

Guthrie and The Grapes of Wrath

Rationale

Studying the music of Woody Guthrie along with John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* will enhance students' understanding of both works and of the historical conditions which produced them. Students will see how these artists drew inspiration from the common people and how both attempted to use their art as agents of social change.

Objectives

Students will:

1. Recognize thematic parallels between Woody Guthrie's music and Steinbeck's novel;
2. Develop an appreciation for *The Grapes of Wrath* and the music of Woody Guthrie, as works of art and historical documents;
3. Explore the idea of the "American spirit."

Materials

CDs/tapes/records of Guthrie songs; lyrics to "This Land Is Your Land;" Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*; video (optional).

Audience

Suggested for high school English or social studies students, grades 10-12.

Timeframe

2-3 class periods in addition to periods already devoted to study of novel.

Procedures

1. Read Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.
2. Introduce music and life of Woody Guthrie, considering the following quote:

Woody is just Woody. Thousands of people do not know he had any other name. He is just a voice and a guitar. He sings the songs of a people and I suspect that he is, in a way, that people. Harsh voiced and nasal, his guitar hanging like a tire iron on a rusty rim, there is nothing sweet about Woody, and there is nothing sweet about the songs he sings. But there is something more important for those who will listen. There is the will of a people to endure and fight against oppression. I think we call this the American spirit. - John Steinbeck

Possibly show video *Hard Travelin': Woody Guthrie* (MGM/UA release 60084 - 70 min.) or read excerpts from *Bound for Glory*, Guthrie's autobiography. Play some Guthrie songs. Discuss the parallels between Guthrie's life and music and

the experience of the Joad family. How well does Tom Joad fit Steinbeck's description of Guthrie? How does Tom change over the course of the novel?

3. Distribute lyrics of "This Land Is Your Land." Play song, focusing student attention on the last several (relatively unknown) verses. Discuss connections between the song and the novel considering the following:
 - Use of irony (e.g. beauty of land vs. condition of people)
 - Attitude toward the land
 - Idea of the "American spirit"
 - Political implications/views

Evaluation

Drawing on their knowledge of the Steinbeck's novel and the music and life of Woody Guthrie, students should be able to complete the following writing assignment. Imagine that Tom Joad meets Woody Guthrie. Write a short scene in which you:

- describe the setting and circumstances of the meeting
- develop a brief dialogue between the two characters

Scene will be evaluated based on the plausibility of the meeting and dialogue as well as on dramatic elements such as characterization, etc.

Extensions

Listen to songs from Bruce Springsteen's 1995 album *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. Why would Springsteen use that allusion? Comment on the influence of Woody Guthrie.

How do later singers such as Pete Seeger and Bob Dylan carry on the efforts of Woody Guthrie? Are there writers during the 1960s whose themes have been influenced by Steinbeck?

Consider the writings of Frederick Jackson Turner and his idea of the "rugged individual" in light of the music of Woody Guthrie and the writings of John Steinbeck.

Selected Recordings

A Legendary Performer (RCA, 1977)

The Greatest Songs of Woody Guthrie (Vanguard, 1988)

Dust Bowl Ballads (Rounder, 1988)

Further Reading

Guthrie, Woody. *Bound for Glory*. New York: Dutton, 1943.

Hard Travelin': Woody Guthrie (MGM/UA release 600884) - 70 min. video

Klein, Joe. *Woody Guthrie: A Life*. New York: Knopf, 1980.

Lomax, Alan, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*. New York: Music Sales, 1967.

The Woody Guthrie Songbook. New York: Woody Guthrie Publications, 1976.

Background

Woody Guthrie

Woody Guthrie (1912- 1967) used the American folk song as a form of social protest. Drawing his inspiration from the people, Guthrie wanted his music to appeal to all races and creeds. He wrote nearly 1,000 songs, many of them new words put to old tunes. His songs, in a hillbilly singing style, are about social justice, the American Dream and the trials and tribulations of everyday life.

Born Woodrow Wilson Guthrie in Okemah, Oklahoma, Guthrie left home at 16 with his harmonica and traveled through Texas and Louisiana. During a visit to his Uncle Jeff Guthrie in Pampa, Texas Guthrie learned how to play chords on the guitar. During the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, Guthrie, like many others headed towards California looking for food, shelter, and a job. After riding the rails as a hobo, he finally found work in Los Angeles hosting a radio show on KFVD. He also wrote a daily column for the communist newspaper, The People's Daily World. Guthrie's first-hand knowledge of life on the road and the plight of the migrant worker caused him to be a supporter of organized labor and other left-wing political causes.

At the start of World War II Guthrie moved east to New York. He wrote anti-Hitler songs and had a sign on his guitar saying "This Machine Kills Fascists." From 1943- 1945 Guthrie was with the merchant marines. He wrote "This Land Is Your Land" after the war in response to a wartime favorite, the patriotic "God Bless America." During the McCarthy era of the 1950s, Guthrie's songs were labeled "un-American."

Guthrie's fame grew throughout the years. His songs, however, were not recorded until 1940. Guthrie had a tremendous influence on Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and the folk revival of the 1950s. He went on the road with Seeger singing in support of organized labor. Seeger also organized a series of memorial concerts for Guthrie in the late Sixties and early Seventies. In 1976 Guthrie's autobiography, Bound for Glory, was made into a motion picture.