



Blackbirds In Little Rock: Exploring the History behind the Music

The Civil Rights Movement



Lisa Loughlin, Mariana DeLoera, Erin Finley

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Grade Level	9th – 12th Grade
Subject	English/Language Arts, Music History, Social Studies
Course	A.P. Language and Composition, AP US History, Composition, U.S. History

Essential Question

How does the speaker impact the meaning of a text? How can history influence art? How is the Civil Rights Movement still relevant today?

Summary

In this lesson, students learn about the Little Rock Nine, other monumental moments from the Civil Rights Movement, and their impact on music culture. By examining the historical inspiration behind Beyoncé’s rendition of the song "Blackbird," students analyze a speaker’s impact on the meaning of a text, how history influences art, and how the Civil Rights Movement is still relevant today.

Snapshot

Engage

Students listen to “Blackbird” by The Beatles and reflect on the meaning of the song, drawing on prior knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement.

Explore

Students review a Civil Rights Music Timeline and reflect on newspaper headlines of the past.

Explain

Students watch a video explaining the Little Rock Nine and the impact of the event on society.

Extend

Students analyze an article about the impact of the songs “Blackbird” and “Blackbird” on members of the Little Rock Nine.

Evaluate

Students choose an essay prompt from a choice board to reflect on their learning.

Standards

Oklahoma Academic Standards (Fine Arts: Music (Middle School to High School (Intermediate)))

AD.M.CN.2 : Compare and contrast uses of music in a variety of societal, cultural, and historical contexts while making connections to uses of music in contemporary and local contexts.

Oklahoma Academic Standards (Fine Arts: Music (Middle School to High School (Intermediate)))

M.CN.2 : Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen personal understanding.

I.M.CN.2 : Identify different ways music is used to represent, establish, reinforce, and reflect group identity.

Oklahoma Academic Standards (Fine Arts: Music (Middle School to High School (Intermediate)))

USH.7.1: Analyze the major events, personalities, tactics and effects of the Civil Rights Movement.

USH.7.1B: Evaluate the events arising from separate but equal, policies, such as poll taxes and literacy tests, violent responses such as the Birmingham church bombing and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and conflicts over segregation including:

USH.7.1B1: "Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas" decision

USH.7.1B3: desegregation of Little Rock Central High School

Oklahoma Academic Standards: English Language Arts (Grade 9)

9.3.R.1: Analyze the extent to which historical, cultural, and/or global perspectives affect authors' stylistic choices in grade-level literary and informational texts.

9.3.R.2: Evaluate authors' perspectives and explain how those perspectives contribute to the meanings of texts.

9.3.W.2: Compose informative essays, reports, or technical writing that:

- objectively introduce and develop topics
- include a defensible thesis
- incorporate evidence (e.g., specific facts, details, charts and graphs, data)
- maintain an organized structure
- use sentence variety and word choice to create clarity and concision
- establish and maintain a formal style
- emulate literary devices from mentor texts

Attachments

- [Blackbird Lyrics—Blackbirds in Little Rock - Spanish.docx](#)
- [Blackbird Lyrics—Blackbirds in Little Rock - Spanish.pdf](#)
- [Blackbird Lyrics—Blackbirds in Little Rock.docx](#)
- [Blackbird Lyrics—Blackbirds in Little Rock.pdf](#)
- [Blackout Poetry Lyrics—Blackbirds in Little Rock .docx](#)
- [Blackout Poetry Lyrics—Blackbirds in Little Rock .pdf](#)
- [Choice Board—Blackbirds in Little Rock - Spanish.docx](#)
- [Choice Board—Blackbirds in Little Rock - Spanish.pdf](#)
- [Choice Board—Blackbirds in Little Rock.docx](#)
- [Choice Board—Blackbirds in Little Rock.pdf](#)
- [I Notice, I Wonder—Blackbirds in Little Rock - Spanish.docx](#)
- [I Notice, I Wonder—Blackbirds in Little Rock - Spanish.pdf](#)
- [I Notice, I Wonder—Blackbirds in Little Rock.docx](#)
- [I Notice, I Wonder—Blackbirds in Little Rock.pdf](#)
- [Lesson Slides—Blackbirds in Little Rock.pptx](#)
- [Tip of the Iceberg—Blackbirds in Little Rock - Spanish.docx](#)
- [Tip of the Iceberg—Blackbirds in Little Rock - Spanish.pdf](#)
- [Tip of the Iceberg—Blackbirds in Little Rock.docx](#)
- [Tip of the Iceberg—Blackbirds in Little Rock.pdf](#)

Materials

- Lesson Slides (attached)
- Blackbird Lyrics handout (attached; one per student, printed double-sided)
- Tip of the Iceberg handout (attached; one per student)
- I Notice, I Wonder handout (attached; one per student, printed double-sided)
- Choice Board handout (attached; one per student)
- Blackout Poetry Lyrics (attached; one per student) (optional)
- Internet access
- Printer access
- Smartboard/projection access
- Pens/pencils
- Notebook paper
- Sticky notes
- Highlighters
- Black markers (optional)

20 minutes

Engage

Preparation Note

Before beginning the lesson, you will need to print copies of the NPR article [“What The Beatles and Beyoncé’s ‘Blackbird’ means to this Little Rock Nine member”](#) to distribute to students later in the lesson. You could also choose to distribute the article virtually via an LMS.

Display the lesson title on **slide 2**, then review the essential questions and learning objectives on **slides 3–4**. Transition to **slide 5** and distribute the **Blackbird Lyrics** handout (attached). Direct students to read the lyrics as they listen to the song. Play the video on the slide, [Blackbird \(Remastered 2009\)](#).

After the song ends, instruct students to answer questions 1–3 on the back of the handout. Allow 3–5 minutes to do this, then invite students to share some of their answers.

Next, move to **slide 6** and read the Paul McCartney quote aloud. Facilitate a brief discussion about the Little Rock Nine and the Civil Rights Movement during this time to gauge students’ prior knowledge. Use the following guiding questions, which can also be found on hidden **slide 7**:

- *What big events were happening during this time?*
- *Why does he talk about Little Rock in particular?*
- *Looking back at the reflection questions you answered, was anyone accurate with their initial thoughts about what the song was about or what blackbirds represented?*
- *What do you know about the Civil Rights Movement? When did it begin?*
- *What do you know about the Little Rock Nine?*
- *Why was this a significant event in America?*
- *What role did music have during the Civil Rights Movement?*
- *What role does music play in historical events?*

20 minutes

Explore

Move to **slide 8**. Distribute the **Tip of the Iceberg** handout (attached). Invite students to write down everything they know about the Civil Rights Movement in the upper part of the iceberg.

Next, instruct students to take out their internet-connected device. Ask them to use the link or QR code on slide 8 to review the **Civil Rights Music Timeline** [infogram](#). Allow students 5–10 minutes to view the timeline infogram. Take a moment to highlight some of the key points.

After reviewing the Civil Rights Music Timeline, instruct students to complete the bottom half of the iceberg and write what they've learned about the Civil Rights Movement thus far. Facilitate a brief class discussion by allowing some students to share what they learned.

Move to **slide 9** and distribute the **I Notice, I Wonder** handout (attached). Review the instructions for the instructional strategy [I Notice, I Wonder](#). Instruct students to take notes on their handout for each newspaper headline they view.

Next, move through **slides 10–14** and review each newspaper headline. As they read, allow students a few minutes to complete each row of the graphic organizer. Provide students the opportunity to share their thoughts before transitioning to the next newspaper headline.

25 minutes

Explain

Move to **slide 15** and play the video [How the Little Rock 9 Impacted the Civil Rights Movement | The American Presidency with Bill Clinton](#). Have students turn to the back of the I Notice, I Wonder handout and complete the guided notes as they watch.

When the video ends, take a moment to review the guided notes and answer any remaining questions. Then, distribute one sticky note to each student.

Transition to **slide 16** and review the instructions for the instructional strategy [How Am I Feeling? What Am I Thinking?](#) Instruct students to draw a line dividing their sticky note in half. On one side, ask students to draw a picture depicting how they are feeling after learning about the events of the Little Rock Nine. On the other side, instruct students to write a sentence about what they are thinking.

Invite students to share, but avoid pushing students to share if they do not wish to.

30 minutes

Extend

Transition to **slide 17**. Explain to students that the version of “Blackbird” they are about to listen to was released in 2024 by Beyoncé on her album *Cowboy Carter*, featuring four other female Black country artists, Tanner Adell, Tiera Kennedy, Reyna Roberts, and Brittney Spencer. Use the link on slide 17 to play “[Blackbiird](#).” Instruct students to listen to the new version.

Distribute the NPR article, [What The Beatles and Beyoncé's 'Blackbird' means to this Little Rock Nine member](#) and a highlighter to each student. Transition to **slide 18** and review the instructional strategy [Why-Lighting](#). Instruct students to read the article and highlight anything they think is important.

After students have finished highlighting the article, direct them to write notes in the margin of the article explaining why this word/sentence/phrase stood out to them.

After students have finished reading and annotating the article, facilitate a brief discussion using the following guided questions, which can also be found on hidden **slide 19**:

- *Why did Beyoncé’s version of “Blackbird” resonate with the Little Rock Nine member, Melba Pattillo Beals?*
- *What things did you highlight and why?*
- *Why does learning the inspiration behind the songs that we listen to matter?*
- *Are there other remakes of songs that you like better than the original?*

Next, move to **slide 20** and invite students to revisit the reflection questions on the back of the Blackbird Lyrics handout. Allow 2–3 minutes for students to answer the remaining reflection questions. Adjust time as needed. Time permitting, invite a few students to share their responses.

90 minutes

Evaluate

Move to **slide 21**. Introduce students to the instructional strategy, [Choice Boards](#). Distribute the **Choice Board** handout (attached) to each student and review the directions. Then move to **slide 22** and go over the essay requirements with the class. Direct students to use the QR code on the slide to access the Civil Rights Music Timeline infographic if they wish to use it as a resource. Next, allow students at least one full period to complete the essay or instruct students to complete the assignment as homework and submit at the established due date.

Optional Evaluation Activity: Blackout Poetry

Distribute the **Blackout Poetry Lyrics** handout and black markers so that each student has a different set of lyrics. Review the instructions for the instructional strategy [Blackout Poetry](#) and the objective of the assignment: create a poem using the words in the lyrics.

Instruct students to brainstorm words related to the Civil Rights Movement and write them down on a piece of notebook paper or the back of their lyric sheet. Then ask students to circle any anchor words in their song lyrics. Ask students to list these words on a separate sheet of paper, or the back of their lyric sheet, organizing them in order of appearance from left to right and top to bottom. Have students study their lists and select the words they want to use in their final poem.

To create their blackout poems, have students use a black marker to black out the page of lyrics line by line, excepting the words they've chosen to use in their poems. The result should be a mostly black page with only students' selected words visible. Allow students fifteen minutes to complete the activity. When all students are done, ask for volunteers to share their poems.

Note: the lyrics to some of these songs could be distressing to students. Take care to choose songs that will work for your particular students.

Resources

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