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## The Black Spiritual As Inspiration For Visual Art

Curriculum Unit 92.04.05  
by Maryanne McGill Basti

“The spirituals are historical songs which speak about the rupture of Black lives; they tell us about a people in a land of bondage, and what they did to hold themselves together and to fight back.”

James H Cone,

*The Spirituals and The Blues:*

An Interpretation. <sup>1</sup>

In keeping with the National Experience as seen through a specific American art or culture form, my unit will focus on the slave experience, in particular, the role of the Black Spiritual.

Africans entered the American scene not as immigrants seeking opportunity, freedom and fortune, but as slaves condemned to a vile, hostile existence. They came in chains bringing nothing but their African tradition. This tradition, extraordinary in art, religion, song and poetry, combined with the American version of slavery, provided the catalyst for developing the Black Spiritual.

The Black Spiritual is rooted in African folk music. To understand and appreciate the spirituals some discussion on the African folk community is necessary. A folk community dictates and sings the entire range of its experiences and deep concerns. Subject matter for songs comes from deep felt community reaction to significant symbols and events in the community life. They are never the borrowed concerns of other people. They are always the original expressions and concerns of the community tempered in its tradition. A brief overview of the African folk community regarding; 1. basic religious beliefs, 2. personality, 3. politics and economics, 4. musical and artistic heritage, will be provided later in this narrative.

There is an abundance of interesting, well written, books about the spirituals. Given the size limitations of this unit, I have provided only an introduction to the Black spiritual which I hope will inspire the reader to use my bibliography for a more in-depth study.

My unit is constructed in three parts. Part one will study the African folk traditions which greatly influenced and contributed to the creation of the Black Spiritual. Part two will examine Black spirituals, focusing on their purpose, the needs they filled in their creators, themes and the use of literary device. Part three will suggest

lessons designed to bring this information into the classroom as a source of inspiration, motivation, and pride for New Haven school children.

As an art teacher I will use the bold vivid descriptions and the powerful emotional content of spirituals as inspiration for painting. It is my intention that the research I have provided serve as a take off point for further expansion in interdisciplinary areas of study.

There are three goals I want to achieve through the teaching of the Black Spirituals. First, I want to raise the level of consciousness of my students regarding Black history and Black American history, their heritage; a heritage rich in culture and accomplishment, a heritage which should make them proud to be Black. Proud to be Black, is a theme I plan to develop into a lesson plan for mural work further along in the paper. What prompted me to think this goal to be so important and necessary is due to an experience I had in preparation for this paper. I went to a local music shop to buy some tapes on Black spirituals. The clerk, a young Black man, asked me if that was the name of a new group. My students know little of their history and culture. This cultural deficiency must be recognized and dealt with to develop each students potential. The shared cultural heritage that is lacking in my students can be provided through the study of spirituals.

Second, I want them to create substantial art, something that they can be proud of. Most of my kids have experienced limited success. My objective is to have them experience the pride in creation arising out of seeing their own ideas, thoughts, and efforts come together in the form of a substantial piece of art work. Something that can show them that they can achieve and succeed with tenacious hard work and effort. For an art project to be successful it must have something substantial to express, be it a strong emotion, novel insight, or an imaginative idea. The lack of feeling for and attention to content results in meaningless superficial art. For whatever reasons, be it limited exposure, lack of outside stimulation and experience, the most difficult part of drawing (visual expression) for my students is getting started, what to say. They are insecure and unfocused as to subject matter. They say they cannot draw this or that, they ask to trace or copy, they ask me to draw for them, they think in stereotypes, and most of my students have not developed the necessary skills to deal comfortably in the abstract. This difficulty with focus is a result of not having a strong emotional response to the subject. Here is where I believe the spirituals will be of great value. Spirituals will provide the emotional response necessary to motivate my students into action. Motivation and success go hand in hand. The motivated person is the successful person. I will use the art of Jacob Lawrence of the historical figures Frederick Douglas and Harriet Tubman as a model. This will have the double benefit of showing a successful Black contemporary artist's work on two important historical Black figures.

Third, I want to teach the techniques necessary to create substantial art. I will do this by teaching inspiring subject matter. I have always found that once students find what they want to say they become excited and eager to learn the skills necessary to visually communicate these feelings and ideas.

As to other interdisciplinary areas of study, the language arts teacher will find spirituals rich in literary devices such as simile, metaphor, personification, mask and symbol. For example, my school has a gospel chorus. I plan to ask them to sing some of the spirituals at the unveiling or showing of the murals. Beyond the obvious musical applications the spiritual served as a communication network, the grapevine telegraph, for the underground railroad. The social studies teacher will find fertile ground for examining the life, times, and condition of the slave on the Southern plantation.

## ***Part 1-African Folk Traditions which greatly influenced and contributed to the creation of the Black Spirituals***

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It is estimated that fourteen million slaves were brought to the new world. The majority were brought from West Africa, a highly developed, civilized, area. The people from this area were, by no means primitive. Their artistic traditions were refined, defined, and sophisticated.

The chief stimulus for African art and music is religion, religion not in the Western sense of the word, but Religion as an inseparable, vital, innate part of the individual. The true study of the spiritual as folk song has been obscured by the tendency to misinterpret its religious role. To the traditional African, religion was all encompassing and not compartmentalized as it is to Western and European cultures. Africans consider religion a totality, the unifying element of their lives: religion is life. African religions were always positive. Hopelessness and abandonment were not part of the religious vocabulary. All aspects of life were accepted and dealt with in a philosophical way. This same philosophical approach can be found in the Black American spirituals. Similarities to Christianity can clearly be found firmly rooted in Africa. The concept and belief in one God, eternal salvation or damnation and spirit possession are themes from Africa which come through in the spirituals, "Ain't No Grave Can Hold My Body Down," "Dese Bones Gwine to Rise Again," "Somebody's Knockin' at Yo Do," are good examples.

A strong sense of community and a reverence for family were of utmost importance to the native African, unlike American writers such as Emerson and Thoreau, who believed that a strong sense of community stifled individualism. The African believed a strong sense of community not only reinforced and enhanced, but also nurtured the individual through feelings of confidence and belonging which it inspired.

Slavery was not exclusive to America. Africa had slavery. However, in contrast, slavery in America was particularly harsh. Slaves in Africa were recognized as a member of the family. Excruciating labor both in fields and homes was not demanded of them. Through the merit system, a slave was allowed to rise in his position in the tribe. Slaves were provided with clean homes, and slave children could not be sold and were often freed. The African innate sense of humanity is exemplified in their treatment of slaves. In the American mind slaves were considered personal property to be disposed of at will or treated less than human.

Self-improvement, understanding, and wisdom were the goals of most individuals in the African culture. The formal process of learning was achieved through apprenticeships in trades and crafts. Writing was not widespread in Africa. The histories and information relative to the culture were recounted by Griots. Griots were individuals with remarkable memories who traveled from place to place reciting things they had memorized. They were the authority on genealogies, religion, music, poetry, storytelling and all other pertinent cultural information. This strong narrative tradition is evident in the Black spiritual. Songs were another system for preserving knowledge in Africa, and later in America became a vehicle for conveying information. The oppressive plantation life was unable to kill this innate desire to learn. A good example of this can be found in the Frederick Douglass book, *Up From Slavery* .

Freedom and democracy were of critical importance to the African-spirit. Model examples of democracy can be found throughout the continent and primitive forms of democratic ideals are widespread throughout the tribal political system.

As the visual arts did not play a direct role in the shaping of the spiritual, I will emphasize the musical and narrative traditions that directly influenced the development of the Black Spiritual in America.

Music is an African tradition and like their religion it is not compartmentalized but is an intricate, inseparable part of the African soul. Basic traits of African music are uniform across tribal and geographical lines. Africans have music for all occasions. Music not only accompanied major events such as birth and marriage, but was a part of everyday living. The vital energy of the African is manifest in their music. Black music is unity music and the making of music is the concern of everyone in the community.

Musical performances are participatory events. It is rare to make music for someone, music is always made with someone. The audience is an active participant in a musical performance.

Music composed or used for one occasion may frequently be used for another. For instance, a dance song may be used as a lullaby. This is directly opposed to other cultures where a certain musical pieces are designed only for specific functions.

A close relationship between music and storytelling exists. This fondness for stories and poems is reflected in the pronounced narrative and dramatic character of African songs which employ few words to tell entire Biblical stories in dramatic fashion. In a visual way, Jacob Lawrence, later on, uses this same format to establish clarity of message in his paintings.

Music is essentially antiphonal; male choruses answering each other in distinct musical phrases. The singer often improvises. From this improvisation the chorus takes up a refrain and sometimes two choruses challenge and answer one another in a call and response fashion.

The primary instrument is the drum. Closely related to drumming is hand clapping which is well established in Africa and is a vital element in the African American spiritual. Hand clapping is always expressed with metronomic precision and is never used for random accent.

The rhythm of African music is very complex. The main characteristic of African music is the simultaneous use of different rhythmic patterns, sometimes up to five rhythmic patterns in one piece. This is the major difference between African and European music. All these musical characteristics will become evident in the Black Spiritual.

## ***Part Two-Black Spirituals***

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To provide some insight into the authors of the Black Spiritual I will talk about slave hierarchy on the plantation. The children of mixed blood, illegitimate children of slave and master unions, were house servants. They were the elite of Black plantation society.

The middle rank of slaves were the artisans, who enjoyed a better existence than the field hands, but not as good as the mixed blood elite.

The field hands were on the bottom rung of the ladder. They were the most suppressed and had least access to the white world. As a result of this forced segregation, outside musical influences were minimal and the African musical traditions survived. It was this group that gave birth to the Black Spiritual. As art is a function of the middle class, scant documentary evidence of slave art exists. Blacks made art items for White use. These were patterned after White requirements from copy books. Baskets, vessels and utensils made by slaves for slaves were the only true folk art. There are two main reasons for this lack of physical artifacts.

First, the slaves did not have the materials necessary to create art, and second, they had no leisure time to work on art projects.

According to Elsa Honig Fine, as stated in *The Afro American Artist* , “Afro-American music developed as the folk expression of an oppressed people who were denied most other means of creative experience. Music and dance sprung from grass roots.”<sup>2</sup>

Just as his African ancestors believed a strong sense of community reinforced, enhanced and nurtured the individual, so to the slave knew his strength came from being apart of his new community. This new community, according to Lovell in, *Black Song; The Forge and The Flame* , the spiritual served many purposes: “(1) to give community a true, valid, and useful song; (2) to keep the community invigorated; (3) to inspire the uninspired individual; (4) to enable the group to face its problems; (5) to comment on the slave situation; (6) to stir each member to personal solutions and to a sense of belonging in the midst of a confusing and terrifying world; (7) to provide a code language for emergency use.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Lovell there are three main cultural themes in the Black spirituals: “(1) a desire for freedom; (2) a desire for justice in the judgment upon his betrayers; and (3) a tactic battle, the strategy by which he expected to gain an imminent future.”<sup>4</sup>

The predominant theme was freedom. Freedom was a dangerous topic for slaves to sing about. Punishment was swift and brutal for anyone misfortunate enough to be perceived as even thinking about it, never mind actually singing about it.

Yet the majority of spirituals dealt with freedom. The slave mind was ingenious. Through the use of mask, symbol and double entendre, he was able to disguise the true meaning of his songs and make them palatable to his unsuspecting master. Slave holders did not allow slaves to worship openly and sing their songs without an authorized White person monitoring their meetings. Because of this the spiritual writer was forced to carry mask and symbol to new heights. By using them they were able to write songs that dealt with every phase of slave life without fear of being punished. They were even able to depict evil masters.

Lovell states it perfectly in *Black Song; The Forge and The Flame* , “As great poets, the makers of the spirituals had stronger reasons even than these for using mask and symbol. They knew, by instinct, that mask and symbol are a part of the means of hurling the poetic point into the heart of the listener with devastating effect. They also knew that the real purpose of artistic inspiration is not expression but impact.”<sup>5</sup>

The slave author often drew upon Biblical imagery to mask his yearning for freedom such as in “The Walls Come A Tumbling Down,” and “Let My People Go.”

The songs went beyond just singing about freedom. The African pride was strong and the mind ingenious. These two factors combined with their uncanny ability to use mask and symbol in song formed the “grapevine telegraph.” The “grapevine telegraph” was an amazing phenomenon. Through their songs the slaves developed an ingenious system of communicating intelligence amongst themselves. This network not only covered the South but penetrated the North via the underground railroad. To serve this system, songs of defiance were written. Each had Biblical implications that covered what the singer was really saying. Thus, Christianity was used as a source for ideals and models only because it was available, least suspect, and most stimulating for expressing their desires for freedom. Through directions given in these songs many slaves escaped via the underground railroad.

Harriet Tubman used the song "Wade in the Water" to teach her friends how to throw off bloodhounds. Nat Turner used "Steal Away" to call his friends together for secret meetings. "The Chariots' A Comin'" was sung via the grapevine telegraph to call someone to the underground railroad. "Good News Member" reported by the same telegraph that a runaway slave reached freedom. "Follow de Drinkin Gou'd" (the drinking gourd was the Big Dipper), served as the musical and poetic map for one line of the underground railroad. Other songs of defiance which helped to bring slaves out of bondage are "Old Chariot," "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel," "The Gospel Train is Coming" and "Steal Away to Jesus" which meant to escape and go North. These songs speak directly and immediately to the heart of the listener.

Spirituals focused on the theme of going home. James H. Cone in *The Spirituals and The Blues* said it best, "Home was an affirmation of the need for community. it was the place where mother, father, sister, and brother had gone. To be sure, the slave wanted to make it to heaven so he could put on his "golden Slippers and walk all over Gods heaven"; he wanted to see the "pearly gates" and the "golden streets"; and he wanted to "chatter with the Father, argue with the Son" and "tell um 'bout the world [he] just come from." But most of all, he wanted to be reunited with his family which had been broken and scattered in the slave marts."6

The biggest folk hero was King Jesus. Slaves identified with his suffering and used his triumph over the evils of the world as inspiration and motivation to get through their difficult existence. Great examples of the Jesus theme are "Dere's No One Lak Jesus," King Jesus is the Rock," and "Give Me Jesus."

The Negro slave was fascinated with occupations and objects that they associated with justice and freedom and used these symbols in their songs. For example, water was associated with freedom. Water can wash away sin, renew and refresh, and transport. The Africans were brought across the ocean on slave ships and believed that on ships they would make the return trip home. As a result, numerous spirituals dealt with water, boats, ships and rivers, for example, "De Ship is in de Harbor." "Old Ship of Zion," and "Roll Jordan."

Trains, and the importance of meeting trains, found great play in the spirituals, "Same Train," "Gospel Train," and "You Better Git Yo' Ticket."

Keys and gates opened doors, to freedom. Swords and shields were signs of fighting and struggling which, the slave felt he was always doing. Transportation themes were often used. Arks and chariots were very popular as in "The Old Ark's A Movering," and "Swing Lo Sweet Chariot"—both were exotic forms of transportation to carry one to better places. Shepherding was the occupation the slaves most admired. Two of their folk heroes, Jesus and David, were shepherds. Shepherds were associated with kindness endurance and bravery, and were probably seen as a version of a field hand. The slave found significant meaning in the fact that Christ was nailed onto a cross and can identify with the fact that he, like themselves, was a gentle innocent victim.

Education and the determination for self improvement were important to the slave just as they were to his African forefathers. The ability to read and write was recognized as their greatest weapon against slavery. Songs such as "My Lord's Writing All the Time," and "Gwine to Write Massa Jesus," are narratives of a personal desire to learn how to write. A perfect example of this desire can be found in Frederick Douglass and the extremes he went through to attain these skills.

Like his African ancestors, the slave was a realist. He dealt with his problems in a positive, optimistic way.

Spirituals clearly spelled out real life problems but also offered solutions. The solutions offered were always within human capacity, but required strength of character. Two examples are "Study War, No More," and "Keep A-Inchin' Along Like a Po' Inch Worm."



Slaves actively sought Heaven. They believed Heaven did not come easy. The journey to salvation was a difficult one, hence, strength of character was a great concern. Heroes were not only admired but were perceived as role models. Identifying with heroes was a way of overcoming great obstacles and easing pain. A hero bore pain with silent indignation. "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" was written by a Negro slave whose trials were almost more than he could bear. After his wife and children were sold away, he poured out his sorrow in this song, achieving a great personal victory over adversity. Another good example of this same theme is "I must walk my lonesome valley."

An outstanding quality and accomplishment of the Black spiritual is its bold, exciting use of simile, metaphor and personification. An example of each follows:

"Simile: O the Religion That My Lord Gave Me/Shines Like a Mornin Star" Metaphor: "My Mother's Broke the Ice and Gone"

Personification: "Death Ain't Nothin But a Robber Don't You See."7

The spiritual displayed a profound proficiency in the use of literary device and the expression of philosophical characteristics of the folk community.

Because these songs were composed in secret, hand clapping had to replace the drum and highly rhythmic body movements, such as swaying and nodding the head, replaced dance.

Most songs are a careful organization of a vivid first line, a middle refrain line, and a chorus. Emphasis and strength are placed on the first line, which is usually the summation of the community and poet's philosophical discovery.

In summary, the Negro spiritual was the natural outcome of two powerful forces fated to unite. The illfated African, rich in cultural heritage, and the insensitive American, blind in his greed, were joined together through slavery. The product of this union is a curiously beautiful, poignant body of music called the Negro spiritual. As an art form, this body of music has survived centuries and is still being performed. Its longevity is testimony to its greatness.

## ***Part Three-Lesson Plans***

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I have suggested three lessons in this section that I am planning to use with my sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students.

*Grade 6* : My sixth graders will construct a quilt type wall hanging, depicting scenes from various spirituals. Here I will use the Faith Ringgold book, *Tar Beach* , as inspiration.

*Grade 7* : My seventh graders will each do one acrylic painting on canvass board depicting a scene from one of the spirituals. Here I will use the Jacob Lawrence series of paintings on Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman as a model. Canvasses will be the same size and will be displayed as a series.

*Grade 8* : Eighth graders will make murals. I am planning to make six murals—three students per 5' x 7' panels. I will introduce contemporary mural artists work but the spirituals will provide the inspiration.

My intention is to begin all three lessons the same way:

1. As a class listen to the Spirituals.
2. Discuss the tapes (Did you like the music? How did they make you feel? What do you think the author meant?)
3. Discuss the history of the spiritual and the people that wrote them.
4. As a class read and discuss the text of the songs.
5. Identify the material objects in the text—striking symbols that invite mental inquiry and play.
6. List these objects and symbols on the board.
7. Identify the story in the song.  
Discuss strong African narrative tradition.
8. Brainstorm as a class.

On this step we will list all symbols and objects that are available in the song to tell the visual story. We will discard anything that will not serve our visual need. Again I will use the Jacob Lawrence painting series on Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass to show how Lawrence selected only striking monumental symbols. He simplified ideas and went straight to the heart of the material to extract his visual symbols.

9. As a class look at and discuss narrative type works, murals and contemporary Black artists.

Discuss qualities identified as appealing and successful

I will go through this procedure with each grade level. Sophistication and depth of response will naturally vary with each grade.

*Grade 6* : Using the information gathered from the above procedure, we as a class will commence to make a quilt type wall hanging. Each student will produce one square. The wall hanging will not be stuffed or quilted. The pieces will be sewn together and I will line the back with muslin. I have done numerous quilt type wall hangings with my students and have found this to be an extremely successful art lesson. My students have always enjoyed this project and have generally produced great results.

I will show pictures of Faith Ringgold's quilt "Tar Beach" and will read them the story, focusing on the narrative tradition.

I will have each student select an aspect or symbol and create one square depicting their selection. A student may select a simple object such as a key, boat, golden slipper, etc., and make a repetitive design or take an idea and create a whole scene.

Each student will cut their objects out of felt, glue them lightly to their square, and then, depending on their sewing ability, stitch them on.

I will encourage my students to make their squares as simple or as complex as they want. These differences complement each other very nicely when the hanging is assembled.

*Grade 7* : Each seventh grade student will do an acrylic painting on canvass board depicting some aspect or subject found in the Black spiritual. I will use the Jacob Lawrence painting series on Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman as a model for this assignment. Some of Lawrence's techniques such as, distorted perspective, simplification of form, flattening of shape would appeal to my students and surface in their own work, thus providing them with a style or base with which to build their own visual vocabulary upon.



*Grade 8* : My goal with the eighth graders is ambitious, I plan to make six murals. I usually have eighteen to twenty-one students in my eighth grade classes. I will assign either three or four students to each mural. Each group will select the spiritual that they want to illustrate. Here I plan to spend more time discussing the character of the slaves that wrote these songs. This is where I want to stress the proud to be Black theme I mentioned in my narrative. I will stress the motivation aspect of the slave.

We will do our preliminary drawings on 4' x 8' roll paper, working out ideas and making a color key. When each group is satisfied with their effort we will draw out our ideas on canvass then proceed to paint.

I plan to use these three projects in the end of the year city-wide art exhibit, then have the murals permanently displayed in our school.

### **Examples of Black Spirituals**

#### *"The Gospel Train"*

"If God was to call me I would not care-um-u, For he done move away my fears-um-u.  
I'm goin' to heaven, an' I'm goin' fo' long-um-u, All don't see me will hear my song-um-u.  
When de gospel train come' long-um-u, That's the train goin' carry me home-um-u.  
Wake up, sinner, yoy will be too late-um-u, Gospel train done pass yo' gate-um-u  
De gospel train's a comin',  
I hear it jus' at hand,  
I hear the car wheels rumblin',  
An rollin' thru de land.  
I hear de train a comin', She's comin' around de curve,  
She's loosened all her steam an' brakes, An strainin' eb'ry nerve.  
De fare is cheap an' all can go, De rich an' pore are dere,  
No second class aboard dis train, No difference in de fare.  
Ther's Moses and Noah and Abraham, And all the prophets, too;  
Our friends in Christ are all on board, Oh, what a heavenly crew.  
We soon shall reach the station, Oh, how we then shall sing;  
With all the heavenly army, We'll make the welkin ring.  
She's nearing now the station, O sinner, don't be vain,  
But come an' get your ticket, And be ready for the train.  
No signal for the other train, To follow on the line;  
O sinner, you're forever lost, If once you're left behind."8

*"The Pilgrim's Song"*

"I am a poor wayfaring stranger, While journeying through this world of woe;  
But there is no sickness, toil, no danger, In that bright world to which I go.  
I'm going there to see my classmates, They said they'd meet me when I come;  
I'm just going over Jordan, I'm just going over home.  
I know dark clouds'll gather' round me, I know my road is rough and steep;  
Yet there bright fields are lying just before me, Where God's redeemed their vigils keep.  
I'm going there to see my mother, She said she'd meet me when I come;  
I'm just going over Jordan, I'm just going over home.  
I'll soon be free from every trial, My body will sleep in the old churchyard.  
I'll quit the cross of self-denial, And enter in my great reward.  
I'm going there to see my mother, She said she'd meet me when I come;  
I'm just going over Jordan, I'm just going over home."9

*"Goin' Down To Jordan"*

"Halleluyer to the Lam'!, Goin' on down to Jordan,  
Lord God's on that givin' han', Goin' on down to Jordan.  
Goin' down to Jordan,  
Goin' down to Jordan,  
I got my breas' plate, sword an' shield,  
Goin' down to Jordan,  
Boldly marchin' thru' the field,  
Goin' on down to Jordan

I plucked one block out'n Satan's wall, Goin' on down to Jordan,  
I heard him stumble an' saw him fall, Goin' on down to Jordan.  
Ole Satan's a liar an' a conjurer, too, Goin' on down to Jordan.  
If you don't mind he'll conjure you, Goin' on down to Jordan.  
Ole Satan mad an' I am glad, He missed a soul he thought he had.  
Ole Satan thought he had me fast, Broke his chain an' I'm free at last.  
I've landed my feet on Jordan's sho'  
Now I'm free forever mo', Goin' on down to Jordan."<sup>10</sup>

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