

HANK WILLIAMS: MY INSPIRATION

In Hank Williams's six short years as a recording artist, he produced hits that would define country music. He was able to use his pain, his personal struggles and even his relationships to create memorable lyrics. In this lesson, students will study Williams's life by watching [AMERICAN MASTERS: HANK WILLIAMS – HONKY TONK BLUES](#). Then, they will use what they learn about Williams to help them analyze some of his most popular songs -- and then discuss whether or not they feel they can understand an artist through his writing. Finally, students will use Williams's methods of inspiration to pen their own lyrics or poetry.

PREPARATION

Grade Level: Grades 9-12

Time Allotment: 2 class periods

Subject Matter: English, Poetry, Music

Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Research information on the Internet.
- Interpret poetry through the lyrics of the songwriter.
- Write their own poems.
- Work collaboratively.
- Work on comprehension and understanding of text through repeated readings and interpretation.

Standards:

MCREL LANGUAGE ARTS, Level 4, Standard 6

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/Benchmark.asp?SubjectID=7&StandardID=6>

Uses reading skills and strategies to understand a variety of literary passages and texts (e.g., fairy tales, folktales, fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, fables, fantasies, historical fiction, biographies, autobiographies, chapter books)

MCREL LANGUAGE ARTS, Level 4, Standard 5

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/Benchmark.asp?SubjectID=7&StandardID=5>

Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process

MCREL LANGUAGE ARTS, Level 4, Standard 8

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/Benchmark.asp?SubjectID=7&StandardID=8>

Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes

MCREL LANGUAGE ARTS, Level 4, Standard 9

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/Benchmark.asp?SubjectID=7&StandardID=9>

Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

MCREL TECHNOLOGY, Level 4, Standard 2

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/Benchmark.asp?SubjectID=19&StandardID=2>

Knows the characteristics and uses of computer software programs.

Computer Resources:

- Modem: 56.6 Kbps or faster.
- Browser: Netscape Navigator 4.0 or above or Internet Explorer 4.0 or above.
Macintosh computer: System 8.1 or above and at least 32 MB of RAM.
- Personal computer (Pentium II 350 MHz or Celeron 600 MHz) running Windows® 95 or higher and at least 32 MB of RAM
- Software: Any presentation software such as Power Point or Hyperstudio (optional)

Materials:

Teachers will need the following supplies:

- Board and/or chart paper
- Television and VCR
- A tape of AMERICAN MASTERS: HANK WILLIAMS, cued to the beginning
- Ideally a screen on which to project the Web-based video clips
- Handouts of song lyrics for the lesson. Songs include:
 - “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry”
 - “Hey Good Lookin’”
 - “Your Cheatin’ Heart”
 - “Lovesick Blues”
 - “I’m So Tired of It All”

Students will need the following supplies:

- Computers with the capacities indicated above
- Notebook or journal
- Pens/pencils

Web Resources:

- **Tip:** Before teaching this lesson, bookmark all of the Web sites used in the lesson and create a word-processing document with all of the Web sites listed as hyperlinks, so that students can access the sites. (Note: It's a good idea to preview these sites before presenting them to your class.) Make sure that your computer has necessary media players, like RealPlayer, to show streaming clips (if applicable). If the students do any Internet research about Hank Williams, make sure that they search for Hank Williams Sr. Hank Williams Jr. is also a country music star.

- The Official Hank Williams Website
http://www.hankwilliams.com/hankbio_1.html
This is a short biography of Hank Williams's life.
- Rock and Roll Hall of Fame
<http://www.rockhall.com/hof/inductee.asp?id=211>
This site features a biography of Hank Williams, who was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1987.
- PBS' American Masters
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/williams_h.html
The AMERICAN MASTERS companion site to the Hank Williams episode.

Various websites that provide lyrics to the Hank Williams songs needed in this lesson. Lyrics are also available on the [Student Organizers section](#) for this lesson.

- "[I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry](#)"
[referenced from: <http://www.jumbojimbo.com/lyrics.php?songid=1774>]
- "[Hey Good Lookin](#)" -
[referenced from: <http://www.jumbojimbo.com/lyrics.php?songid=76>]
- "[Your Cheatin' Heart](#)" -
[referenced from: <http://www.jumbojimbo.com/lyrics.php?songid=2076>]
- "[Cold, Cold Heart](#)" -
[referenced from: http://www.thesonglyrics.com/w_song_lyrics/hankwilliams_lyric1.html]
- "[Lovesick Blues](#)" -
[referenced from: <http://www.lyricsfreak.com/h/hank-williams/64091.html>]
- "[I'm So Tired of It All](#)" -
[referenced from: <http://www.lyricsfreak.com/h/hank-williams/64143.html>]

This lesson was prepared by: Anna Chan Rekate

STEPS

Introductory Activity: (15 minutes)

1. Break the students up into groups of three or four to discuss the following questions. (Note: Students should take notes on large chart paper so they can share their responses with the rest of the class.)
 - How do you get to know someone?
 - How well do you know people?
 - Why do you know some people better than others?
 - Why are some people easy to get to know and why are others more difficult?
2. Next, ask students to what extent they feel they can know a songwriter from their songs. Ask them to reflect on current singers and their raps/lyrics. Do those lyrics reflect the person's life? (You may ask students to consider connections between the lives and lyrics of some contemporary singers students may know.) In this conversation, ask if students know any country music singers or if they know any DJs who include country music in their mixes.
3. Explain to students that they are going to look at one singer's life and lyrics, to decide for themselves how well you can get to know an artist through his or her lyrics. Tell them they will watch segments of AMERICAN MASTERS: HANK WILLIAMS. Ask if any students know who Hank Williams was. Ask them if they know any of his songs. Tell them that he was a country music singer in the 1940s whose brilliant career was cut short by drinking and death.
4. Begin by distributing the Student Organizer Questionnaire and direct students to the questions under Section 1:
 - Were Williams's friends and family members close to him? Explain what makes you think they were or weren't.
 - How did they suggest that others learn more about him?
 - Besides his life, what were his other sources of inspiration?

Ask students to answer these questions as they watch the first three minutes of the AMERICAN MASTERS episode "Hank Williams – Honky Tonk Blues." Tell students that they will see rare performance tapes, home movies, and interviews with family, other musicians and musicologists to explore Hank Williams, man and myth. Suggest that as they watch they pay attention to the comments Williams's family and friends make about knowing him. Play the opening segments of the show, where Williams's family and friends all suggest that people listen to his songs to find out what he was like, and end at the funeral scene.

5. After watching the segment, survey the students about their answers to the questions in Step 4.

Learning Activities

Activity 1: (20 minutes)

1. Continue to show the video from the funeral scene for three minutes. This video segment will end with a rendition of another musician, Bob Dylan, performing Williams's song, "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry."
2. For the first activity, distribute one song to each of the groups. You can find the lyrics to each of the songs at each Web site listed or in the [Student Organizers section](#) of this lesson plan.
 - "[I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry](#)"
[referenced from: <http://www.jumbojimbo.com/lyrics.php?songid=1774>]
 - "[Hey Good Lookin](#)" -
[referenced from: <http://www.jumbojimbo.com/lyrics.php?songid=76>]
 - "[Your Cheatin' Heart](#)" -
[referenced from: <http://www.jumbojimbo.com/lyrics.php?songid=2076>]
 - "[Cold, Cold Heart](#)" -
[referenced from: http://www.thesonglyrics.com/w_song_lyrics/hankwilliams_lyric1.html]
 - "[Lovesick Blues](#)" -
[referenced from: <http://www.lyricsfreak.com/h/hank-williams/64091.html>]
 - "[I'm So Tired of It All](#)" -
[referenced from: <http://www.lyricsfreak.com/h/hank-williams/64143.html>]
3. After reading these lyrics and discussing them in groups, students should brainstorm ideas about the situation behind the song. The students should record their answers on chart paper so there is a record of their ideas that can be posted in the classroom. The questions listed in Section 2 of the [Student Organizer Questionnaire](#) may help them in their discussion:
 - What is the premise of the song you chose?
 - What does the author, Hank Williams, seem to be feeling?
 - What language features tell you what Williams is feeling? (Consider: What words does he choose? How would you describe the vocabulary of the song? What rhythms does he use? Are the rhymes exact or off somehow? Is the melody sometimes at odds with the lyrics? What words does he emphasize, either through repetition or through their placement in song passages that are musically different?)

TIP: If students do not yet have the vocabulary to describe poetic features, suggest that they investigate the [Glossary of Poetry Terms](#).
4. After 10 minutes, ask students to answer the questions in Section #3 of the [Student Organizer Questionnaire](#). Based on their literary analysis of the songs, ask students to guess at (and offer evidence for their guesses) about Williams's:
 - state of mind
 - personality
 - love life
 - family situation
 - emotional state

Activity 2: (15 minutes)

5. Show students the final video clip, which begins approximately 11 minutes into the show with Williams's biography and a discussion about his "cowboy look." It will include information about his participation in talent contests, interviews with members of his band, the Drifting Cowboys, an interview with Audrey Williams, Hank Williams's widow, and the use of the "funny books" as inspiration for his lyrics. This 10-minute clip will end with the song "Movin' On Over."
6. After watching the biographical segment of the show, go over what they have learned from the video and how it compares to their analyses of the selected Hank Williams songs. Ask students how what they have learned about Hank Williams's life compares to their guesses about him. Ask them whether they believe they can understand Hank Williams through his songs.
7. Explain to the students that during the next class period they will use the inspiration of Hank Williams to create their own poem or lyrics about something in their life. You can choose to have them create their poem/lyrics in the culminating activity as homework or as an activity during the next class period.

Culminating Activity/Assessment: (One class period)

1. For the culminating activity, students will think about the influences and inspirations in their own lives and will compose poetry that reflects those influences. They will also share their poems with each other, and will use peer reflection to help them decide for themselves whether or not they can "know" an artist from his or her writing. To create their poems, students should use any ideas they are comfortable with -- and they should not be shy about borrowing ideas from books, current events, or their favorite television shows. Students can generate ideas using Section #4 of the [Student Organizer Questionnaire](#).
 - **Adversity:** When were you most scared? What scared you? What were you afraid would happen? What did happen?
 - **Love:** Whom do you love most in the world? Why? Write down one memory of being with that person. Where were you? What did your environment look/ sound/ smell/ feel like? What did the other person say? What did you say?
 - **Goals:** Describe your ideal life. Where would you live? What would you do? What would you look like? Why do think that's your ideal?

TIP: Suggest that students consider modeling their pieces in Williams's "Honky Tonk Blues" style, especially if the events are not uplifting or happy. Students may decide to write in any musical or poetic genre that interests them: sonnets, blues, epic poems, rock, ballads, rap, mixes (they may assemble a verbal collage of other artists' work to create their own statement), or some other form. Ask students to explain why

they chose their particular genre, however, and what it expresses about or how it informs the topic they have chosen.

2. Using Section #5 of the [Student Organizer Questionnaire](#), have students engage in peer-editing sessions in small groups or pairs so that they can provide feedback to one another. If students are willing, they may also analyze each other's lyrics and poems to offer guesses about what inspired their classmates' creations. Allow the writer to provide feedback on these guesses.

TIP: Since this is fairly personal, make sure that students agree to allow others to read their poems and question them in this way.

3. Once they have finalized their poems, students can volunteer to share their writing by reading it out loud to the class.

CROSS-CURRICULAR EXTENSIONS:

- Music - Learn to sing or play Hank Williams's songs in music class.
- Science – The AMERICAN MASTERS episode dealt with Hank Williams's physical pain as well as his emotional pain. We now know that his back pain was spina bifida. The students can do their own research on spina bifida and determine what it is, how it affects its victims, and how people can deal with it today.
- English – Compare the lyrics of Hank Williams Jr. and Hank Williams Sr. Both of them are country music stars, but do their songs share the same themes?
- Arts – do a Web-based research project where they identify the different versions of his songs, who sang them, and their reasons for singing his songs. Everyone from Elvis to Norah Jones to Coldplay has covered a Hank Williams Sr. song. For more information go to <http://www.coversproject.com/artist/>.
- Play the Six Degrees game on the [AMERICAN MASTERS Website](#). Have discussion for each relationship they do. Were they surprised by the connections? Or have the students create their own six degrees of separation from Hank Williams to other musicians.

Community Connections:

- Organize a performance that would feature a selection of Hank Williams's songs and students' poetry.

ORGANIZERS FOR STUDENTS

Print out and make copies of these organizers for your students:

- [Student Organizer Questionnaire](#)
- [Song lyrics for “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry”](#)
- [Song lyrics for “Hey Good Lookin”](#)
- [Song lyrics for “Your Cheatin’ Heart”](#)
- [Song lyrics for “Cold, Cold Heart”](#)
- [Song lyrics for “Lovesick Blues”](#)
- [Song lyrics for “I’m So Tired of It All”](#)

STUDENT ORGANIZER QUESTIONNAIRE

Section #1

- Were Williams's friends and family members close to him? Explain what makes you think they were or weren't.
- How did they suggest that others learn more about him?
- Besides his life, what were his other sources of inspiration?

Section #2

- What is the premise of the song you chose?
- What does the author, Hank Williams, seem to be feeling?
- What language features tell you what Williams is feeling? (Consider: What words does he choose? How would you describe the vocabulary of the song? What rhythms does he use? Are the rhymes exact or off somehow? Is the melody sometimes at odds with the lyrics? What words does he emphasize, either through repetition or through their placement in song passages that are musically different?)

Section #3

If you had to guess, based only on this song, what would you say about Williams's:

- state of mind
- personality
- love life
- family situation
- emotional state?

Do you think your guesses are accurate? Why or why not?

Section #4

If you have trouble coming up with ideas for a poem or song, you can use these questions to generate inspiration.

Choose one of the three themes below and answer the questions:

1. **Adversity:** When were you most scared? What scared you? What were you afraid would happen? What did happen?
2. **Love:** Whom do you love most in the world? Why? Write down one memory of being with that person. Where were you? What did your environment look/ sound/ smell/ feel like? What did the other person say? What did you say?
3. **Goals:** Describe your ideal life. Where would you live? What would you do? What would you look like? Why do think that's your ideal?

After you have written down your answers, circle the most important words from your answers.

Choose a form of song or poetry that you think relates to your experience, or just choose a rhythm that feels comfortable to you. Using the words you circled, tell a story (fictional or true) that fits the song/poetry form or the rhythm. Remember to make it clear who is telling the story.

If you want your poem to rhyme, you can use [The Rhymer](#) Web site.

For more information, see [Writing Poetry: A Beginner's Guide](#).

Section #5

When you are listening to or reading your partner's poems/lyrics, answer the following questions about their work to help you provide constructive feedback:

1. What is the main idea of this poem/lyric?
2. What word choices, rhythms, or rhymes tell you that?
3. What is the main emotion of this poem/lyric?
4. What did you like most about this poem/lyric?
5. Do you feel that this poem/lyric helps you to understand its author?

If you are confused about the answers to any of these questions, ask your partner to explain what he or she intended.

I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry
By Hank Williams

Hear that lonesome whipporwill
He sounds too blue to fly
The midnight train is whining low
I'm so lonesome I could cry

I've never seen a night so long,
When time goes crawling by;
The moon just went behind a cloud;
I'm so lonesome I could cry.

Did you ever see a robin weep
When leaves began to die
That means he's lost the will to live
I'm so lonesome I could cry

The silence of a falling star
Lights up a purple sky
And as I wonder where you are
I'm so lonesome I could cry
I'm so lonesome I could cry

Hey, Good Lookin'
By Hank Williams

Hey, good lookin'
What you got cookin'
How's about cooking something up for me

Well I'm free and ready
So please go steady
How's about keepin' a steady company

I got a hot rod Ford and a two dollar bill
And I know a spot, right over the hill
'Cause there's soda pop and a dancing spree
You want to have fun, come along with me

Hey, good lookin'
What you got cookin'
How's about cookin' something for me

(instrumental)

I'm gonna throw my date book over the fence
And then find me one for five or ten cents
I keep it 'til it's covered with age
'Cause I'm writing your name down on every page

Hey, good lookin'
What you got cookin'
How's about cookin' something up for me

(instrumental)

I got a hot rod Ford and a two-dollar bill
And I know a spot, right over the hill
'Cause there's soda pop and a dancing spree
You want to have fun, come along with me

Hey, good lookin'
What you got cookin'
How's about cookin' something up for me
How's about cookin' something up for me

How's about cookin' something up with

I said, good looking
Well how's about cookin' something up with me.

Your Cheatin' Heart
By Hank Williams

Your cheatin' heart will make you weep
You'll cry and cry and try to sleep
But sleep won't come the whole night through
Your cheatin' heart will tell on you

When tears come down like falling rain
You'll toss around and call my name
You're gonna walk that floor
the way that I do
Your cheatin' heart will tell on you

When tears come down like falling rain
You'll toss around and call my name
You're gonna walk that floor just the way that I do
Your cheatin' heart will tell on you

Your cheatin' heart will tell on you
Your cheatin' heart will tell on you

Cold, Cold Heart
By Hank Williams

I tried so hard, my dear, to show that you're my every dream
Yet you're afraid each thing I do is just some evil scheme,
A memory from your lonesome past keeps us so far apart.
Why can't I free your doubtful mind and melt your cold, cold heart?
Another love before my time made your heart sad and blue
And so my heart is paying now for things I didn't do,
In anger unkind words are said that make the teardrops start.
Why can't I free your doubtful mind and melt your cold, cold heart?
You'll never know how much it hurts to see you sit and cry,
You know you need and want my love yet you're afraid to try,
Why do you run and hide from life? To try it just ain't smart.
Why can't I free your doubtful mind and melt your cold, cold heart?
There was a time when I believed that you belonged to me,
But now I know your heart is shackled to a memory,
The more I learn to care for you, the more we drift apart.
Why can't I free your doubtful mind and melt your cold, cold heart?

Lovesick Blues
By Hank Williams

I got a feelin' called the blu-ues, oh, lawd
Since my baby said good-bye
And I don't know what I'll do-oo-oo
All I do is sit and sigh-igh, oh, lawd
That last long day she said good- bye
Well lawd I thought I would cry
She'll do me, she'll do you, she's got that kind of lovin'
lawd, I love to hear her when she calls me
Sweet dad-ad-ad-dy, such a beautiful dream
I hate to think it all o-o-ver
I've lost my heart it seems
I've grown so used to you somehow
Well, I'm nobody's sugar-daddy now
And I'm lo-on-lonesome
I got the lovesick blu-ues.

Well, I'm in love, I'm in love, with a beautiful gal
that's what's the matter with me
Well, I'm in love, I'm in love, with a beautiful gal
But she don't care about me
Lawd, I tried and I tried, to keep her satisfied
But she just wouldn't stay
So now that she is lea-eav-in'
This is all I can say.

Repeat 1st verse

I'm So Tired of it All
By Hank Williams

All my life I've been so lonesome
If happiness came, I missed the call
[c] all my dreams have died and vanished
And now I'm so tired of it all.

In life and love, I've been a failure
Too many tears thru it all
Too many broken vows and promises
And now I'm so tired of it all.

Ev'ry thing I loved, I lost, dear
Too many times I've watched my castles fall
My life is full of regretting
And now I'm so tired of it all.

From this world I'll soon be goin'
No one will miss me, after all
Up there, I pray I'll find contentment
But now I'm so tired of it all