



Teaching the Beatles as poets

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Abstract

The Beatles' lyrics provide students with a window into the chaotic milieu of the 1960s: the war and the peace movements, the power of civil rights action, the annihilation of authoritarian structures, and the disintegration of social mores. Yet beyond that, their lyrics are timeless poetry that informs contemporary events and conveys the kaleidoscope of experiences and emotions that compose the human experience.

In this course, the Beatles lyrics are interwoven with poetry from across the ages, and students learn to compare and contrast the lyrics with this poetry. For example, the work of the English Romantic poets especially lends itself to these comparisons, since the Second Generation Romantics were the "rock stars" of the early nineteenth century.

One important aspect of this course is to look beneath the surface of the words – to discover what is being said that is not apparent without careful scrutiny and knowledge of both the authors and their times.

The mechanics of poetry are subtle aspects of the course; these are taught in conjunction with the poetry, rather than as separate topics.

Through this course students gain a myriad of skills; they learn to appreciate the Beatles' lyrics as poetry and thus all genres of music lyrics as such. Finally, they come to understand that poetry is a ubiquitous part of their lives, and ultimately, a valuable guide to understanding both their interior and exterior worlds.

Keywords

Beatles, lyrics as poetry, Romantics

Introduction

The Beatles' lyrics provide students with a window into the chaotic milieu of the 1960s: the war and the peace movements, the power of civil rights action, the annihilation of authoritarian structures, and the disintegration of social mores. Yet beyond that, their lyrics are timeless poetry that informs contemporary events and conveys the kaleidoscope of experiences and emotions that compose the human experience.

This course is exceedingly popular with students (The cap at Curry is 30 so it tends to be available only to juniors or seniors, since they have priority in the scheduling process. But my daughter took a Beatles music course at Arizona State University and there were 300 enrolled.) as so many of them have parents of the baby boomer generation who love the Beatles and have familiarized their



children with the Beatles music. Indeed, many students demonstrate an exhaustive knowledge of the music, but have little understanding that the lyrics represent some of the most beloved poetry of all times. Rarely, a student will enroll in the course without any knowledge of the Beatles' work at all. These are some of the best students, as their questions bring up issues for discussion that go right to the basics of the lyrics and their references to the culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, since the professors who teach a Beatles course tend to have their songs integrated into their DNA, it is good to be reminded that this is not true of the students.

So how does it make sense to create a Beatles course? At Curry, the course has evolved; it was originally taught as purely the Beatles work with the mechanics integrated into the entire course rather than as stand-alone lessons. Students tend not to be very interested in mechanics such as rhyme scheme, strophic lyric, elegiac lyric, meter, foot, etc., although these terms are important aspects of the Beatles poetry. Still, it remains much more useful to integrate these as they apply to each individual lyric.

The second phase of the course was to make comparisons between the Beatles lyrics and those of other artists. Examples of this are as follows:

Beatles lyrics:*Ask Me Why**P.S. I Love You**There's a Place**Strawberry Fields Forever**Blackbird***Comparison lyrics:***I Saw Her Standing There*
The Rain, the Park, and Other Things
The Cowsills*Everything That Touches You*
The Association*Miss You*
The Rolling Stones*Bron-yr-Aur*
Led Zepellin*Our House*
Crosby, Still, Nash and Young*The Times They Are a-Changin'*
Bob Dylan

*Yesterday**Turn, Turn, Turn*
The Byrds*Here Comes the Sun**Here Comes Sunshine*
The Grateful Dead*The Word**Songs of Freedom*
Santana*Lucy in the Sky
With Diamonds**Heroin*
The Velvet Underground*Within You Without You**Crystal Blue Persuasion*
Tommy James and the Shondells*Julia**So Long Mom*
Tom Lehrer*A Day in the Life**The End*
The Doors*Because**Mercy Mercy Me*
Marvin Gaye*Carry That Weight**The Weight*
The Band

The method of this second incarnation worked quite well because there are so many songs from the Beatles' era that allow students to envision them as poetry and to make thematic comparisons. It also allows students to suggest songs for the class and to use their favorites in their essays that compare the Beatles work to a vast catalogue of other music lyrics.

Take, for example, the theme of temporality in *Yesterday* and The Byrds' *Turn, Turn, Turn*. McCartney's lyrics sadly wish for another time. He says:

Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away
Now it looks as though they're here to stay
Oh, I believe in yesterday



Suddenly, I'm not half the man I used to be
There's a shadow hanging over me.
Oh, yesterday came suddenly . . .

This leads to a discussion about time, how it affects us, how it can be either friend or foe, depending on the circumstances. In *Turn, Turn, Turn* The Byrds address time by evoking Ecclesiastes 3:1:

To Everything (Turn, Turn, Turn)
There is a season (Turn, Turn, Turn)
And a time to every purpose, under Heaven

A time to be born, a time to die
A time to plant, a time to reap
A time to kill, a time to heal
A time to laugh, a time to weep

These lyrics continue the theme of time as they perfectly contrast the good and the evil that have their place in every life.

In the third incarnation of the course it was important to move the course into the realm of conventional poetry, the Beatles lyrics, the lyrics of other musical artists, and poetry from across ages and cultures were woven together.

It is clear that the Second Generation Romantic poets have much in common with the Beatles in terms of their ideology and even their lifestyles; this is particularly true of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron (George Gordon). Shelley and Byron were exceedingly popular; they were chased all over Europe by women wishing just to sleep with them, just as the Beatles were (and still are today). Their lifestyles are reflected in those of the 1960s' generation. They practiced free love (Lord Byron with Clair Clairmont, Shelley with Mary Godwin) and their lives were rife with scandal; they finally left England in order to live more freely. They experimented with opium and frequently used heroin and its derivative, laudanum. In other words, these poets were the godfathers of "sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll". They were culturally and socially savvy, yet they chose to ignore all convention. They were also quite involved in the protest movements of their time – Shelley with the Irish fight for liberation from England (*An Address to the Irish People and Proposal for an Association of Philanthropists*) and the war against the working class in England (*The Masque of Anarchy*), and Byron in the



Greek war against the Turks. Still, there are countless poets to work with other than the Romantics.

While students respond quite well in terms of making connections between the Romantic poets and the Beatles, they do ultimately understand and appreciate the intersection of themes with a myriad of other poetry and the Beatles lyrics; the Beat poets and the poets writing in the 1960s are especially popular.

The following is a short list of conventional poetry that works well thematically with the Beatles lyrics:

The Beatles

Misery

Here, There, and Everywhere

Revolution

If I Needed Someone

When I'm Sixty-Four

*You've Got to Hide
Your Love Away*

She Said, She Said

*I Don't Want to Spoil
The Party*

Help

Complementary Poetry

Tenebrae
Geoffery Hill

She Walks in Beauty
Lord Byron

London
William Blake

Gestalt Prayer
Frederick Perls

*Sonnets from the Portuguese #43:
How do I Love Thee?*
Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Gay
author unknown

Contemplating Death
Sandi J. Holland

The More Loving One
W.H. Auden

When I Have Fears
John Keats



Nowhere Man

I'm Nobody, Who are You?

Emily Dickinson

In My Life

Funeral Blues

W.H. Auden

Eleanor Rigby

The Love Song of J. Alfred

Prufrock

T.S.Eliot

I'm Only Sleeping

The Lotos Eaters

Tennyson

Money Can't Buy Me Love

The World Is Too Much With Us

I Am The Walrus

The Walrus and the Carpenter

Lewis Carroll

Happiness Is A Warm Gun

The Goblin Market

Christina Rossetti

The following is an example of how these pairings are taught using Frederick Perls' *Gestalt Prayer* and the Beatles *If I Needed Someone*. Perls says:

I do my thing and you do your thing
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,
And you are not in this world to live up to mine. You are you and
I am I
And if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.

Thematically, this can take students' down many roads. Perls celebrates individuality and questions the likelihood of any two people coming together. At the end of the poem he celebrates the fact that *should* chance bring people together, it would be "beautiful." The title itself emphasizes this, since the meaning of the word "gestalt" is an organized whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Still, chance may not bring two people together and Perls stresses the fact that we are all individuals, responsible, ultimately, only for ourselves.

In *If I Needed Someone* The Beatles theme is also individuality:



If I needed someone to love
You're the one that I'd be thinking of
If I needed someone

If I had some more time to spend
Then I guess I'd be with you my friend
If I needed someone

Had you come some other day
Then it might not have been like this
But you see now I'm too much in love

Carve your number on my wall
And maybe you will get a call from me
If I needed someone . . .

While there is an attraction, there is also emphasis on “if” which casts doubt over the possibility that the relationship will, in fact, ever begin.

An important aspect of this course is to look beneath the surface of the words – to discover what is being said that is not apparent without careful scrutiny and knowledge of both the authors and their times. For example, the song *Please Please Me* refers to oral sex. And *You've Got to Hide Your Love Away* refers to being homosexual. Both of these themes would have been taboo – even in “swinging London” in the 1960s; for instance, it was not until 1967 when homosexuality was decriminalized in England and *You've Got to Hide Your Love Away* was released in 1963. *Martha My Dear*, seemingly about a woman, is actually a song about Paul's sheepdog, *Hey Jude* was written by Paul to comfort Julian Lennon during his parents' divorce; *Sexy Sadie* expresses Lennon's disgust with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

Students are surprised to discover these facts. Indeed, there are so many Beatles lyrics that tell a completely different story than what is immediately apparent that students make it a game to uncover as many “hidden meanings” as they can. And beyond that, they also begin to read other poetry deeply to find unexpected connotations.

Through the Beatles' philanthropic, peacenik (*Eleanor Rigby*, *From Us To You*, *Blackbird*) and revolutionary lyrics (*Revolution*, *All You*

Need is Love, *Carry That Weight*) students learn what the culture of the '60s was like. They describe their generation (Millennials) as self-involved, lazy, and



conflict-averse. When asked individually if they would be willing to engage in a movement for justice as so many college students did during the '60s, it is rare to find one who says they would. Teaching this aspect of the Beatles work gives them a lens through which to view a time when college students cared deeply about social justice. Some examples that impress them are the Freedom Riders, the shootings at Kent State during an anti-war protest and John Carlos' and Tommie Smith's Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics. Surprisingly, (or perhaps not) students are not at all impressed by the successful efforts of the counterculture movement to get the 26th Amendment passed, lowering the voting age from 21 to 18.

Teaching the Beatles as individual artists after the band split (April 10, 1970) is an important and appropriate way to conclude the course. Students are certainly interested in the songs, especially in the fact that they all became such activists post break-up. They began to actively work for peace and the annihilation of poverty.

John and Paul indulged in politicizing their lyrics, something they had done, yet mostly by intimation, as Beatles. Ultimately, this resulted in some of their lyrics being banned by the British Broadcasting Company. McCartney's *Give Ireland Back to the Irish*, released in February of 1972, sympathized with the "enemy" at a time when Northern Ireland was in dire turmoil. The song was written in sympathy for the victims of "Bloody Sunday" but most importantly it was a protest against the restrictions of daily life imposed on the Irish by the British army.

The "Bloody Sunday" massacre took place on January 30th, 1972. During a protest against the internment of suspected Irish nationalists, thirteen unarmed Irish civilians were shot dead and 17 more injured. Perhaps McCartney recognized his own Irish roots at this time, both of his parents being of Irish descent.

John Lennon was fully Irish only on his father's side, but was even more Irish nationalistic than McCartney. His songs *If You Had the Luck of the Irish* and *Sunday Bloody Sunday* are far more radical than McCartney's *Give Ireland Back to the Irish*.

Influenced by his sojourn to India as a Beatle and his friendship with Ravi Shankar, George Harrison organized the Concert for Bangladesh. It was the first of its kind, bringing together a spectacular line-up of rock stars to raise money for charity.

Ringo also took part in the Concert for Bangladesh and ultimately founded his own charity, The Lotus Foundation.

The politicization of their lyrics along with their philanthropic works demonstrate how the individual Beatles recognized that they had a much deeper role to play concerning social and political justice. Freed from the restrictions of being Beatles, and having no financial worries, they now began to work resolutely, using their fame and fortune to promote charitable causes.

Students enjoy learning about these endeavors by the Beatles for several reasons. They appreciate the fact that Lennon, McCartney, Harrison and Starr didn't just disappear in the way that many, many band members do, but continued to work not only philanthropically, but creatively; that they didn't just rest on their laurels, which they certainly could have; and that their activism, rather than diminish, became much stronger.

Students are also quite curious about the Beatles' biographies. Of course, all of these details reside in their lyrics, so these questions lead directly back to them. Students want to know such facts as where the Beatles grew up, what their family lives were like, who their girlfriends were, and where they live/d post-Beatles. It is a critical part of the course to examine the autobiographical lyrics, for example:

Lennon, like his predecessors Shelley and Byron who left England forever, felt constricted in England. He couldn't be creative or walk around freely without being instantly surrounded by fans. And having visited New York City where he felt very much at home and free to enjoy the city without being bothered. New Yorkers are notoriously "cool" and most wouldn't dream of acknowledging a celebrity. So this was the perfect place for him; he left England for good and moved to New York City in 1971.

McCartney remained in Britain; he owns homes in Scotland – High Park Farm and the Mull of Kintyre – and in London and Sussex.

A discussion with students regarding where Lennon and McCartney chose to live post-Beatles reflects, in Lennon's case, his desire to be anonymous when he chose, and in McCartney's case, his profound patriotism regarding Britain. These propensities are expressed in their lyrics. In *Watching the Wheels* Lennon says:

People say I'm crazy doing what I'm doing,
Well they give me all kinds of warnings
To save me from ruin,
When I say that I'm o.k. they look at me kind of strange,
Surely you're not happy now you no longer play the
game,

People say I'm lazy dreaming my life away,
Well they give me all kinds of advice



Designed to enlighten me,
When I tell that I'm doing fine watching shadows on the
wall,
Don't you miss the big time boy you're no
longer on the ball?

McCartney, however, writes lovingly of places in Britain; for example, in *Mull of Kintyre* he says:

Mull of Kintyre
Oh mist rolling in from the sea,
My desire is always to be here
Oh mull of Kintyre
Far have I traveled and much have I seen
Dark distant mountains with valleys of green.
Past painted deserts the sunset's on fire
As he carries me home to the mull of Kintyre.

Conclusion

Teaching a literature course that focuses on the Beatles lyrics may sound frivolous. In fact, it is anything but that. Through this course students gain a myriad of skills; they learn to appreciate the Beatles' lyrics as poetry and thus all genres of music lyrics as such. Finally, they come to understand that poetry is a ubiquitous part of their lives, and ultimately, a valuable guide to understanding both their interior and exterior worlds.

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