review and discuss the source and complementary questions together.
 - Provide each student with the Harlem Renaissance Works Analysis Handout in [Appendix 2](#) to be completed during the station activity.

Development assessment.

- (1) Ask the class how Harlem Renaissance artists, like Billie Holiday, used their artistic creativity to protest lynching? Students should substantiate their responses using the provided sources they just reviewed.

Closure and expansion

Closure and expansion objective.

- (1) Students will examine and interpret different forms of protest expression like artwork, songs and poems.
 - Have posted on the walls in the classroom images, songs and poems from the Harlem Renaissance era that capture other issues artists from the era protested. See [Appendix 3](#) for some suggested resources.
 - Share with the class that lynching was just one issue Harlem Renaissance artists protested and that there were many others.
 - Using a Wall Walk, ask students to complete the 3-2-1 activity and to record their responses on the handout in [Appendix 4](#).

Closure and expansion assessment.

- (1) Using the student responses from the 3-2-1 activity, probe the students and ask them to summarize and clarify the ways in which Harlem Renaissance artists used their creative ability to protest injustices of the era.

Strange Fruit:
the power of a
protest song

269

Final assessment

The class will brainstorm a list of modern day local, state, national and international injustices. From the teacher approved list of options, students will select one injustice and write the lyrics/verses for their own protest song/poem using the directions and rubric in [Appendix 5](#) for guidance.

Suggested extension activities

- (1) Locate other protest songs, poems or artwork for other eras.
- (2) Evaluate how contemporary artists have used *Strange Fruit*.
- (3) Trace the history of the federal anti-lynching legislation movement over the last 100 years.
- (4) Research how the Emmitt Till Anti-Lynching Act came to be passed in 2022.

Additional references

African American Protest Poetry. available at: <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1917beyond/essays/aaprotestpoetry.htm>

Billie Holiday Official Website. available at: <https://billieholiday.com/>

Britannica Harlem Renaissance. available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art>

Cotton Club Images. available at: <https://allthatsinteresting.com/cotton-club#31>

History.com Harlem Renaissance. available at: <https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/harlem-renaissance>

Jacob Lawrence, Migration Series (Long Version). available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t4lgvB5cV5E>

Jacob Lawrence, Migration Series (Short Version). available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLC8xRNcjvE>

Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror. available at: <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>

Selecting Primary Sources that Deal with Difficult Issues. available at: <https://primarysourcexus.org/2015/02/selecting-primary-sources-deal-difficult-issues/>

Smithsonian Harlem Renaissance. available at: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/new-african-american-identity-harlem-renaissance>

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SSRP
17,3

Appendix 1

Source A

Aaron Douglas (1934 public mural) "The Idyll of the Deep South".
<https://www.theartstory.org/artist/douglas-aaron/>

270

Source B

Billie Holiday (1939 song) "Strange Fruit".

Source C

Langston Hughes (1949 poem) "One-Way Ticket".
https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/ows/seminars/tcentury/gmigration/Hughes_OneWayTicket.pdf

Source D

Jacob Lawrence (1941 painting) "Panel 15".
<https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/the-migration-series/panels/15/there-were-lynchings>

Source E

Reginald Marsh (1934 political cartoon) "This is her first lynching".
<https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s68q2180>

Appendix 2

Strange Fruit:
the power of a
protest song

271

Harlem Renaissance Works Analysis Handout	
Source A: Aaron Douglas (1934) Public Mural, "The Idyll of the Deep South"	Idyll means a very happy and peaceful scene, what aspects in the mural represent this and which do not?
	What do you think accounts for the contrasting images?
Source B: Billie Holiday (1939) Song, "Strange Fruit"	The lyrics "Blood on the leaves and blood at the root" are a metaphor. What do you think Billie Holliday is saying with that lyric?
	What exactly was this song about?
Source C: Langston Hughes (1941) Poem, "One Way Ticket"	Where is the subject of this poem going?
	Why do you think?
Source D: Jacob Lawrence (1941) Painting, "Panel 15"	How does the artist show the power of absence and presence?
	What emotions is the artist trying to invoke?
Source E: Reginald Marsh (1934) Political Cartoon, "This is her first lynching"	Why would an adult bring a child to this event?
	What do you think is the lasting impact is of having children attend events such as these?

Appendix 3

Sterling Brown (1931 poem) “*Strong Men*” (second half).
<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/protest/text11/brownstrongmen.pdf>
 Claude McKay (n.d. poem) “*Tiger*”.
<https://www.poetryexplorer.net/poem.php?id=10011722>
 Countee Cullen (1925 poem) “*Shrouded in Color*” (excerpts).
<https://poets.org/poem/shroud-color>
 Countee Cullen (1934 poem) “*Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song*”.
<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/protest/text11/cullenscottsboro.pdf>
 Marcus Garvey (1927 song) “*Keep Cool*”.
<https://allpoetry.com/Keep-Cool>
 Langston Hughes (1940 poem) “*The Ballad of the Landlord*”.
<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/protest/text11/hugheslandlord.pdf>
 Langston Hughes (1930–33 poem) “*I look at the world*”.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/52005/i-look-at-the-world>
 Georgia Douglas Johnson (1922 poem) “*Prejudice*”.
<https://margaretstone.commons.gc.cuny.edu/prejudice/>
 Jacob Lawrence (1941 art) “*Bar and Grill*”.
<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/bar-and-grill-79031>
 Jacob Lawrence (1934 art) “*Migration Series*”.
<https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/the-migration-series>

Appendix 4

Wall walk 3-2-1 handout

Name 3 issues these artists are protesting in their works

- 1
- 2
- 3

Name 2 emotions the artists are conveying in their works

- 1
- 2

Name 1 question you still have

- 1
-

Appendix 5

Protest song/poem final assessment rubric

As a class we brainstormed a list of modern day local, state, national and international injustices. From the final list of modern day injustices, select one injustice you feel strongly about and construct a protest song or poem in a similar fashion to Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit.” In your song or poem you will describe the injustice, the ways it has been combated and the positive outcomes from ending this injustice. Use the following to craft your work:

Verse/Stanza 1: State the injustice that you have chosen. Explain the injustice and how it began. Be sure to include examples of the injustice you are writing about. (min. 4 lines)

Verse/Stanza 2: Explain ways your injustice has been combated. Some examples may be: protests, legislation, sit-ins, boycotts, leadership and organizations. (min. 4 lines)

Verse/Stanza 3: Describe the positive outcomes from ending this injustice. (min. 4 lines)

Category	4	3	2	1	0
Content-accuracy	Content displayed is accurate to the injustice and relevant to the assignment	Content displayed is mostly accurate to the injustice and relevant to the assignment with some inaccuracies	Content and descriptions are relevant but vague and disjointed	Content is irrelevant and not connected to the injustice or the assignment	Song/Poem was not submitted
Required elements	The song/poem includes all required elements as well as some additional information	All required elements are included in the song/poem	All but one of the required elements is included on the song/poem	Several required elements were missing in the song/poem	
Use of class time	Used time well during the class period; focused on getting the song/poem done; never distracted others	Used time well during the class period; primarily focused on getting the song/poem done and never distracted others	Used some of the time well during the class period; there was some focus on getting the song/poem done but occasionally distracted others	Did not use class time to focus on the song/poem OR often distracted others	
Verse/Stanza-relevance	All verses and stanzas are related to the chosen injustice and make it easier to understand	Most verses and stanzas are related to the chosen injustice and most make it easier to understand	Some verses and stanzas relate to the chosen injustice	Verses and stanzas do not relate to the chosen injustice	

About the authors

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