



SINGER-SONGWriters AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did the singer-songwriters of the 1960s and 70s address the concerns of the environmental movement?

OVERVIEW

We are stardust

We are golden

And we've got to get ourselves

Back to the garden

– Joni Mitchell, “Woodstock” (1970)



In 1962, marine biologist Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, a chilling account of the damage done to the environment by pollution, particularly in the form of chemicals and pesticides. Eight years later, on the first “Earth Day,” Americans all over the country joined in protests over the degradation of the country’s air and water, launching an environmental movement that continues today. Popular music began to reflect the same concerns.

This influence was particularly apparent in the work of the Singer-Songwriters. Some made assertive statements about protecting the land from the ravages of corporate greed: As Jackson Browne sang in “Before the Deluge,” “Some of them were angry at the way the earth was abused/By the men who learned how to forge her beauty into power.” In “Big Yellow Taxi,” Joni Mitchell lamented that “They paved paradise and put up a parking lot,” and invoked a world where “They took all the trees / Put ‘em in a tree museum / And they charged the people a dollar and a half just to see ‘em.” Mitchell explicitly called attention to the insecticide DDT, a specific concern at the heart of *Silent Spring*.

At the same time, many Singer-Songwriters expressed a more general unease about America’s increasing urban sprawl and suburbanization, and a longing for a closer connection to the land. “In my mind I’m gone to Carolina / Can’t you see the sunshine / Can’t you just feel the moonshine,” sang James Taylor in “Carolina in My Mind.” In “After the Gold Rush,” Neil Young painted a portrait of “a fanfare blowin’ to the sun / That was floating on the breeze / Look at Mother Nature on the run in the 1970s.”

In this lesson, students will analyze a series of songs articulating a connection to nature and the environment — a longing to “get ourselves back to the garden” — and examine the ways in which they reflect a growing attention to environmental issues in American culture.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The main ideas and historical importance of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which detailed threats to the environment from pollution and the use of pesticides
- The events surrounding the celebration of the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970
- The growing attention of Singer-Songwriters in the late 1960s and early 1970s to themes relating to nature and the environment
- The musical contributions of such Singer-Songwriters as Joni Mitchell, James Taylor, Neil Young, and Jackson Browne.

2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Identify themes relating to nature and the environment in both the lyrics and musical forms of several singer-songwriter songs of the late 1960s and early 1970s
- Connect musical expression to the historical context in which it was created
- Common Core: Students will analyze how Carson introduces and develops her arguments about the dangers of the "silent spring," with particular attention to the order in which she enumerates her main points. (CCSS Reading 3).

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ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Display the following image of environmental protesters:



Discuss as a class:

- Who are the people in the picture?
- What are they doing? Where are they doing it?
- What props are they using?
- What is their general message?

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: (CONTINUED)

2. Display image of the front page of the Wisconsin State Journal from April 23, 1970, along with the excerpt from the lead story:

Youth joined hands with age across the generation gap Wednesday in a gigantic array of demonstrations pleading for an end to pollution.

Earth Day, as Wednesday was designated, was a phenomenon in this age of protest—a day when Americans of all shades of belief joined in protesting the spread of contamination which threatens the very existence of life on this planet.

—Wisconsin State Journal, April 23, 1970

Discuss as a class:

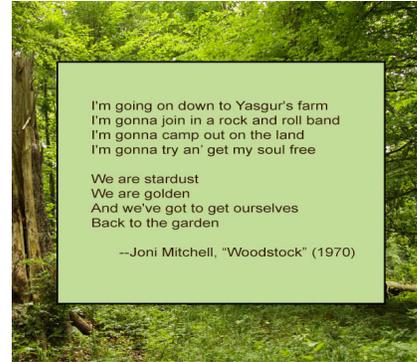
- What does the main headline say? What news is this headline reporting?
- What was “Earth Day”? What were people protesting?
- What does the article say about who participated in Earth Day? Why was this particularly newsworthy in 1970?

3. Inform students that the first Earth Day was on April 22, 1970, and that environmental protests were held all over the country. Earth Day continues to be commemorated every year.

PROCEDURE:

- Note: You may wish to assign the opening activity with the reading from *Silent Spring* as homework to be completed the night before the lesson. In that case, the discussion questions listed below may be assigned as a homework writing activity.
- Distribute Handout 1: Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*.
- Ask for a volunteer to read the short introduction out loud.
- Divide students into pairs. The members of each pair will read the passage aloud, alternating by paragraph. Both students should follow along, underlining key words and phrases.
- Ask each pair to discuss:
 - How does Carson describe America in the first two paragraphs? How do the people interact with the environment in this world?
 - What does she describe happening to America in the rest of the chapter?
 - How does Carson develop the idea of the “voices of spring”? How is each voice developed? What does she suggest ultimately happens to these voices?
 - How does Carson build her argument? How does her introduction of each “voice” build toward her conclusion?
 - Do you think Carson is effective in painting a picture of what is happening to the environment? Why or why not?
 - What do you predict the rest of Carson’s book deals with?
 - Why do you think this book resonated with so many readers in the early 1960s?
- Play the short excerpt from Joni Mitchell’s live performance of her 1970 song “Woodstock” and display the lyrics below. (If students are unfamiliar with Woodstock, briefly explain that it was

a three-day music festival in 1969 that attracted almost half a million people. It was held on farmland owned by a man named Max Yasgur in Bethel, N.Y.)



- Discuss:
 - What does Mitchell suggest happens when you “camp out on the land”?
 - What do you think Mitchell means when she says, “we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden”?
 - Is the idea of “the garden” similar to Carson’s depiction of farmlands “where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings”? Why or why not?
 - According to the lyrics, what else would people do while they were at Yasgur’s farm? What does Mitchell seem to be suggesting about the connection between Rock and Roll and being back in the garden? How might these two together help “get my soul free”?
- Set up four listening stations around the room.
 - Station 1: Joni Mitchell, “Big Yellow Taxi” (1970)
 - Station 2: Neil Young, “After the Gold Rush” (1970)
 - Station 3: James Taylor, “Carolina in My Mind” (1968)
 - Station 4: Jackson Brown, “Before the Deluge” (1974)
- Distribute Handout 2: Lyrics for Songs in This Lesson and Handout 3: Comparing Four Songs.
- Instruct students to visit each station to listen to the song excerpts and follow along with the lyrics. They will record

PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

their observations on Handout 3. Divide students so that an equal number begin at each station. (Note: It is up to the instructor to decide whether students will complete this activity individually or in small groups or pairs.)

11. Allow students sufficient time to visit all four stations and complete the chart on Handout 3.

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

1. Reconvene the class and discuss:

- Are there common themes to all four songs? If so, what are they?
- Are all the songs overtly about the environmental movement? Are some more explicit about threats to the environment than others? Do you think, for example, that “Carolina in My Mind” is a song about the environmental movement? Why or why not? Does a song have to be explicitly about a historical event to reflect what is happening at the time it was written/performed? Why or why not?
- Remember that these performers are called “Singer-Songwriters” because they generally perform material that they themselves have written. Why do you think many Singer-Songwriters might have chosen to write about themes relating to nature and the environment in the late 1960s and early 1970s?
- Do these songs reflect the influence of Silent Spring? What specific evidence can you find in the songs to suggest that they do?
- Do these songs reflect the spirit of Earth Day and the idea of getting “back to the garden”? Cite specific evidence in your answer.
- If you had to pick one of these songs to be the theme song for Earth Day, which would it be and why?

WRITING PROMPT:

How did the Singer-Songwriters of the late 1960s and early 70s reflect the concerns of the burgeoning environmental movement in their music? Be sure to discuss the influence of the publication of Silent Spring and the first Earth Day on the environmental movement in your answer.

EXTENSIONS:

1. Ask students to research the history of Earth Day since 1970. Have them identify songs by popular artists from later eras that reflect the concerns expressed on Earth Day. You may also wish to ask students to identify a current song that might be used as a theme for an upcoming Earth Day celebration in your school or classroom.
2. Have students engage in a creative writing exercise by writing their own song lyrics about the current state of the environment.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

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

Reading 3: Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a 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 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 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Speaking and Listening 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments

Theme 8: Science, Technology, and Society

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Select: Choose music appropriate for a specific purpose or context.

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

- Jackson Browne – Before the Deluge (1976)
- Neil Young – After the Gold Rush (1970)
- James Taylor – Carolina In My Mind (1968)
- Joni Mitchell – Woodstock (1970)
- Joni Mitchell – Big Yellow Taxi (1970)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Jackson Browne
- Joni Mitchell
- James Taylor
- Neil Young

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: Rachel Carson, Silent Spring
- Handout 2: Lyrics for Songs in This Lesson
- Handout 3: Comparison Chart