



DYLAN AS POET

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Bob Dylan merge poetry with popular music?

OVERVIEW

"I consider myself a poet first and a musician second. I live like a poet and I'll die like a poet." – Bob Dylan

"I'll never be able to write like Dylan. He thinks of these fantastic word combinations. It doesn't matter if you get lost in one of his compositions, you can get hung up on just two words – the man is a poet." – Paul McCartney

"Dylan has merged poetry, myth, and song, with an unsurpassed artistic ambition. Dylan's fusions... can also be understood as a fulfillment of what the Modernist Ezra Pound foresaw as Modernism's future, reincarnating the spirit of Homer's epics and classical Greek drama in their mixture of words and music." – Dylan biographer Sean Wilentz

No investigation of Bob Dylan's influence on popular culture is complete without careful attention to the highly poetic nature of his lyrics, which are widely considered among the finest in the history of popular song. Dylan's work bears the deep influence of poets who came before him, particularly those of the postwar Beat Generation, such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. His own compositions in turn transformed the possibilities of what Rock and Pop could do not simply as music, but as a literary force. Almost singlehandedly, Dylan expanded the parameters of what subject matter, language and tone were suitable for a Rock song. To consider, for example, the shift, from the Beatles' "I Want to Hold Your Hand" (1964) to "A Day in the Life" (1967) is to see the influence of Dylan, who inspired a generation of songwriters to think of lyric writing as not just a craft but an art form.

In this lesson, students will investigate Dylan as poet by comparing the literary structure of "Subterranean Homesick Blues" and Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl." They will investigate the differences between poetry and song and examine the similarities between the two in terms of textual structure and style, using their analyses to write original extensions of the poem or song.



OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The literary definitions of tone, diction, rhyme, repetition, and rhythm
- A basic approach to literary analysis
- A brief history of Bob Dylan's early musical influences

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Complete a simple poetry analysis
- Make connections between beat poetry and folk music
- Connect the structure of beat poetry and folk music to the larger artistic climate of the time
- Use their analysis to write an extension of Dylan's song or Ginsberg's poem
- Common Core: Students will compare and contrast the textual forms of poetry and song (CCSS Reading 5; CCSS Reading 7; CCSS Reading 9)
- Common Core: Students will evaluate and characterize the music of Bob Dylan (CCSS Writing 1; CCSS Writing 9; CCSS Language 3)

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Ask students what they think the difference is between a poem and the lyrics to a song.

- If there is a difference, how would you distinguish between the two?
- What is the difference between a poet and a songwriter? Is it possible to be both at the same time? Can you think of any specific examples?

2. Read the following quote by music journalist and critic Robert Christgau: *"The songwriter who seems to sound most like a poet is Bob Dylan ... Poems are read or said. Songs are sung ... Dylan is a songwriter, not a poet."*

3. Ask students if they agree with Christgau that there is a difference between a song and a poem, a songwriter and a poet. Why or why not?

4. Explain to students that in this lesson they will investigate whether Bob Dylan should be considered a songwriter, a poet, or a mixture of the two.

PROCEDURE:

1. Play the video clip of Bono discussing Dylan and Beat poetry and discuss:
 - What do you think Bono means when he says that Dylan gave other artists a new “vocabulary, a vocabulary that you never heard in that place before”?
 - What was happening in cafes in the early 1960s that wasn’t happening in the rock and roll world, according to Bono? What kind of people did Dylan meet at these cafes?
 - What does Bono mean when he says Dylan “set words free”?
2. Distribute Handout 1: Allen Ginsberg. Ask for a volunteer to read it aloud.
3. Break students into pairs. Explain to students that they will be working with a partner to compare and contrast the lyrics of a Dylan song with a Ginsberg poem.
4. Distribute Handout 2: Comparing Texts and Handout 3: Excerpts from “Howl” and “Subterranean Homesick Blues.”
5. Explain to students that before they begin working with their partner, they will watch videos of the two works they will be comparing, and they should try to identify any structural elements (such as rhyme scheme, repeated words, use of a chorus, etc.) of the works as they watch. (Depending on the skill level of the class, you may wish to review/clarify these elements with students.)
6. Play the video of “Subterranean Homesick Blues” (1965) by Bob Dylan, pointing out to students that Ginsberg appears at the left in the background during the video. Briefly discuss:
 - What did you notice about the lyrics? (Answers may include that it is a long song that uses a lot of words, that it is hard to hear all of the words, etc.)
 - Is there a rhythm to the lyrics? If so, how would you describe it?
 - Were you able to identify any other structural elements?
7. Play a clip of Allen Ginsberg’s live reading of “Howl” (1956) and ask students to look for similarities in tone and rhythm between the poem and “Subterranean Homesick Blues.”
8. Ask students to use Handout 3 (the excerpts from the two works) and what they have seen in the videos to complete their analysis of the two works on the chart in Handout 2. Briefly discuss:
 - “Howl” was published almost a decade before “Subterranean Homesick Blues.” How do you think Dylan may have been influenced by Ginsberg?
 - Based on this comparison, would you consider “Subterranean Homesick Blues” to be more of a song or a poem? Why?
9. Bring the class back together as a whole, and ask a few pairs to share their analysis. Briefly discuss:
 - Break students back into pairs and ask each pair to compose two additional lines for either “Subterranean Homesick Blues” or “Howl,” keeping their original phrases in line with their analysis. (For example, students could write two lines continuing Dylan’s rhyme scheme in “Subterranean Homesick Blues” or using the repetition of the word “who” in “Howl.”)
 - Reconvene the class as a whole and again ask for volunteers to share their compositions with the rest of the group. Invite others to comment on the structural and creative choices used.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Return to the quote from Robert Christgau at the beginning of the lesson: “Poems are read or said. Songs are sung ... Dylan is a songwriter, not a poet.” Briefly discuss:

- Based on your analysis, do you think Christgau is correct? Why or why not?
- How do students view the element of performance in each piece? Is it necessary, or can the words from the poem or song stand on their own?
- How did Dylan’s use of poetic techniques in his songwriting influence later songwriters?

WRITING PROMPT:

Based on what you have seen in this lesson, how would you characterize Dylan? As a poet, a songwriter, or as someone who straddled the line between the two? Use details, examples, and quotes from the lesson to support your position.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

Note: for this extension, the instructor will need a copy of Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Hadda Be Playing on the Jukebox” (1975) as well as a copy of rock band Rage Against the Machine’s recording of it.

1. Begin by asking students to read all or part of Allen Ginsberg’s “Hadda Be Playing on the Jukebox” (1975)
2. Have students listen to the version of the poem performed by rock band Rage Against the Machine.
3. Use the questions in the “comparing texts” handout to compare the written text of the poem with the performance.
4. Discuss with students:
 - Does the performance change either the tone or the meaning of the poem?
 - Does the music contribute in some way to the text? If so, how and what does it contribute?
 - Does performance seem like a vital part of Beat poetry? Why or why not?

Explore the historical significance of the poem, such as Ginsberg’s allusions to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Cold War, and the Kent State shootings.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text

Reading 5: Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

Reading 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Reading 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

Writing 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Writing 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language for Grades 6-12

Language 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Bono – Dylan As Beat Poet
- Bob Dylan – Subterranean Homesick Blues (1965)
- Allen Ginsberg – Howl (1955)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Bob Dylan

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - Allen Ginsberg
- Handout 2 - Comparing Texts
- Handout 3 - Excerpts from “Howl” and “Subterranean Homesick Blues”