

Using Blues to Teach Literary Devices: Jimi Hendrix “The Wind Cries Mary”

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Rationale

Jimi Hendrix’s “The Wind Cries Mary” is an ideal song, not just to illustrate personification, but also to demonstrate how poetic devices enhance the meaning of the poem. As soon as the students recognize that the speaker is mourning the loss of a special person, the purpose of the personification will blossom for them.

Objectives

The student will be able to:

1. identify and explain examples of personification;
2. use literary analysis skills to support an interpretation of the plot; explain how the music compliments the tone of the lyrics;
3. recognize the reason for personification being the most appropriate poetic device for this poem;
4. develop a supportable statement of them for the song.

Materials

CD or tape player and the music and lyrics for “The Wind Cries Mary”

Time Frame

One class period should be sufficient to discuss the song; additional time may be needed for preliminary work on poetic devices.

Audience

This song should be accessible to students grades 10-12.

Procedures

Students should be familiar with the term “personification.” Preliminary discussion may involve everyday, common examples of how we give human traits to inanimate objects. For this song a good opening question might be, “How do your perceptions of your surroundings change when you’re really upset?” Distribute the lyrics to each student and play the song. Class discussion should focus on the following points:

1. Examples of personification. In addition to the title and last line of each stanza, at least five more examples of personification exist. Students should note the progression of the rising and then falling intensity of the wind’s “voice” in the incremental refrain at the end of each stanza.
2. The feeling of loss and depression. In each stanza, the imagery suggests the speaker’s profound sadness. The stanzas progress from former childhood

- pleasures ("the clowns have all gone to bed"), the loss of a companion ("somewhere a king has no wife"), the loss of life ("the life that lives is dead"), to grim thoughts of the future ("will the wind every remember..."). The subdued music (by Hendrix's standards) adds to this feeling.
3. The reason for personification. Once the students recognize the deep feelings of loss and loneliness the speaker is experiencing, they may have one of those "aha!" moments when they realize that the consistent use of personification is an emotional or psychological attempt by the speaker to bring everything around him to life. If his beloved is gone, he will attempt to fill the void by investing the surrounding inanimate objects with life.
 4. Altered perceptions brought on by grief. Fortunately, this is a Hendrix song where altered perception is brought on by a strong emotion--grief. Just as bad news can change the way we view our surroundings, the speaker's tragedy causes him to see life differently. The traffic lights (that may control his progress on the road of life) will "turn a blue tomorrow." Some of the examples of personification add an air of unreality to the scene--"a broom sweeping" with no guiding human hand, "happiness standing on down the street."

Selected Recordings

"The Wind Cries Mary" written and performed by Jimi Hendrix

Source: The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (<http://www.rockhall.com/teacher/sti-lesson-7/>)