

## Addressing Issues of Social Justice, Political Justice, Moral Character, and Coming of Age in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.



### A LitTunes Lesson Plan

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[http://www.corndancer.com/tunes/tunes\\_lp019/lp08\\_mckbrd.html](http://www.corndancer.com/tunes/tunes_lp019/lp08_mckbrd.html)

#### Type of Activity:

Novel study

#### Approximate time:

One to four 50-minute class periods

#### Grades:

eighth, ninth, and tenth

#### Overview:

Widely considered the most frequently taught whole-length text in schools across America, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and its central characters, Scout, Jem, and Atticus, create a fascinating story that continues to grip the hearts and minds of readers young and old. Typically taught somewhere between the eighth and tenth grades, the novel is often remembered as the first classic novel students read and study for school. Hundreds of thousands of teachers have presented this text to students in thousands of different ways.

In exploring how we could present this text in the LitTunes context, we thought first of a resource at the center of our collaborative writing efforts: *The Green Book of Songs by Subject* [[http://www.corndancer.com/tunes/tunes\\_web.html](http://www.corndancer.com/tunes/tunes_web.html)]. Along with its companion online database, the *Green Book* categorizes all genres and eras of popular music by more than 2,000 themes. It is not necessary to purchase the resource to complete this assignment, but our lesson serves as an example of what is possible when teachers make song-to-text connections for both classic and contemporary works of literature. Chris began using this resource in 2002 as a high school teacher. Lauren is general manager of the Nashville, Tennessee-based company that publishes the *Green Book*.

We began the process by generating a list of four common themes typically addressed in the teaching of *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

1. **Social inequality** based on race, class, and other social characteristics (e.g., mental health).
2. **Political inequality** and the structures that perpetuate injustice and lack of equal rights.
3. **Moral character** and the commitment to live one's convictions.
4. **Loss of childhood innocence** and development of the ability to experience life from the perspective of others.

To address these wide-sweeping and common themes, we first unpacked them and then searched the *Green Book* for tunes through which these messages would be most readily taught.

**The following lesson plan** is a combination of the songs we found to help illustrate and teach these themes and four different pedagogical approaches to helping make content comprehensible to students. These approaches could be used as either a single lesson or four separate lessons to enhance tried and true methods of teaching Lee's masterwork and other novels pertinent to the language arts classroom. Each approach incorporates American popular music as a bridge between our students and their music and between literary themes and lyrics.

### Objectives:

1. Through writing and discussion activities, students will engage four themes prevalent in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
2. The students will identify text-to-song connections between *To Kill a Mockingbird* and popular music.
3. The students will generate their own text-to-song connections between their music and the school-based novel.
4. The students will demonstrate mastery of one of the four thematic concepts by composing explanations of how their musical connections further their understanding of a theme of the novel.

### Materials:



MP3 player or CD player



Suggested songs and themes based on *Green Book Of Songs By Subject* categories.

## **Theme One: Social Inequality**

Judgments made by society based on based on race, class, and other social characteristics (e.g., mental health).

### ***Green Book Of Songs By Subject categories:***

- Crazy
- Law & Order
- Small Town Life
- Prejudice
- Politics: Social Injustice
- Social Class: General
- Social Class: Rural
- Social Outcasts

### **Songs:**

- “Baloney Again” by Mark Knopfler
- “Law Is For The Protection Of The People” by Kris Kristofferson
- “People Are People” by A Perfect Circle
- “Shine” by Ry Cooder
- “Simon” by Lifehouse

## **Theme Two: Political Inequality**

Political structures that support inequality, unequal application of the laws, Jim Crow.

### ***Green Book Of Songs By Subject categories:***

- Law & Order
- Politics: Politics & Government
- Politics: Social Injustice
- Prejudice
- Protest
- Society: Criticizing Modern Society

### **Songs:**

- “Alabama Blues” by J. B. Lenoir
- “When Will I Get To Be Called A Man” by Big Bill Broonzy
- “The Lonesome Death Of Hattie Carroll” by Bob Dylan
- “The Death Of Emmett Till” by Bob Dylan
- “Strange Fruit” by Billie Holiday
- “Jena” by John Mellencamp

## **Theme Three: Moral Character**

The commitment to live one's convictions, as Atticus does.

### ***Green Book Of Songs By Subject categories:***

- Brotherhood
- Character & Integrity
- Ego
- Faith & Hope
- Families: Fathers
- Motivation
- Teaching Values

### **Songs:**

- "There But For Fortune" by Phil Ochs
- "I Choose" by India.Arie
- "Hands" by Jewel
- "What Say You" by Travis Tritt
- "He Was My Brother" by Simon and Garfunkel
- "Lie On Lie" by Chalk Farm
- "Atticus Taught Me" by Cary Cooper

## **Theme Four: Loss of Childhood Innocence**

Development of the ability to experience life from the perspective of others.

### ***Green Book Of Songs By Subject categories:***

- Aging
- Brotherhood
- Character & Integrity
- Help
- Love: Power of Love
- People
- Prejudice
- Search
- Self-Awareness
- Prejudice

### **Songs:**

- "Don't Laugh At Me" by Mark Wills
- "Walk A Mile In My Shoes" by Joe South
- "Everyday People" by Sly and The Family Stone
- "Walk Tall" by John Mellencamp
- "All Kinda People" by Robert Palmer

### Setup:

Begin the discussion of the four themes outlined above by having students listen to a song and discuss the lyrics as a whole class. One song familiar to most students is “Don’t Laugh At Me” by Mark Wills. While this song is often used in bullying workshops, it provides a straightforward, understandable launching point to begin digging into songs and discerning meaning from them. Discussion of the song often turns up many of the issues and themes related to the novel.

### Procedure:

Rather than providing a specific set of procedures for each of the themes, we have put together four approaches which will work to connect the themes to the novel. This is designed to allow for more leeway in terms of when — before, during or after reading the novel — teachers feel the discussion of each theme fits best.

#### ***Approach One:***

##### **Using Music to Illustrate a Theme**

1. Split the class into four or five different groups.
2. Have each group examine and discuss the lyrics to one song which we have provided as representative of the theme.
3. Have each group develop and present a summary of the song, connections to the novel, and overall thematic relationship of the song to the class in a short group presentation.
4. Lead the class in a culminating discussion of the theme based on their presentations of each song.

#### ***Approach Two:***

##### **Using Music as a Prompt for Responsive Narrative Writing**

1. Begin by reviewing the anticipatory discussion of the Mark Wills song. Ask students to brainstorm and talk about personal experiences of being the center of negative attention, of seeing people laughing at them or others. The idea persisting through this discussion will often be one of dehumanization and how a bully’s laughter can have that effect on the victim, a situation analogous to the racism and classism present in the novel.
2. Bring in examples from the novel and the songs, especially the theme of Social Injustice, to further this discussion. Again, highlight the dehumanization aspect of each song.
3. Ask the students to select one example of dehumanization from the book or their own experience to retell in a narrative form. This could be either a major, week-long, writing process or just a brief draft.

### ***Approach Three:***

#### **Getting Connected to the Text**

- 1.** At the outset of teaching the novel, choose several songs and spend one class period discussing them, either as a whole group or several small groups. Tell the students that as they read *To Kill A Mockingbird*, they are to attempt to make connections between these songs and the text and to make and track the same types of connections between the text and their own music.
- 2.** Distribute the handout, “Connections to the Novel,” and instruct students to keep a record of the connections they discover.
- 3.** Periodically throughout the reading of the novel, check students’ progress and have them discuss the connections they have made.
- 4.** Using these musical connections as a starting point, have the students make connections from other popular culture outlets back to the novel.

### ***Approach Four:***

#### **Identifying and Connecting Themes from Music and the Novel**

- 1.** Split the class into partner groups.
- 2.** Randomly distribute the songs from the four thematic groupings.
- 3.** Have the students analyze the song for thematic meaning and identify which theme presented here their lyric fits best.
- 4.** Either during the reading of the novel or after completing it, ask the students to find as many different quotations as possible in the text of *To Kill A Mockingbird* that go along with their song.
- 5.** Have the student present the song and the connections to class at the end of the unit. This could take the form of an oral presentation and/or a writing activity.

#### **Summary:**

This lesson plan builds on the power of popular music to dramatize literary themes in the secondary school curriculum, and the ability to enhance students’ critical thinking by making thematic connections between song and text. The lesson’s “choose your own adventure” approach is consistent with the highly individual connections that songs inspire in each student. Of course, this lesson is an amalgamation of several different units that have been field tested in the high school classroom with several different novels. These approaches work on multiple fronts.

*To Kill A Mockingbird* is one of the best works available in terms of creating long-lasting teachable moments. The issues presented are as important in our society now as they were when Lee crafted her masterwork in 1962. By including some of the voices in popular songs, with their short and easily accessible attempts to address similar issues, we can help our students gain multiple perspectives and the ability to empathize with all of mankind.

### Enrichment:

This lesson provides numerous opportunities for enrichment. Here are a couple of ideas that bubbled to the surface as we finished this lesson:

🎵 Students will invariably identify many songs in their own music catalog which may tie thematically to the novel — or connect to learning goals in other ways as outlined by **the LitTunes approach to teaching literacy** [[http://www.corndancer.com/tunes/tunes\\_mission.html](http://www.corndancer.com/tunes/tunes_mission.html)]. For a class project, challenge students to create a classroom version of the *Green Book of Songs By Subject*. This will provide a useful outlet for all of the songs they connected to the book, and will empower them as co-creators of the curriculum for use with future classes. Over a period of time, these connections will be representative of the changing landscapes of classrooms, popular culture, and our students themselves.

🎵 Have students nominate songs for inclusion in the actual *Green Book Of Songs By Subject* by composing a formal e-mail to the company that addresses required information. This provides an opportunity to teach and practice technical writing skills by tapping directly into content our students know and love — the music of their lives. For guidelines, visit this link:

**<http://www.greenbookofsongs.com/page.asp?SID=1&Page=12>**