Lesson Plan following The Most Southern Place on Earth: Music, Culture and History in the Delta NEH Institute

Background – Each year, I introduce an activity in class that I call connections. Basically, students are encouraged to see a relationship between texts being studied or class activities and events taking place outside of class. I model making connections by providing daily examples from sources such as NPR, *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and my personal life. When students make connections, they write their connection on a poster board. Each poster board has a letter at the top. There are eleven boards that spell out CONNECTIONS. When the C board is filled up, it is displayed on the classroom wall. As the year goes on, more letters are added. Students often end up filling the backs of the boards with their connections after the fronts of the boards are filled up.

The lesson – As a way to introduce my English 10 Honors students to the connections concept, they will engage in an analysis activity in which they will read passages from William Ferris’s *Give My Poor Heart Ease: Voices of the Mississippi Blues* and explain how those passages relate to content from their summer reading novel *To Kill a Mockingbird.* In addition to introducing the connections concept, this activity will assess student knowledge of the summer reading and open a window of discussion into various aspects of the novel.

Suggested answers - At the end of the lesson, I have provided suggested answers for each passage. I have found that when comparing two works of literature in the past, students have generated valid responses with cogent reasoning that I had not considered. My hope is that here too students will identify points of comparison I had not imagined.

Directions – Five passages are printed for you from William Ferris’s *Give My Poor Heart Ease: Voices of the Mississippi Blues*. Read each passage and consider how the content can connect with *To Kill a Mockingbird.* Use your copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as you try to identify specific comparisons. Write a paragraph explaining the relationship you see between the Ferris passage and the one you’ve selected from *To Kill a Mockingbird.* Please include a quotation with page number from *To Kill a Mockingbird* in each of your responses.

Passage One

You don’t never hear nobody talking about being scared of spirits now. They ain’t got no time to think of it. But a long time ago, there was a whole lot of people would talk of spooks. White people would use the word “ghosts.” They say “ghosts,” and not “spooks.” I don’t know why there’s the separation in that. But right now, the average person in Leland, if you go and talk with them, they’ll say, “Oh, there ain’t no such thing as a ghost.”

Some don’t believe in them. But I believe in ghosts. I dig graves for a funeral home. But I don’t never let night catch me out in the cemetery. I always get through before night or either wait and finish the next day.

A lot of colored people believe in what they call the hoodoo. Most of the white people, they don’t believe in hoodoo. But it is something. It’s got to be. You can get sick --- you don’t have to be real sick --- but your blood can get wrong, and you get where you’ll lay down and see things. People like that are “low sick,” and they’ll see things. When my stepdaddy died, he used to say, “Look at them dogs. Get them dogs out of here.”

Well that’s low sick. I got that way once. I was small, and my grandmother made me sleep on this cot that we had got from some white people. I just couldn’t rest on that cot. I’d see all kinds of men and little boys and everything coming up around that cot and hitting at me. And I heard my grandmother and them whispering and saying they believed I was going to die, the way I was carrying on. So they finally got rid of that cot. And I didn’t feel that way no more. I don’t know what it was.

James “Son Ford” Thomas - Leland, Mississippi, 1968

Passage Two

If a black boy see a white gal and he wanna talk to her, don’t you talk to her in Mississippi. If she want to talk to you that bad, take her right on cross the line over there. If she wanna talk to you, she’ll talk to you. But now don’t try to sleep with her here cause if they catch you sleeping with her here, the first thing you know, she gonna say, “Oh, he ravishing me.”

You say, “What the hell they talking about?”

But that’s the way they all go. Ain’t you always reading papers about, “Oh, he ravished Mrs. So and So.”

Gussie Tobe - Leland, Mississppi, 1968

Passage Three

They take you out of school, made us quit going to school to work the land. That’s why so much blues come out of Mississippi.

People like the blues. Good times. You couldn’t have nothing but a good time. When you’re all by yourself, what you gonna do? You can’t be with nobody else. White folks on that side, and the Negroes on this side. You couldn’t go to the white side of Leland. You couldn’t go over there. They better not catch you on their side of the tracks. They would put you in jail, like you was trying to steal something.

Shelby “Poppa Jazz” Brown - Leland, Mississippi, 1973

Passage Four

I have known many men to just walk around, and these white people kill them out on their place. That’s a fact. They ain’t never had to have no license to kill a nigger. It’s a license for everything else. You got to buy a license to kill everything but a nigger. We was always in season. But if we keep on, you’ll have to have a license to kill a nigger. Then it won’t be so many of them doing it. They used to kill them whenever they wanted to. Beat them to death.

Jasper Love - Clarksdale, Mississippi, 1968

Passage Five

During the sixties, the Rose hill congregation gathered on the first Sunday of every month to hear Reverend Isaac Thomas preach his powerful sermons. The sound of its hymns drifting across graves on the hill always reminded me of the church’s rich musical history. There were no hymnals in the church, and the congregation sang its Dr. Watts hymns – originally composed by Isaac Watts – from memory. In the familiar, chanted pattern known as “lining out,” a lead singer spoke each line, and the congregation responded by singing it. This style of signing hymns originated in colonial America and is still used today in rural churches in Mississippi and other parts of the South. During each service at Rose Hill Church, Amanda Gordon, a tall, thin elder in her seventies, led the congregation as she lined out Dr. Watts hymns in her high-pitched voice.

William Ferris

Suggested answers –

Passage One – Jem, Dill, and Scout discuss hot steams in chapter four. Jem recounts what you are supposed to say to repel a haint: “Angel-bright, life-in-death; get off the road, don’t suck my breath.” Scout tells Dill not listen to Jem claiming, “Calpurnia says that’s nigger-talk.”

In chapter twenty-eight, Jem and Scout are both dismissive of various superstitions they were aware of a few years prior: “We laughed. Haints, Hot Steams, incantations, secret signs, had vanished with our years as mist with sunshine.”

Passage Two – In chapter nineteen during Tom Robinson’s testimony, he addresses the quandary he was in when Mayella Ewell made sexual advances toward him. He says he was scared he’d be in court to “face up to what I didn’t do.”

In chapter twenty, Atticus points out that Mayella Ewell broke the social code and now must get rid of Tom Robinson: “She must put Tom Robinson away from her. Tom Robinson was her daily reminder of what she did. What did she do? She tempted a negro.”

In chapter twenty-five there is the following observation: “Tom was a dead man the minute Mayella Ewell opened her mouth and screamed.”

Passage Three – In chapter two, it is pointed out that “most of the first grade had failed it last year.” In the next chapter, Walter Cunninham explains why it is so difficult for him to pass the first grade: “’Reason I can’t pass the first grade, Mr. Finch, is I’ve had to stay out ever’ spring an’ help Papa with the choppin’, but there’s another’n at the house now that’s field size.’”

In terms of the segregation of the races, there are multiple examples in the novel. Blacks and whites have different churches, and they live in completely separate sections of town. In chapter fourteen, Aunt Alexandra has a meltdown when Scout asks to go spend time at Calpurnia’s house. In chapter twenty-three, Jem describes the social hierarchy in Maycomb County as he sees it with “colored folks” occupying the bottom rung. In chapter twenty-five, Atticus drives to Helen Robinson’s house to tell her of her husband’s death. This is another reminder of the segregated housing in Maycomb.

Passage Four – In chapter three, the importance of the hunting season is established: “In Maycomb County, hunting out of season was a misdemeanor at law, a capital felony in the eyes of the populace.”

In contrast, a passage in chapter twenty-five shows the white populace’s general reaction to Tom Robinson having been shot seventeen times: “Maycomb was interested by the news of Tom’s death for perhaps two days... To Maycomb, Tom’s death was Typical. Typical of a nigger to cut and run…Nigger always comes out in ‘em.”

Passage Five – Perhaps the most literal comparison of the bunch is the “lining out” passage. When taken to services at Calpurnia’s church in chapter twelve, Scout asks “’How’re we gonna sing it if there ain’t any hymn-books?’” On the way home from church, Calpurnia identifies the method for singing the hymns: “’Yeah, it’s called linin’. They’ve done it that way as long as I can remember.’”