

Creative Teaching in Interdisciplinary Humanities: The Human Values in Pop Music

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Man and Modern Media

The mid-twentieth century has thundered through time in motion, light, sound, and symbol. Each generation finds itself maturing within new and changing experiences. Stability is no longer understood in terms of firmness, permanence, and fixation. The sound of the times is communication, in ever more instantaneous communication media. One interesting aspect of modern media is a sub-culture called 'pop.'

While many adults reject the "pop cult" phenomenon as a passing and distasteful fad, creative teachers find themselves with the awesome task of searching for value and justifying its use in previously staid, esoteric, and antiquated educational environments. Their search involves understanding, interpreting, and judging the artistic refinements of media. A student's personal growth may very well depend upon the teacher's grasp and proper use of contemporary media. Today's youth are exposed to newspapers and magazines, telephone and radio, television and films almost as a way of life. While the visual images and sounds of media continually change, and contribute to the change of western culture itself, creative teachers have often found that the message does not change.

Pop lyrics is but one good example of the abiding message. The inherent values bouncing in rhythm and rock, they find, generally fall within the mainstream of the Judeo-Christian value system. In addition to the literary value of a given genre, and, indeed many songs have real literary value, of predominant importance is the civilizing value. This civilizing and humanizing value not only removes the genre of pop lyrics from the area of gimmickry to justify its

use in an English class, but makes its use pivotal to the very existence of educational institutions.

Characteristics

Values contained in the medium of pop music are generally characterized by an honesty in admitting real human problems, a questioning of those values that do little to improve the human situation, open revolt against empty, specious, and oppressive values, and finally, an offering of values as tangible solutions for the problems of our human encounters. It is this last characteristic that is so appealing. Most solutions are really "old stuff," no more than the enduring values of our civilization.

Pop lyrics reveal numerous themes; here we shall consider five: (1) personal flaws, (2) communication and inter-personal relationships, (3) the ideals and dreams of man's destiny, (4) the vision of the artist in society, and (5) here and now sociological problems. The lyrics of the more poetic composers, such as Paul Simon, James Taylor, or John Lennon, are among the richest resources for the teacher of popular culture.

Personal Flaws

Man's personal blindness and selfishness is one variation of the personal flaw theme. Not long ago Paul Simon reworded one of Edward Arlington Robinson's poems, "Richard Cory," by giving the narrator the character of a selfish, ignorant factory worker, blind to the suffering of another who happened to be rich. In a later poem, "Mrs. Robinson," Simon exposes adult "double standards" of living as a deception to be both scorned and pitied. Burt Bacharach and Hal David's "Alfie" describes an unfeeling man who selfishly uses others. Such popular lyrics as "Take a Letter, Maria," or "Mr. Emery Won't Be Home Till Late Tonight," in this instance describing the unfaithful husband who vacillates between his wife and his secretary, are frequently subtle and ironic revelations of double-standard living.

George Harrison of the Beatles takes the same general theme of blind selfishness in "Within You,

Without You," and advocates getting out of self to find "peace of mind." Another Beatle, John Lennon, takes the same selfish individual in "Nowhere Man" and leaves him in his "nowhere land making all his plans for nobody," because "he's as blind as he can be, just sees what he wants to see, doesn't have a point of view, knows not where he's going to." Then he asks, "Isn't he a bit like you and me?"

The apathy theme is self explanatory in Paul Simon's "A Still Life Water Color." Simon's indebtedness to T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" provides a provocative comparative study.

It's a still-life water color
On a now late afternoon
As the sun shines through the curtain lace
As the shadows wash the room
And we sit and drink our coffee
Couched in our indifference
Like shells upon the shore
You can hear the ocean roar
In the dangling conversation
And the superficial sighs
The borders of our lives.

Hiding from reality in a world of illusion and isolation, another aspect of the personal flaw theme, rings out in two Simon poems, "Flowers Never Bend" and "I am a Rock." "Flowers Never Bend" reads in part:

The mirror on my wall
Captures an image dark and small
But I'm not sure at all it's my reflection
I'm blinded by the light of God and Truth and Right
And I wander in the night without direction
So I'll continue to continue to pretent
My life will never end
And flowers never bend with the rainfall.

Ironically, the poet knows that his life will end and flowers do bend. Isolation and pretension are not answers. "I am a Rock," rich in metaphors and imagery, says on a literal level that isolation is a viable human solution; but on the level of imagery, it means coldness

and death. Neil Diamond's "Be" is perhaps a timely, positive response to "I Am a Rock":

While the sand would become the stone
Which begot the spark turned to living bone
Holy, Holy, Sanctus, Sanctus.
Be as a page that aches for a word
Which speaks on a theme that is timeless
While the sun God will make for your day,
Sing as a song in search of a voice that is silent
And the one God will make for your way.

Communication and Inter-Personal Relationships

Two recently popular ballads performed by Helen Reddy, "Delta Dawn" and "Leave Me Alone" (Ruby Red Dress) present women reminiscent of such southern gothic maidens as Faulkner's Miss Emily, and poignantly depict individuals isolated from the human community.

In "Eleanore Rigby" John Lennon contrasts two different types of loneliness: the loneliness of Eleanore who actually lives to love but is never loved in return; and the loneliness of Father McKenzie, a self satisfied bachelor, whose vocation is to love but who is so wrapped in himself that he does not know his love is directed inwardly. Father McKenzie buries Eleanore at the end of the poem and wipes his hands as he walks away from her grave, as if to say, "another job well done."

James Taylor, himself a former inmate of a mental institution, sings again and again of his loneliness and of the problems related to imposed human isolation: "Knocking 'Round the Zoo" and "Carolina in My Mind," are two such Taylor lyrics. Contrasted to the sufferings described in these original songs, students appreciate Taylor's disarmed warmth when he performs Carole King's "You've Got a Friend":

You just call out my name
And you know wherever I am
I'll come running. . . .

Bob Dylan, the prophet of the pop generation, asks

the older generation to change with a changing world in "The Times They Are A 'Changing'."

The present now
Will later be past
The order is rapidly fading
The first one now
Will later be last
For the times are a changin'.

Life is filled with sad experiences. One of these is the breakdown of a personal relationship. In "Red Rubber Ball" Paul Simon creates a cycle of life imagery in a red rubber ball, the sun, and a roller coaster to awaken and prepare his listeners for these eventualities. He says in effect, "be like that red rubber ball--that's life."

The generation gap is expressed in terms of parental failure in Lennon's "She Is Leaving Home." To escape the "lovelessness" of home, a girl runs away to take a trip on drugs. The reaction of her parents is, ironically, indignation. Selfishness is at the root of their non-communication.

She (We gave her most of our lives)
Is leaving (Sacrificed most of our lives)
Home (We gave her everything money could buy)
She (We never thought of ourselves)
Is leaving (Never a thought for ourselves)
Home (We struggled hard all our lives to get by)
She's leaving home after living alone
for so many years. Bye, bye.

"The Sounds of Silence" by Simon, romantic in form, rich in imagery and literary allusions, develops the theme of loneliness amidst crowds of people. The poet pleads prophetically to "hear my words that I might teach you/ Take my arm that I might reach you." Later, in 1970, Simon is less desperate when he describes himself as a "Bridge over Troubled Water:"

If you need a friend
I'm sailing right behind
Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind.

A Trent-Tony Hatch song, "Don't Sleep in the Subway," recommends reason and compromise as a solution for exaggerated personal problems, problems founded in pride and self delusion. Merrill and Styne's "People," then, capsules what may be a simplistic solution to the more complex problem of communication and inter-personal relating.

Ideals and Dreams of Man's Destiny

Contemporary musical drama is replete with scores of this theme: Godspell, Hair, Jesus Christ Superstar. Simon's "Hazy Shade of Winter" and "Leaves That Are Green" speculate on time:

Time hurries on
And the leaves that are green turn to brown
And they wither with the wind
And they crumble in your hand
Hello, hello, hello, hello
Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye
That's all there is
And the leaves that are faded touched the ground.

In the "Beatitudes" Simon finds a contradiction in words without acts. Specifically, he points to the hypocrisy and emptiness of religious dictums. Religion and life cannot be isolated.

Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit. . .
Blessed is the lamb whose blood flows. . .
Blessed are the sat upon, spat upon, ratted on.

These are the real events and sufferings of mankind that need blessing, that deserve an application of noble principles.

Leonard Cohen's lovely ballad "Suzanne" suggests that the problem of loneliness is solved for man by contact with simple things. The real hero is one who is attentive to the ordinary events of life, especially suffering. Contact with Suzanne gives the narrator of the ballad insight and brings him into communion with all men. In Suzanne he finds life.

And she feeds you tea and oranges
That come all the way from China
.
And you want to travel with her
And you want to travel blind
For you've touched her perfect body
With your mind.

By reaching him as a person, Suzanne brings the narrator to cosmic transcendence and becomes his alter Christus redeemer:

And Jesus was a sailor
And when he knew for certain
Only drowning men could see him
He said all men will be sailors.

The Vision of the Artist in Society

The lives, contributions, and ideals of artists frequently become the subject of song. Paul Simon ("Rhymin' Simon") alludes to his art in such compositions as "Sounds of Silence" and "Homeward Bound." His craft is the exclusive subject of "Song for the Asking." The relationship of the renowned architect to Simon's lyric "So Long, Frank Lloyd Wright" could spark interesting student speculation.

In "American Pie," a remarkable verbal collage of an entire decade, Don McLean recalls "the day the music died" in his eulogy of composer-performer Buddy Holly. The mood of McLean's "Vincent" is far more plaintive than the almost flippant "Bye, bye, Miss American Pie" when he speaks to the Dutch master of nearly a century ago, "How you suffered for your sanity/ How you tried to set them [men] free." Describing Van Gogh's painting of a starry night and recalling that suffering humanity was "soothed beneath the artist's loving hand," McLean laments that Van Gogh's vision is as misunderstood in the present as it was in his own time:

And when no hope was left in sight
On that starry, starry night
You took your life as lovers often do.
But I could have told you, Vincent,

This world was never meant
For one as beautiful as you.

Social Problems

The most important of the social problems is that of the struggle for civil and human rights. In songs like "He was my Brother," we hear of a freedom rider killed in the streets for riding a bus. "Sparrow," another Paul Simon song, is a story about Blacks told in imagery of a starving sparrow who is rejected by the wealthy, by white racists, by all of society. His destiny is corruption and death; the song ends fatalistically: "From dust were ye made, and dust ye shall be."

The social theme of the horrors of war is developed in the contrasting imagery of peace and annihilation in "The Sun is Burning in the Sky." "Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream" is a song expressing hope that war will end and men will live in peace.

The structure of social institutions and, in many cases, the subsequent suppression of the individual by the institution, is a common theme in pop lyrics. Simon's "Patterns" illustrates this theme:

From the moment of my birth till the instant
of my death
There are patterns I must follow just as I
must breathe each breath
Like a rat in a maze, the path before me lies
And the patterns never alter until the rat dies.
My life is made of patterns that can scarcely
be controlled.

Lyrics dealing with particular social issues are myriad: Marvin Gaye's "Mercy, Mercy Me (the Ecology)" obviously addresses itself to the contemporary concern for preserving natural life; "Wooden Indian" and "Half Breed" expose the crisis of the American Indian; "Candy Man" and "Rocky Mountain High," on one level at least, are songs about drugs; sexism is confronted in Helen Reddy's "I am a Woman;" James Brown's Motown recordings,

unpoetic but forcefully communicative in their vernacular, are deliberate, message-oriented comments on problems ghetto youth encounter in society.

Conclusion

Many of the more appealing aspects of pop music are beyond the scope of this writing: electronic sound, psychedelic music translations, and audience response, to mention but a few. Lyrics are stripped of their spirit when given in one dimension. The total power of pop music can only be gained through the experience of its performance.

Pop lyrics in the English class is not the last word in the teaching of English, nor should it replace traditional literature. However, this music should take its rightful place as a continuation and development of the humanistic themes that are found in the literature of every age. Formerly, popular lyrics were not taken seriously because until fifteen or twenty years ago they said very little about life, and what they said was often a form of romantic escapism. Today's pop lyrics say something real and meaningful, and millions of listeners hear these messages each day.

Music shows youth what has motivated men through crises and calm, through joy and suffering, through hate and love, through life and death in their own age. It is a record of contemporary values: of folly and nobility, of crime and retribution, of generosity and avarice, of harm and stupidity, of weakness and heroic strength. Pop music can help young people to interpret the world they live in, to establish an emotional, psychological stability, and to commit themselves to those values most enriching for their own lives. Viewed in this way, pop poetry truly is one of the humanities.