

Poetry Vs. Songs

1
2 The study of poetry in English classes is often extensive and in-depth. Poetry written
3 from BC to a couple of decades ago are scrutinized to find their significance and broken down
4 to analyze the meaning of various poetic devices. But does contemporary music have a place
5 being taught alongside traditional poetry? To tackle this issue, first the question must be asked:
6 what determines which poems are taught in class? What are the requirements? Does a poem
7 need to effectively use poetic devices, or does it need to make significant commentary about
8 the human experience? Ideally, poetry needs to do both so that students get a richer poetic
9 education. But there are scores of songs that do both as well. To argue that songs have no place
10 being taught alongside poetry is to argue that they do not have the same depth or, use the same
11 poetic devices as traditional poetry. However, songs are just as capable of addressing the
12 themes that poetry does while still holding artistic value in their use of devices such as
13 symbolism, rhythm, imagery, and all else that makes a poem worth teaching, as well as having
14 the advantage of appealing to a modern audience of young students.

15 Take the theme of faith, for example, a timeless theme that has been explored in poetry
16 since poetry has existed. Emily Dickinson tackled this theme in her poem "I know that He
17 exists." More recently, Regina Spektor has sung about this theme in "Blue Lips." Both explore
18 the idea of believing in God while still having doubts. Dickinson's poem begins with an
19 affirmation- "I know that He exists," and clearly states her belief in God, comparing life to a
20 play in which God, though rarely seen, will make a "fond Ambush" at the end (Dickinson,
21 lines 1,6). As the poem continues, however, more doubt begins to reveal itself. The third
22 stanza has a very prominent shift, beginning with "But" and going on to state her doubt of God
23 when faced with death- she fears that God will not make an ambush after all, and it is all just a
24 jest (Dickinson, line 9). In contrast, Spektor's doubt is apparent in the very first line. "He

1 stumbled into faith and thought / God, this is all there is?" (Spektor, lines 1-2). Immediately,
2 the man in the song is experiencing doubt. He did not even seek out faith, but simply
3 "stumbled" into it, as if by accident. Addressing God directly in the next sentence, he expresses
4 something akin to disappointment about the state of faith. He still believes in God, but is upset
5 that faith is, to his eyes, meager. Indeed, this is similar to Dickinson's idea of God hiding "his
6 rare life" from us, in that though she believes in God she has not seen him (Dickinson, line 3).

7 Both poems contain commentary about faith, but in "Blue Lips," rather than focusing on
8 the relationship between faith and the individual, Spektor focuses on the relationship between
9 faith and society as a whole, specifically in the instance of organized religion. The man in her
10 story has "pictures in his mind" that begin taking shape—ideas of what religion and faith should
11 be, stemming from his disappointment with what faith has to offer—but "no one saw and no one
12 heard" his ideas, everyone simply "followed the lead" of organized religion (Spektor, lines 2,
13 22-23). Spektor uses the image of the Tree of Knowledge to drive in this point. The people
14 "started off beneath the knowledge tree / And they chopped it down to make white picket
15 fences," (Spektor, lines 26-27). The white picket fences represent an ideal—the American
16 Dream. People, instead of choosing knowledge, choose to follow the path towards an idealized
17 version of the future. In addition to this rich symbolism, Spektor's song, like many, is a
18 treasure trove of rhythm, rhyme, and repetition. "Blue lips, blue veins/Blue, the color of our
19 planet from far, far away" is the refrain repeated throughout the song, evoking images of death
20 and sadness on the human form (Spektor, lines 14-15). "Blue lips," the title and the most often-
21 repeated phrase, is a type of visual and kinesthetic imagery evoking images and feelings of
22 coldness, added to by the fact that blue veins hold deoxygenated, unusable. essentially "dead"
23 blood. To call Earth blue from far away is to liken Earth itself to death, and the slant rhyme
24 with "veins" and "away" adds to a feeling of unease. Dickinson's poem offer a different take,

1 focusing on her own experience with faith as an individual, though there are also similar
2 themes of death and unease throughout. Instead of repetition and half-rhyme, however,
3 Dickinson chooses to employ dissonance and cacophony. There is frequent interruption by
4 way of dashes, especially in the lines "Should the glee—glaze—/ In Death's-stiff—stare —,"
5 creating a feeling of instability and disquiet (Dickinson, lines 11-12). This commentary is
6 aimed directly at God, and showcases Dickinson's doubt through its instable structure. She
7 believes that the earlier "glee" of the play will glaze over in the face of Death—that perhaps it is
8 easy to believe in God, but when faced with Death that belief will be tested. The next stanza
9 contains two questions that, rather than ending with question marks, end in exclamation points,
10 heightening the sense of disquiet first introduced in the previous stanza. She speaks of the
11 "jest" having "crawled too far," calling up images of a joke being made at the expense of the
12 speaker (Dickinson, lines 15-16).

13 Spektor's song and Dickinson's poem tackle similar themes, but they differ greatly in
14 their approach and in the poetic devices that they choose to employ. And while the ideas
15 presented in both may be similar, they differ too in their relevance to contemporary culture.
16 For example, certain ideas- such as the idea of "white picket fences" as the American ideal or
17 of "assembly lines" as a type of slavery- will resonate more strongly with a modern audience
18 familiar with such ideas than the idea of a play presented in Dickinson's poem (Spektor, lines
19 27, 31). There is value in relating to students using modern examples of poetry that should not
20 be disregarded. If a student is presented with topics that have relevance to their lives and
21 interests, they are more likely to be interested in the poetry than if it were written a long time
22 ago. Even something as small as Dickinson's use of "'Tis" can seem archaic and serve to
23 further disconnect a student from poetry (Dickinson, lines 5-6). There is even greater value in
24 using music that students are familiar with, which can further deepen the connection that they

1 may feel with the study of poetry. Thus, it is important to give students an idea of non-
2 traditional poetry, whether it be poetry by contemporary or less well-known poets or through
3 song lyrics. Clearly, there exist many "bubblegum pop" songs designed to be catchy with little
4 to no artistic merit, but there are *also* a great deal of poems that would not suffice in teaching
5 students to analyze themes or literary devices. Just as a few select poems are taught, only a few
6 songs deemed relevant to the curriculum can be taught as well. So, while music may not
7 necessarily replace poetry altogether, there is benefit to be had in teaching it in tandem with
8 poetry to show both can have merit.

9 Ultimately, both poetry and song lyrics are very similar in that poems and songs with
10 artistic value are very far removed from prose, relying on symbolism, imagery, and auditory
11 devices such as rhyme and rhythm to convey a certain message. Song lyrics, while not
12 necessarily traditional, should not be overlooked simply because they originally began as
13 songs and not written poetry. As with Dickinson's "I know that He exists" and Spektor's "Blue
14 Lips," poems and songs can tackle the same themes in ways that would resonate differently
15 with a contemporary audience, and would work well being taught together. Although song
16 lyrics may not be the most effective alone, it would be highly beneficial to teach them in
17 conjunction with traditional poetry to give students a more comprehensive understanding of
18 poetry and celebrate the fact that it can be incredibly diverse.

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Works Cited

2 Dickinson, Emily. "I Know That He Exists. (365)." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation,
3 1999. Web. 18 Nov. 2014.

4 Spektor, Regina. "Blue Lips Lyrics." *MetroLyrics*. Emi Music Publishing, Web. 16 Nov. 2014.

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