



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
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## **The Blues Impulse in Drama: Lessons on Racial Pain**

Curriculum Unit 97.05.10  
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As a drama teacher at Fair Haven Middle School in New Haven CT, I have found that it is increasingly important to include many areas of the curriculum to the various plays I teach. I hope that this curriculum unit will afford opportunities to collaborate my efforts with teachers from different subject areas. With what I have planned in these lessons, the input from social studies, art and music will be an instrumental element in the success of my endeavour.

An interesting problem discussed in the seminar “The Blues Impulse” at The Yale New Haven Teacher’s Institute dealt with the treatment of teaching and protecting students from pain. To what extent do teachers bear a responsibility to expose young people to the harsh realities of the modern world? What are the effects that violence and hate have on our students, and should education provide shelter to the harsh and cruel environment that children live with on a daily basis? There are other questions that must be pondered, and this unit will attempt to unfold them as students read and write about a particularly relevant issue: racial pain and the history of hate between white and black people.

### ***I. Objectives and Strategies***

While this unit does not necessarily take on the weight of finding solutions to the problem, it can act as an important class which provides awareness to a centuries-long problem of ignorance and prejudice. It is my hope to continue this study of teaching pain and dealing with the problems of race relations with subsequent curriculum units in future Institute seminars, and apply them directly to the classroom experience. I hope this unit will launch other teachers to write units that confront this problem head on, as mine attempts to do, so that a type of awareness curriculum may be used by teachers everywhere.

To make students aware of their own situation of racial conflict, the selections chosen for this unit deal with modern plays of pain and racial injustice . To augment students’ understanding of them, a plethora of multi-media data ranging from pieces of art, music and photo journalism taken from the Internet will be used to clarify the themes these dramas present. Responses to each presentation of the varied art forms will be a necessary assignment for the course participants, for one of the unit’s main objectives is to develop critical thinking skills so that they may produce their own written plays or music from their thoughts and feelings. It will be important for students to express their thoughts based on what has been presented to them over the duration of the course.

While all students have feelings toward a subject, most of them rarely think critically enough. The combination

of thoughts and feelings will need to be emphasized, and as stated in a recent study on critical thought and prejudice, the two go hand in hand:

Although it is common to separate thought and feeling as though they were independent, opposing forces in the human mind, the truth is that virtually all human feelings are based on some level of thought and virtually all thought generative of some level of feeling. (1) This passage was taken from a teaching project by the Center and Foundation For Critical Thinking at Sonoma College in Santa Rosa California. Written by Richard Paul, PhD, and Linda Elder, PhD, the authors have composed some fascinating ideas on processes of critical thinking and explanations of egocentricity and prejudicial thinking. All of these findings were taken from research that was found on the internet, and they have helped to shape a strategy towards teaching this drama course. The experts continue to write about critical thinking in their essay:

Critical thinkers realize that their feelings are their response (but not the only possible, or even necessarily the most reasonable response) to a situation. They know that their feelings would be different if they had a different understanding or interpretation of the situation. They recognize that thoughts and feelings, far from being different kinds of “things”, are two aspects of their responses. (2) The ability then, to pair thoughts with feelings, is the crux of critical thinking, and as young people develop both of these “things”(as they call it), they may be able to work in a more productive manner, using their imaginations as well as their analytical minds to express themselves. More is discussed on this matter, as the focus shifts to the non critical thinker:

Uncritical thinkers see little or no relationship between their feelings and their thoughts, and so escape responsibility for their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Their own feelings often seem unintelligible to them. (3) This description of the non critical thinker sheds a great deal of light on the young student who, when asked about his response towards anything says “I don’t really care” or has difficulty putting feelings and thoughts together in expressing a well worded answer. It will be this unit’s objective to develop students thoughts as well as feelings, and with the proper combination of the two, produce a qualitative statement or response toward a given presentation. The expressions of the combination of thoughts and feelings will result in the production of writings dramatic or poetic, musical compositions, art drawings or paintings, and/or oral interpretations. The student will be able to choose from an array of media to aptly express thoughts and ideas based on the data presented in class.

Once development in the area of critical thought has been introduced, the main study of our course work may proceed, focusing on how people’s views have shaped our world. The Sonoma study provides for an introduction to this course on the Blues Impulse, for it addresses one’s ability to separate personal bias when attempting to be critical:

To think critically, we must be able to consider the strengths and weaknesses of opposing points of view; to imaginatively put ourselves in the place of others in order to genuinely understand them; to overcome our egocentric tendency to identify truth with our immediate perceptions or long-standing thought or belief. This trait is linked to the ability to accurately reconstruct the viewpoints and reasoning of others and to reason from premises, assumptions, and ideas other than our own. (4) An understanding of other points of view will be an important skill needed for a student’s ability to write objectively. In many young people, as witnessed in the classroom, we see a one sided viewpoint while taking on a controversial or disturbing piece of literature. Such early prejudice and egocentricity hamper one’s ability to appreciate a work of art by viewing it at many levels of understanding other than our own preferred way of looking at it. Paul and Elder have interesting views on this subject, and all of this leads towards a preparedness for studying the plays of racial pain include in the course work:

Egocentricity means confusing what we see and think with reality. When under the influence of egocentricity, we think that the way we see things is exactly the way things are. Egocentricity manifests itself as an inability or unwillingness to consider others' points of view, a refusal to accept ideas or facts which would prevent us from getting what we want (or think we want). (5) In exercising the ability to see both sides of a story, the lessons on racial pain can be learned in a manner that steers away from injurious and malicious response, and instead lead towards more intellectual and constructive thought. Students need to learn how single egocentric beliefs can lead to a whole group's feelings, and be able to separate this tendency towards socialization when it comes to their own work:

As people are socialized, egocentricity partly evolves into sociocentricity. Egocentric tendencies extend to their groups. The individual goes from "I am right!" to "We are right!" To put this another way, people find that they can often best satisfy their egocentric desires through a group. "Group think" results when people egocentrically attach themselves to a group. Uncritical thinkers often confuse loyalty with always supporting and agreeing, even when the other person or the group is wrong. (6) Once a student is aware of the tendency to group one's thoughts and feelings from a shared belief with others to think more independently, the process of critical thinking may take place. It will also be possible to cover the themes and plots of the selections of the course without prejudice and condemnation. In a final passage taken from the Center's report, a positive result emerges:

We can change egocentric tendencies when we see them for what they are: irrational and unjust. The development of children's awareness of their egocentric and sociocentric patterns of thought is a crucial part of education in critical thinking. This development will be modest at first but can grow considerably over time. (7) The development from social thinking to individual thinking mentioned in the study is a major objective of this unit. Once students feel comfortable with expressing how they feel without being influenced by outside sources, critical thinking can flourish and students will learn much more than before.

## ***II. Introduction to the Course—The First Lesson in Critical Thought***

Using the report by the Center for Critical Research, the opening class for this course will serve as an introduction and allow students an opportunity to discern their own thoughts and feelings about painful subjects. By introducing the notion of prejudicial thought, students will get a chance to understand that the way people in general feel about certain things should not interfere with one's objectivity when learning is concerned. Items that should be mentioned in this class should involve:

- the creation of an unbiased thought.
- self esteem and the premise of reliance in one's thoughts.
- the idea to create something original that comes from internal thoughts and not external influences.
- the ability to justify and explain an originally composed opinion.

### ***III. Adding the Blues Impulse to the Course***

After introducing students to these ideas on critical thinking, our first presentation will take place. Using the remainder of the class time in this introduction, the song “Good Morning Blues” will be played. It will be this early blues classic that will “kick off” our study of the blues impulse, and serve as an early example of the forming of thoughts and feelings from original ideas. It will introduce students to the racial pain mentioned earlier as well, for it is about struggle and pain that the blues came about in the first place. By showing students how the blues became a way to confront pain and deal with trouble, our course may begin to shed a light on how to best express ourselves when placed in a tough situation.

### ***IV. Expectations of the Student***

Before the description of the course continues, an overview on what is expected by the student will be mentioned. While students will be subjected to a very large amount of data by means of literature, music, art and the Internet, it is necessary that they react to all that is presented to them in some type of oral or written manner. Tests may be given, but it would be more favorable to have individuals share their thoughts and responses in a forum that allows collaboration with others. A public performance or group discussion would be good examples of this type of evaluation of a student’s development.

By the completion of the course (a ten week venture that meets three times a week), students will have the necessary tools to write a complete play taken from their ability to adapt their thoughts and feelings into their own original work. While accustomed to drawing from their own observations of personal experience, an emphasis on recreating someone else’s conflict will be made. This will strengthen a student’s frame of reference and allow for experimentation to try things that seem foreign or different from their present situation or environment.

It has been my experience to observe that students’ writings are well done when the premise has been based on a self perception of events and people in the students’ immediate environment. Plays written about life in the neighborhood or in school, using peers as characters or other recognizable people in their surroundings are usually well written, vivid descriptions about events in their young lives.

The choice they make to write about their own world easily allows for a course study that introduces the “Blues Impulse”. It is clear in the written works that students are willing to meet adversity head on, just as the blues confronts its problems through a self realization—and then it moves on, dealing with the problem the best it can.

Steeped in reality and using stark language and harsh and shocking actions to express their plots, it is quite evident that these young writers have plenty of drama in their personal experiences to draw from. In fact, there is so much adversity it seems, that when given the choice between creating a realistic drama or a comic fantasy, a great majority of students choose to represent their real, close-to-home stories in tragic formats. Very few choose to escape their harsh reality and delve into their imaginations to devise any abstract works that might entertain them. Comic pieces have been written by some students, but they are weak creations when compared to some of the tight, action packed dramas that students have created since I started teaching playwrighting.

The challenge to write plays that are created from different perspectives will be a way to open a student’s eyes towards area unknown and mysterious. While expressing their thoughts and feelings about their immediate surroundings is a healthy way of understanding themselves, a newer and fresher look at the unfamiliar may encourage students to create objective thoughts in their study of the unknown, and create

new pieces that are just as vivid and well constructed as their earlier autobiographical works.

In addition to developing the writing and thinking skills of students, the course hopes to equip them with the tools and the ability to group various forms of art into a unified theme. In this case, the blues will be the theme for a number of presentations that are not musical ones. Sample questions that students should be able to react to, upon completion of the course:

What does it mean to “have the blues”?

Where is the blues in the scene we read?

What character in the film experiences “the blues”?

What feelings are shared in both:

—a Mississippi Delta blues song and the confrontation scene in a play we read in class?

—A WPA poster hanging in the hallway and a poem from the Harlem Renaissance?

Students may be evaluated from a number of assignments that are called for in the various presentations, as well as in the many chances to become involved in group discussions, scene performing, song reciting, or other types of classroom involvement.

After an introductory class that explains the objectives of critical thinking and confronting pain, the class will consist of presentations of various art forms that contain the “Blues Impulse”. A number of plays, films, works of visual art, and music are described, but many other examples can and should be used as teachers find the link that may be appropriate to the study of teaching pain via the blues impulse.

### ***V. Using Film as a Presentation***

One of the first presentations of the course will be a screening of the film version of Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is an adequate first look at the Depression Era South and shows the existence of prejudice and racial tension in our country. It also takes on an impulse from the blues in that it introduces the class to confronting fear.

Through the eyes of “Scout,” a feisty six-year-old tomboy, the film carries us on an odyssey through the prejudice and injustice in 1932 Alabama. Presenting her tale first as a reminiscence of events from her childhood, the narrator draws us near with stories of neighborhood exploits by she, her brother Jem, and their friend Dill. Peopled with a cast of eccentrics, Macomb (“a tired and sleepy town”) finds itself the venue of the trial of Tom Robinson, a young black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. Atticus Finch, Scout and Jem’s widowed father and a deeply principled man, is appointed to defend Tom for whom a guilty verdict from an all-white jury is a foregone conclusion.

Juxtaposed against the story of the trial is the children’s hit-and-run relationship with Boo Radley, a shut-in who the children and Dill’s Aunt Stephanie suspect of insanity and whom no one has seen in recent history. But fear keeps them at a distance until, one night, the children confront an evil born of ignorance and blind hatred and must somehow find their way home.

Finch takes on the white courtroom, and working against all odds, proceeds to fight for equality and justice. The children's fear of Radley takes on a blues like quality as they meet up with what scares them. Like the blues, the recognition of a bad situation is made and then confronted and dealt with, thus relieving the stress and pain that accompany the initial suffering.

#### **VI. Post Film Activities:**

Students are to bring to class a definition and an example of stereotype. Then, in small self-selected groups, students identify the social groups at Fair Haven Middle School. They list several characteristics and several values of each group. Students discuss the following questions:

- To which group do you belong?
- Which other groups do you or would you associate with?
- Which groups would you never associate with and why?
- What characteristics or values do these groups have that conflict with yours?
- Do those groups feel the same way about your group? Explain.
- Why does each group hold these views of the other?
- Why do you have these feelings about different groups?

A representative from each group shares the group's observations and conclusions with the entire class. The class discusses the implications of these observations and conclusions. Some additional questions the instructor may pose:

- What happens when people make these kinds of assumptions about others?
- What are the positive and negative consequences of identifying yourself with a particular group and excluding yourself from other groups?
- What forms of group identification are legitimate?
- Which are unjustified?
- Why do people make such unjustified distinctions?
- Why is it hard to express attitudes that conflict with those of your group?
- How do group members respond to dissent? Why?
- How do you feel about those who disagree with the rest of the group?
- How does the group members' response make the dissenters feel? Why?

After this discussion concerning group vs. individual thinking, the instructor should ask a number of questions that pertain to the film they watched:

- What groups of people are covered in this book? (Townpeople, Blacks, people like the Cunninghams, the Ewells.)

- What are Aunt Alexandra’s attitudes about others?
- Why did she feel this way about each group?
- Was she fair? Why or why not?
- What were Jem and Scout’s theories on class distinctions?
- Why did they come up with these theories?
- Why did the theories make some sense to them?
- How reasonable were they?
- Where did they miss the mark?
- Where does Boo fit in?
- Would he have been treated differently if he had been from another class?

It is suggested that the film be presented in two class periods so that plenty of discussion time is available after the screening of the film. One of the most important objectives of this unit is to promote and develop students’ ability to respond critically. After each presentation that is offered in class, ample time must be provided for either a group discussion or individual written response time. By the end of the course a culmination of the students’ responses toward each presentation should supply the teacher with plenty of data to evaluate the progress each person has made towards critical expression.

Beginning the course with a visual presentation like a film could be a good way of getting the needed attention in class. It is suggested that the class not read either the novel or play version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* , for there will be plenty of reading involved with other parts of the course. By alternately presenting the class with visual and acoustic data, reading and writing may be accepted more freely than a



course which requires a strictly “read and write” demand on them.

### **VII. Music as the Next Presentation**

The second presentation to be introduced to the class will take a musical form. Selections from blues, jazz, rock and possibly even rap may be presented to the class to show how the “blues impulse” is involved in all of the presentations involved in the course.

Maurice O. Wallace, seminar leader of “The Blues Impulse” captures this term by quoting Ralph Ellison: “To speak of the blues is to speak, more broadly, of a survivalist sensibility, of ‘an impulse’ in artistic expression ‘to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness’ ” (Ellison). Keeping the pain alive in the expression of music will be introduced and emphasized throughout the varied presentations of the course. While the need to identify and discuss the pain in each presentation exists, it will be important to describe how it has a blues impulse, that is, how it accomplishes the maintainance of the details in an artistic venue, whether it be through music, art, dance or drama.

While there are hundreds of blues songs to choose from, a partial list has been composed for classroom use. A song list should be developed by the instructor which clearly defines the idea of the blues impulse. A typical blues song will have as its content some sort of a self realization of a problem, a confrontation with it, and then a resolution of continuance; going on with one’s life and dealing with the problem no matter how big or small it may be. Here are some songs to present:

(Featured Instrument)	“Title”
Artist	(Description)
(Guitar)	“Goin Down Slow”
Howlin Wolf	(About a man’s declining health)
(Guitar)	“Cause of It All”
Howlin	Wolf (A man’s woman leaves him)
(Guitar)	“Highway 49”
Howlin Wolf	(A man looks for his woman)
(Guitar)	“I Pity The Fool”
BB King & Buddy Guy	(A man tells his woman what she’s done to him)
(Guitar & Vocal)	“There’s Something On Your Mind”
BB King & Etta James	(A song about loving someone who doesn’t love you)
(Guitar)	“Stormy Monday”
BB King & Albert Collins	(The typical bluesman’s week)
(Guitar)	“We’re Gonna Make It”
BB King and Irma Thomas	(Inspirational gospel/blues tune about overcoming adversity)
(Guitar)	“Everybody’s Had the Blues”
BB King & Joe Louis Walker	(upbeat realization of the universality of the blues)
(Guitar/Vocal)	“Give Me One Reason”
Tracey Chapman	(A woman torn between staying or leaving)
(Guitar)	“Texas Flood”
Stevie Ray Vaughan	(Dealing with a natural disaster)
(Vocal)	“Backwater Blues”
Bessie Smith	(Similar to “Texas Flood”, but 60 years earlier)



(Guitar /Vocal) "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out" (Both Versions)  
 Bessie Smith('30's) and later,  
 Eric Clapton (unplugged in the '90's)  
 (Singing about poverty and neglect)

(Clarinet, Vocals, Xylophone) "Billie's Blues"  
 Billie Holiday (A woman who wants out of a relationship)

(Vocal) "Blue Turning Grey Over You"  
 Billie Holiday (woes over a distrustful man)

(Saxophone, Piano) "Be Fair With Me Baby" (Helpless Blues)  
 Billie Holiday (Another bad relationship song)

(Vocal) "Rocky Mountain Blues"  
 Billie Holiday (Turning the blues around and overcoming)

(Trumpet) "Working Man's Blues"  
 King Oliver & Louis Armstrong Recorded in 1923 in Richmond, Indiana

Bessie Smith Songs:

"St. Louis Blues"

"Gimme a Pigfoot"

"Muddy Water" (A Mississippi Moan)

"Foolish Man Blues"

As part of the music presentation, it would be helpful to have a music teacher join the class. A few lessons on music theory with emphasis on the distinctions of the blue note in music may help students to discern what makes the blues form unique. Along with the theory, a number of classes should involve history lessons on the birth and fruition of the blues. There are many Internet links to this area, and students should spend time in the library browsing the World Wide Web seeing and listening to data that pertains to this part of American heritage. Some links include:

<http://www.thomson.com/partners/avs/blues.html>

<http://www.music.sony.com/Music/ArtistInfo/Legacy/RootsNBlues/bessie.htm>

<http://web.fie.com/~tonya/smith.htm>

<http://home1.gte.net/deltakit/bessiesmith.htm>

<http://members.aol.com/ragtimers/index.html>

<http://www.webcom.com/friedman/blues.html>

The next presentation will involve a mix of blues music heard in earlier class periods to a reading of another play about pain and racial hatred, *The Death of Bessie Smith* by Edward Albee. Written in 1961, Albee gives a depiction of the goings on at a Southern “semi-private” hospital in Memphis Tennessee on the day that Bessie Smith, the famed “Empress of the Blues” was killed. While Bessie does not appear in the play, the characters around this incident are pivotal in the events that happened to her that day.

Interestingly enough, it is the sub plot that takes place which underscores the play’s theme of discrimination and racial hate, for the audience witnesses the treatment a “Negro” orderly must go through in order to work successfully in that hospital. His constant abuse by the desk nurse, the main character of the play, causes him to look toward better ways of making it in the world. He looks to the young white doctor, a man of great ambition, and an idealist of great proportion, to seek a way out of his predicament. A play that focuses on abandonment, it is ironic that it is the white desk nurse who is stuck at work as well as at home, caring for her delusional old father, a symbol of the crusty Old South. The orderly makes use of his coworkers treatment of him to assure his strategy will be one of action. He turns the nurse’s harsh treatment of him into his impetus to get away from her, and relies on the interns idealistic hopes of excitement abroad in Spain as something to look forward to. While most of the characters seek a way out, it is the desk nurse who sits at her desk, determined to stay and rule her “subordinants.”

### ***VIII. Lesson Ideas after the Play:***

While the play covers the issues of hatred and prejudice, mention should be made about the media’s coverage of Bessie Smith’s career. Reports concerning the circumstances of Besse’s death in 1937 after an automobile accident outside of Clarksdale, Mississippi brought more controversy and attention from the white press than she had received during her lifetime:

Despite an enthusiastic following among both Northern and Southern whites, Bessie made no attempt to endear herself to white society. At the height of her popularity, Bessie’s income provided ample resources to adapt a “mainstream” lifestyle (i.e. “white”). But she stubbornly clung to her familiar street life and homemade liquor probably out of rebellion as much as natural propensity. There were notable exceptions to her avoidance of whites. Frank Walker, her producer at Columbia Records, and the Van Vechtens, New York socialites and admirers of African American culture, were among the few who Bessie grew to trust. (8)

#### *The Auto Accident-Truth or Myth?*

Her producer at the time, John Hammond, published an article in *Down Beat* magazine, based entirely on hearsay, claiming that Bessie had died unattended after a white hospital refused to accept the black woman into the emergency room. Without bothering to investigate Hammond’s credibility, writers spread the story, embellishing it as they went, until the intrigue surrounding Bessie’s death remained etched in the public’s vague, racially-charged recollection. In writing this play, it seems that Edward Albee helped perpetuate the myth.

#### *Race Relations and her Music:*

By and large, however, Bessie kept her distance from racial inequality during the 1920’s and 30’s. She must have been infinitely more angry on the subject in private than she was allowed to be on record, as the following heartfelt but relatively tepid stanzas from “Poor Man’s Blues” suggest:

Mister rich man, rich man, open up your heart and mind,  
Mister rich man, rich man, open up your heart and mind;  
Give the poor man a chance, help stop these hard, hard times.

While you're livin' in your mansion you don't know what hard times means,

While you're livin' in your mansion you don't know what hard times means;  
Poor working man's wife is starving your wife is livin' like a queen.(9)

### *Student Activities:*

The three activities mentioned here deal with the treatment of prejudice, hatred and pain. A chance to express original thoughts on what they have read in the Albee play should be a large factor in their work.

### **Scene work**

Students break up into groups of three or four, and in two or three class periods rehearse and perform the following scenes:

Scene 2—The nurse and her aging father, at home.

Scene 3—Jack's monologue to Bessie, telling her to get up and get ready to leave with him for her comeback tour to New York.

Scene 4—The orderly and the nurse. This scene deals with our concept of confronting pain and dealing with it. The orderly speaks of "action", while the nurse speaks of "great abandonment", and how "Uncle Tomming" himself will only get him into a bitter no man's land, hated by whites and blacks, alike.

Scene 8—The intern abandons his cares and ideals to care for the injured Bessie Smith, a victim of hatred and bitterness.

### *Costume/Set Design*

Students will work with an art teacher for this assignment. They will be asked to bring in a collection of pictures they have taken from their own cameras or newspapers and magazines which represent their view of abandonment. After a feel for the play has been captured by creating a type of photo collage, students may incorporate their thoughts and feelings by designing the set of *The Death of Bessie Smith*, or if they choose, design costumes of some of the characters in the play. While historical accuracy is not important, the need to

express a theme will be.

The art teacher may be able to include historical references to the New Deal and the WPA Project, which allowed many artists to keep working during the Great Depression.

### *Reaction Paper/Critique of the Play*

Students may write a review of the play based on their reactions towards abandonment, hatred and racial pain. References to the Depression and research on the South during this time will be important to the success of the paper.

## **IX. Inter-Disciplinary Lessons: Adding the Art and Social Studies Teacher**

The next presentation acts as an explanation for some of the terms and events that are mentioned in the Albee play. It is important to examine vital elements that, while not integral to the production of the play, are important in our understanding of the motivations of the characters as well as comprehending the time period and some of the events that shaped people's way of looking at things. This presentation would best be given by a social studies teacher and an art teacher, for it should contain lessons about:

Social Studies Topics.....combined with.....Art Topics:

The Ante Bellum South

(19th Amendment, Racial Tension, KKK)

The Great Depression.....Paintings and Photos of the Period

Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal.....WPA Murals

The Spanish Civil War.....Picasso's "Guernica"

## **X. The Internet: A Wealthy Resource:**

### ***The WPA Murals:***

Once again, a wealth of information exists on the World Wide Web. On the subject of the WPA murals for instance, a site describes how the government allocated funds for the commissioning of art in public buildings. This information, though remotely connected to any "blues impulse", is relevant in that there is a direct local connection that can be made to the murals and to the time period. The cyber link to this information on the Internet which does clarify certain references in the Albee play, has direct importance with a WPA mural that is displayed in the hallway of Fair Haven Middle School. Through a peripheral study of *The Death of Bessie Smith* then, it may be possible to understand the piece of art that has existed on the school's wall these sixty odd years.

The heart of the Section's plan for dispensing art in public buildings was the competition. Before World War II smothered it, 15,426 artists submitted 40,426 sketches in 190 competitions. Each competition concerned decoration of a specific building chosen by the Section for its mural and sculpture spaces and the size of its financial reservation for art. (10) The website explains that from time to time the citizens of certain towns would object to works of art that they felt had no good reason for being there. As an example to how the internet works as a learning tool, one incident is presented:

In the mining community of Kellogg, Idaho, Local 18 of the Mine Workers and Smelt Workers praised Fletcher Martin's dramatic design, "Mine Rescue", as distinctly appropriate for the post office while local industrialists rejected it as not in harmony with existing conditions. The industrialists carried and Martin eventually installed a noncontroversial scene of purely local interest. (11) While gaining an insight on this WPA project through modern technology, students may view the subjects that were debated about, and judge for themselves, for both murals, the original one and the replacement one, are available at the following locations:

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/mine-rescue.html>

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/kellogg-pro prospector.html>

As a presentation of the art of The New Deal, students may understand the opportunities the government made available to all of it's people during the Depression. By way of the Internet, it allows them to connect with a piece of art outside their classroom with a particular work discussed in the historical lessons surrounding the study of a play in their drama class. This interdisciplinary curriculum is implemented in its finest form , and for that reason it is included in this curriculum unit.

### ***XI. The Attraction to Communist Ideals in the Depression Era:***

Another brief example of how the study of the play enhances students' knowledge of the facts surrounding it may be found when a social studies teacher lectures in one class period on the attraction of our country towards Communism in the Thirties. The teacher's lesson may explain how the Spanish Civil War provided a type of distraction, and its magnetism towards our ideology of changing things was a strong impetus for many ambitious people.

This information is pertinent to the Albee play, for it allows the student to understand what opportunities arose to the orderly during tough and desperate times. One topic of the War lesson could include the description of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a volunteer group from the US, determined to stop the spread of fascism. The following information is provided to students via the WWW:

During the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), 2,800 American volunteers took up arms to defend the Spanish Republic against a military rebellion led by General Franco and aided by Hitler and Mussolini. To the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, which fought from 1937 through 1938, the defense of the Republic represented the last hope of stopping the spread of international fascism. (12) This information can be very helpful to students in their understanding of both the idealistic aspirations of the intern as well as those of the opportunistic orderly in the play. Students will see why the Spanish Civil War had an appeal to a great many young men, both black and white, for it included the hope and excitement they desperately seeked during hard times:

Like many during the Great Depression, the young volunteers had an experience of deprivation and injustice that led them to join the burgeoning student, unemployed, union, and cultural movements that were influenced by the Communist Party (CP) and other Left organizations. (13) With these kinds of lessons which introduce a wide scope of information surrounding the study of the play, students may keep their interest in a piece of literature that beforehand may have had little importance to them. Rather than skimming past the historical references mentioned in the play, a more concentrated effort through different disciplines will allow the student to learn more in many different fashions.

As a final example of this interdisciplinary work, attention is drawn to the art teacher who may contribute to our lessons on drama and history by including a presentation of a work by Picasso which interpreted the event

included in our previous lessons. By way of the WWW, the art teacher may call up any one of his versions of his painting called "Guernica". The website may be reached at:

<http://www.compulink.co.uk:80/~phreak/picasso/guernica.html>

## ***XII. Blues For Mister Charlie***

The teaching of this play will conclude the course, and is actually better suited for high school students. I would advise editing the script for its use in younger grades, for some of the language is quite strong and graphic.

The 1964 play by James Baldwin deals with the racial pain and prejudice that this unit aims at and acts as a perfect example to make students aware of how people have suffered and how bitterness and hatred ruin all relationships between people.

Lyle Britten, a white shop owner in a Southern community, is to be tried for the murder of Richard Henry, a local black man who has recently returned from New York City. Rehabilitated from a dependency on heroin, he returns home after spending time at a correctional facility and attempts to make a new life in his old hometown. It is Parnell James, a long time friend of both men's families, and an outspoken equalist in the conservative community who seeks the truth and works unequivocally for racial justice.

I debated about using this play because of the very tough language it includes. Mr. Baldwin has not pulled any punches or spared his audience from any tameness where word choice is concerned. It is an amazingly tough and gritty piece of drama. Sexual references that deal with myths about African Americans do exist in the play, as well as the use of words like "nigger" and "peckerwood" to describe its characters. Issues of rape and murder and drug use are parts of it as well, yet I still believe it is a very important work that may be helpful in teaching children about racial disharmony and justice. This play clearly does not protect or hide our students from racial pain, but will make a great number of children and adults aware of where we have all been as a nation of free people and possibly where we are going to go in the future.

## ***XIII. The Play as a Contemporary Issue***

I mention the future, for our destiny lies towards a better understanding of all people, regardless of color, for a very good reason. While this curriculum unit was being created, while it was in its infancy in fact, our region experienced a horrific event quite remarkably similar to the tragedy of the main character, Richard Henry, in *Blues For Mister Charlie*.

On April 14, 1997, when being persued by the East Haven police on motor vehicle charges, 21 year old Malik Jones was stopped on a street in Fair Haven and was gunned down and killed. Emma Jones, Malik's mother, has begun a crusade in bringing about fairness and justice.

Her peaceful marches to local churches and rallies held at court buildings have struck a note in me. James Baldwin's thirty three year old drama, based distantly on the Emmitt Till lynching in 1955; the play I will teach from this unit and may possibly direct in a full scaled production, is very much in line with the present settings of our time. What Baldwin wrote about in this 1950's Southern community: its church societies and public hearings of the law, its dichotomous appearance of church and state, combined with segregation of blacks and whites is remarkably in tune with what our newspaper headlines are filled with as I write this piece today: about an ongoing state investigation dealing with the officer who is still on duty, an all white police force, a black man's long record of criminal activity and a parent's crusade to provide justice for all.

With such similarities to the current events in New Haven these days and the events which take place in the play, a vast wealth of activity becomes available in a classroom situation. The question now arises as to what do you teach, and how do you teach it? There are many perspectives to attacking the play, and I welcome others ideas on what would be valuable lessons on dealing with the play through not only the blues impulse, but on other fronts as well. There are politically based lessons, like civil rights and police brutality, as well as the message that is being delivered to confront and communicate problems in a public forum, as Jones' parents and clergymen are doing. The following lesson is a small part of a much larger issue that teachers may wish to spend a greater portion of time dealing with in other subject areas, and that issue deals with character.

#### ***XIV. A Study On Character***

It was Baldwin's fear of writing this play that he wouldn't be able to draw a valid portrait of the murderer. In the preface to the play, he writes:

No man is a villain in his own eyes. Something in the man knows—must know—that what he is doing is evil; but in order to accept the knowledge the man would have to change. What is ghastly and really almost hopeless in our racial situation now is that the crimes we have committed are so great and so unspeakable that the acceptance of this knowledge would lead literally to madness. (14) Baldwin further explains that we have a duty to try to understand a man like this, and though we couldn't hope to liberate him, we might be able to work at freeing his children. This interesting explanation causes great excitement then, when attempting to teach young people about race and pain and hatred, for it extends a portion of hope that we as teachers can take responsibility for our students' future actions for equality and justice.

Lyle Britten, as we see in the play, closes his eyes, compulsively commits his crimes, and enters a spiritual darkness that no one can ever help him get out of. The second act of the play in fact, which takes place at his home, begins with a celebration with the townsfolk on the occasion of his first anniversary of marriage to Jo. It is a Sunday Morning, the Reverend Phelps is in attendance, yet Lyle is nowhere to be found. He is allowed by his wife to sleep late, and is generally excused from the early merry making. In a literal and figurative way, Baldwin allows his main character to languish in the darkness, alone and guilty.

#### *A Classroom Assignment*

Have the class divide into pairs. One person will be Lyle Britton, the other a murderer who has not been charged with any crime, but is cognizant of his crime. Both are in bed and asleep. Act out a nightmare that each man has, and discuss the similarities they have with each other.

Then have both actors portray the same characters, but rather asleep in bed, have them talking to a group of people at a party. Discuss these similarities.

What are the difficulties the characters have when they are alone with their thoughts?

What are the difficulties the characters have when interacting with other people?

Lyle Britton has closed his eyes and has entered that area of darkness. Acquitted from killing Old Bill in "self defense", he now must live with new blood on his hands. He cannot tell his wife the truth, although she has figured out a good deal of the facts behind his affair with Willa Mae, Old Bill's young wife, and she is a part of the confrontation Lyle has with Richard at the family store just before his murdering him later that night. He also refuses to tell Parnell the truth, and would never confide in the Reverend.



Parnell is definitely a man entrenched in the middle of this predicament. A self proclaimed renegade white man, he believes strongly in social justice and has worked hard to write in his newspaper advocating the equality of all people. It is his determination to see that both sides are properly treated, and is responsible for the court trial that will decide his old buddy Lyle's fate.

Finally in the third act, we are led to understand what a courtroom and the law means to people. With the use of a number of flashbacks and inner monologues, we are led to understand about what truths become evident at a trial. Each character testifies what they believe is their own truth, concocted from their own inherent beliefs and experiences. Truth then, becomes a collage of many peoples' truths, and in this case proves that injustice reigns in our hateful society.

### **XV. Topics For Discussion**

- How is Parnell James' need for justice mirror Emma Jones' present quest?
- Compare the trials of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Blues for Mister Charlie*.
- How has criminal law and social justice changed from the *Mockingbird* 30's, *Mister Charlie* 50's, and the *Malik Jones* 90's?

## **Notes**

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1. Paul, Richard PhD, Elder, Linda PhD. *Exploring Thoughts Underlying Feelings and Feelings Underlying Thoughts* , Sonoma College, Santa Rosa California: Center and Foundation For Critical Thinking, 1995
2. Paul and Elder
3. Paul and Elder
4. Paul and Elder
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8. Albertson. *Bessie* . New York: Stein and Day, 1972: 41-42
9. Smith, Bessie. "Poor Man's Blues". New York: Empress Music, 1930
10. McKinzie, Richard D. *The New Deal for Artists* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973
11. McKenzie
12. Sills, Sam. "The Abraham Lincoln Brigade" Document URL: <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/abe-brigade.html>
13. Sills
14. Baldwin, James. Author's Notes from *Blues For Mister Charlie* in *Best American Plays, 1963-1967* . New York: Crown, 1971. 49

## Resources

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### Teacher's Bibliography:

Albee, Edward. *The Death of Bessie Smith* . New York, Coward-McCann, 1960

Albertson, Chris. *Bessie* . New York: Stein and Day, 1972 An informational biography on the great blues singer.

Baldwin, James. *Blues For Mister Charlie* in *Best American Plays, 1963-1967* . New York: Crown, 1971

Key, Janis. "To Kill a Mockingbird" a teacher's project at Vintage High School, Napa, CA  
<http://www.sonoma.edu/ctthink/K12/k12class/9-12/mock.nclk>

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird* . New York: Popular Library, 1960

McKinzie, Richard D. *The New Deal for Artists* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973

Document URL: [http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/mine rescue.html](http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/mine%20rescue.html)

Paul, Richard W, PhD, and Elder, Linda, PhD. *Exploring Thoughts Underlying Feelings and Feelings Underlying Thoughts* , Sonoma College, Santa Rosa California: Center and Foundation For Critical Thinking, 1995

URL: <http://www.sonoma.edu/ctthink/>

Sills, Sam. "The Abraham Lincoln Brigade" Document URL:

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/abe-brigade.html>

An online website that gives insight to a popular movement during the Spanish Civil War. This explanation of the Brigade could clarify the need for action that the orderly speaks of in the Albee play.

Smith, Bessie. "Poor Man's Blues". New York: Empress Music, 1930

Whitney, Ross. *Reflections Of 1920's And 30's Street Life In The Music Of Bessie Smith* Spring, 1995, California State University, Long Beach, for

Christine Forney's course: the History of Women in Music.)

<http://dragon.acadiau.ca/~rob/blues/readings/bessie.html>

Spanish Civil War Links:

Guernica 1937, Picasso links: "<http://www.wwar.com:80/artists/period/cubism2.html>"

Blues Music Links:

<http://www.thomson.com/partners/avs/blues.html>

<http://www.music.sony.com/Music/ArtistInfo/Legacy/RootsNBlues/bessie.htm>

<http://web.fie.com/~tonya/smith.htm>

<http://home1.gte.net/deltakit/bessiesmith.htm>

<http://members.aol.com/ragtimers/index.html>

<http://www.webcom.com/friedman/blues.html>

### *Students' Bibliography:*

#### **Books:**

Albee, Edward. *The Death of Bessie Smith* . New York, Coward-McCann, 1960

Baldwin, James. *Blues For Mister Charlie* in *Best American Plays, 1963-1967* . New York: Crown, 1971

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<http://dragon.acadiau.ca/~rob/blues/readings/bessie.html>

#### **Classroom Materials:**

Videotape of: "To Kill a Mockingbird"

TV and VCR

Computers with Internet Connections (Media Center)

Art Supplies for Set and Costume Designs

CD Player/ Tape Player—For musical Presentations

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