

TEACHING WITH BLUES POEMS

Borrowing from Song to Write about What's Wrong

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This form is one of my tried-and-true exercises, one I have used with a range of ages that always gets the pens going. It also allows me to play music in the classroom, which is always a game-changer. I usually find the atmosphere of a classroom so rigid, the fluorescent lights and stuck windows, often overly lit, airless places that I am always looking to warm up in some way, to get to a place of intimacy from which students can write. I lower the lights or turn them off in the front part of my classroom when I can, and talk to students about writing from that cozier place. Music in a dim room makes it warmer.

I teach this to college-level students in my introductory creative writing class, but have taught it at the middle and high school level too. I use different examples for the levels, but the shape of the lesson is generally the same.

I tell the students that I am introducing them to a form that has been around for much of America's history, that originates from music as so much poetry does, music and poetry forever married if not cousins at the very least, sometimes married cousins. I tell them the influence of the blues is everywhere still today. I ask them if they know of current musical genres influenced by it. If they don't guess, I mention R&B, rhythm and blues, which still includes the form in its name. I, like many of my students, am from an immigrant family that didn't necessarily listen to the blues or speak English in the household. On occasion, I do get some students with families and grandparents from Virginia or somewhere down south, where many Black students in northern cities like New York have roots, who did

expose them to the music growing up. It is a history lesson for all of us too far away in place or time to know where the sound and word come from.

We discuss the origin of blues in the post-slavery South of the United States. We talk about what that time meant. I ask them what they know of it. *What years were those exactly?* We talk about the one hundred years between the end of the Civil War and the civil rights era. *Was there really freedom for African-Americans after the Civil War? Why did a civil rights era occur if there was freedom?* We get to talking about Jim Crow, the KKK, segregation, and voting rights. All this existed in the era in which blues and jazz were created, when the United States made its first, most particular music.

I tell them I am about to play a song from the late 1930s. I pass out copies of the lyrics so they can follow along. I tell younger students they might laugh because the sound is so old but it was popular music back in its day. The singer, Lead Belly, was on the cover of *Time* magazine and had quite a few hits. He was in jail and made music like quite a few rappers today. He was a star very long ago. I play “Good Morning Blues” from a link on YouTube, the whole version, including his very long talk before the song that is clearly part of it. I don’t show the screen. I have them listen. It is a great song for a morning class, as we all lumber in half dazed from dream and dissatisfaction. Its smart, gentle chorus—“Good morning blues, blues how do you do”—stays with the listener for most of the day.

The song lyrics can be found online and in an amazing little volume called *Blues Poems*, edited by Kevin Young. You can enter this book at any point and be sucked in by the emotion and mastery of form. The book includes both song lyrics as well as poems by a wide range of American poets.

We talk about the meaning of the word “blues,” what it conveys. Sadness, most all of the students say, but it is music too, so it is sadness expressed in a structured, lyrical way. By then, I have talked to my students about other forms of poetry, the various shapes and ways it is made, and I have introduced them to the idea of poetry as a container of feelings that can help you express the inexpressible. The limits, the shapes, allow a freedom to say in a way that works, that provides some release. This particular container, blues, is more than one hundred years old and has been evoked by a world of poets and singers, and they can use it too.

We talk about structure. *What is the shape of this container? How long are the lines? How do they make sounds?* We count syllables in the song, eight to ten a line, roughly. We notice rhyme and repetition. A three-line stanza, the first two lines repeat generally and the last rhymes with it. I write it on the board. I tell them not all blues poems take this form, but most blues songs do. The students don’t have to stick to the form if it is too much to replicate, but they should at least be familiar with it. I will go on to show them exam-

ples of quite a few blues poems, some that are strict with the form and some that break but keep the repetition and rhythm.

We get to the feel, the content. We discuss what the singer is sad about. It is a general sadness, a general dissatisfaction, a malaise. No one around him makes him happy, not his family, not a woman. No white man can feel this, he begins. The song doesn't quite come out and say what is wrong, but it is all wrong. The air is wrong, the morning is wrong, the world is wrong. This is a Jim Crow-era song; nothing is right. I ask the students what is there to be sad about now, what is wrong with the world now. What kind of blues do we have? We brainstorm about what gives us the blues and I write the list on the board as they raise their hands:

the MTA
 the president
 school
 family
 work
 poverty
 racism
 the police
 love
 immigration

We read many versions of the form from a packet I compiled from Kevin Young's *Blues Poems*. We start with Langston Hughes, the biggest proponent of the form as poetry. In Hughes's play *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, the character of the young man says, "That's what the blues is. Sad funny songs. Too sad to be funny, and too funny to be sad." Hughes stays dark and adult, funny yet strict with the form in poems like "Morning After" and "Too Blue," discussing a bad night drinking and a contemplation of suicide as complex and witty as Dorothy Parker's "Resumé."

We move on to Gwendolyn Brooks, who also adheres to the shape and mixes sass and sadness in "Queen of the Blues." "Now show me a man / What will love me / Till I die / Can't find no such man / No matter how hard / You try." We then look at poems that break with the form, like "Tired" by Fenton Johnson, a prose poem and all-time favorite of mine. It is specific, tragic, and plain, yet lyrical from its first line.

TIRED

I am tired of work; I am tired of building up somebody else's civilization.
 Let us take a rest, M'Lissy Jane.

I will go down to the Last Chance Saloon, drink a gallon or two of gin, shoot a game or two of dice and sleep the rest of the night on one of Mike's barrels.

You will let the old shanty go to rot, the white people's clothes turn to dust, and the Calvary Baptist Church sink to the bottomless pit.

You will spend your days forgetting you married me and your nights hunting the warm gin Mike serves the ladies in the rear of the Last Chance Saloon.

Throw the children into the river; civilization has given us too many. It is better to die than it is to grow up and find out that you are colored.

Pluck the stars out of the heavens. The stars mark our destiny. The stars marked my destiny.

I am tired of civilization.

For my older students, including some high school age kids, I have had the honor of introducing them to "Feeling Fucked Up" by Etheridge Knight. Like "Tired," it has a sense of anarchy that liberates voices in a classroom. Yes, there might be some curse-laden blues by students that follow it, but they often really need to get it out. I've also read the jazz-inspired "You Know" by Jayne Cortez aloud to the class, the repetition and rhythm of which is often inspiration for the students.

For younger kids—middle school and high school—I have read from *Blues Journey*, a picture book rich in lines and images by Walter Dean Myers, illustrated by his son, Christopher Myers, "Pain will push and poke you, / despair will scrape the bone / Misery loves company, / blues can live alone." It also has a great introduction, timeline, and glossary related to the blues and its place in American art and culture. I inundate students with examples to immerse them in this form and history of which they are about to become part.

I read examples from other student poems depending on time. Middle school examples can have as much of an impact on college-level students as any pieces by their peers. My college classes run seventy-five minutes, so I often have time to fit in a great deal of examples from published and classroom poets. For a forty- to forty-five-minute period in a middle or high school, I might stick to the song, one or two poems from a published poet, and one or two from a student poet.

After they have heard the poems, some of which they or I might read aloud, I try to give students fifteen to twenty minutes to write their own blues in response. We share when they are done writing. Sometimes ten minutes of writing can be enough as this form can click quickly with kids. If they are stuck, they don't have to attempt the original form; they can just repeat "I got the blues" over and over and declare what they have the blues about till they catch a rhythm. I tell them to get detailed and specific, to

be inside that moment of blues for several repetitions of the line. They are joining an immense chorus of American artists who have sung and written the blues. They write in and about solitude when they write blues, yet they are not alone.

These poems from some of my students can be model blues poems for students you teach.

JODY

I've got the blues 'cause Jody don't love me no more
I used to be his whole world until he decided to explore
Now I'm just some distant planet occupying his space
And even in my own world he's made me feel out of place

I've got the blues 'cause Jody don't love me no more
Says he's loving someone new
And I love Jody so much I said how 'bout you love two
And I say what I don't know won't hurt me
Just meet me Jody for a rendezvous

I've got the blues 'cause Jody don't love me no more
And God forbid if he never really did
'Cause Jody's got my heart and without him how would it beat
Jody is a part of me without him how could I be complete?

Jody don't love me no more and it hurts to my core
but mama says what's that got to do with the time you've been given
'Cause you out here lovin' Jody and not yourself so you really ain't livin'

MANYAH SEISAY (CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK)

A MOTHERLESS CHILD

A motherless child is bad for business
They'll do you wrong and so no wrong in it
A motherless child doesn't know how to love
So if you fall in love
You better run

A motherless child is me
Heartbroken
Feelings of anger hurt and defeat

I try to understand
 I really try to understand
 But all I can do
 is walk around with a heart full of rage

Angry at the world
 I can care less
 I just want my mother back
 Please God give me a second chance

A motherless child is bad for business
 I've warned you
 Don't get yourself involved with them

ALEXANDER DAJOEL POLITE (BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE)

MY BLUES

Living on autopilot but taking no flight
 Living on autopilot but taking no flight
 Going through the motions all day and lying awake all night

I've got no time to think but I think all the time
 I've got no time to think but I think all the time
 My mind spitting syllables and I, I just want to feel alive

I look at the mirror, who's that I don't recognize?
 I look at the mirror, who's that I don't recognize?
 She mimics me and my uncertainty but she is so full of lies

Autopilot take me home before it's my time to die
 Autopilot take me home before it's my time to die
 I can't live it up, live it up, flying straight to my demise

BRIDGETTE FELIZ (BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE)

THE BLUES

The blues speaks to my mind
 then trickles through my body
 finding my soul

I have my own blues
 that belong to me
 They make me rock back and forth
 back and forth
 the blues the blues the blues
 Make me gaze into the zone
 of the music
 which accuses my mind
 yet loses my mind
 like I'm ghost
 unspoken words
 lost in the notes
 of this blues poem
 I'm done with the blues
 yet the notes live on every day
 like a new joke

ERICA (TENTH GRADE)

FAMILIA BLUES

I got the blues
 porque no tengo a mi familia
 I get so sad when I remember them
 Yo nunce pensé
 que me fuera tan far far de ellos
 quisiera cumplir mi sueño de verlos
 pero me doy cuenta
 que eso será en muchos años
 I got the blues
 por no tenerlos conmigo
 they were everything to me
 pero hay que aprender a decir adios
 Maybe in the future
 los visitaré
 I remember the beautiful times
 que mi familia y yo vivimos
 Mexico and New York
 son muy diferentes
 Mi familia también me extrañan
 and I miss them

JENNIFER (SEVENTH GRADE)