



Muse Machine 2025 Summer Institute-Inspired Lesson Plan

Ballad of the American Dream

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Lesson Plan Summary:

Although the American Dream is a common ELA topic, its evolution over time often receives less attention. Inspired by Rick Good's "Songs that Tell a Story" session at the 2025 Summer Institute *Storytelling and the Folk Arts Spirit: The Roads that Lead to Home*, Sarah Swint of David H. Ponitz CTC invited ELA 11 students to write ballad verses and choruses to the tune of "This Land Is Your Land," reflecting on modern barriers to the Dream. The lesson sparked thoughtful analysis, energized performance, and offered this teacher insight into students' fears and hopes for the future.

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Instructor: Sarah Swint

Title of Lesson: Ballad of the American Dream

Subject Area & Grade Level: English 11

Summer Institute Inspiration: Songs that Tell a Story with Rick Good

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

Summary:

After briefly learning a bit about ballads in American tradition, students will write a ballad verse set to the tune of “This Land is Your Land” reflecting on obstacles to obtaining the American Dream. Students have built their background knowledge as we have read and analyzed several visual and written texts to help establish the vision of the American Dream. Their ballad will help build context and ideas for a final essay, which will challenge students to respond to the questions: What is the American Dream, and is it still attainable today?

Enduring Understandings:

Generations of Americans have strived to achieve “the American Dream” despite the fact that it may or may not be attainable.

Ohio ELA Standards:

Reading Literature and Informational Texts

RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes/central ideas and analyze their development; provide an objective summary.

RL.11-12.4 Determine meanings of words/phrases, including figurative language and tone.

RI.11-12.2 Determine central ideas of an informational text and analyze their development.

Writing

W.11-12.3 Write narratives to develop experiences/events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and structured sequences.

W.11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

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Speaking and Listening

SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in collaborative discussions.

Language

L.11-12.3 Apply knowledge of language to make effective choices for style and meaning.

L.11-12.5 Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances.

Objectives & Outcomes:

- I can analyze how different texts represent the American dream and identify the obstacles that challenge it today.
- I can determine central ideas about the American dream and explain how they develop across visual, literary, and informational texts.
- I can write a ballad verse that uses narrative techniques and figurative language to reflect a modern obstacle to the American dream.
- I can adapt my writing to a specific purpose, audience, and form by matching my lyrics to the structure of a traditional ballad.
- I can use figurative language effectively to communicate complex ideas about society and identity.

Teaching Approach(es):

Textual analysis, Writing Workshop, performance-based learning, individual work and small group collaboration

Assessment Tool(s):

Formative Assessments: Graphic organizers/notes, rhyme and rhythm practice, peer collaboration/table discussions, ballad draft, reflection question on [Quarterly Survey](#)

Summative Assessments: Completed ballad verse/chorus performance, American Dream essay

LESSON PREPARATION

Teacher Needs:

Teacher Context and Research

Teachers should have a strong understanding of:

- The American Dream: Historical origins, traditional ideals (freedom, opportunity, prosperity), and contemporary critiques.
- Immigrant experiences and social inequality: How different populations have historically been included/excluded from the Dream (Yeziarska, Hughes, Alvarez).
- Historical and literary contexts of readings:
 - Roosevelt’s 50th Anniversary of the Statue of Liberty speech
 - Whitman: democratic vision, celebration of workers, poetic form.
 - Hughes: counter-narrative, resilience, and inclusion.
 - Alvarez: Latino perspectives and voice in literature.
 - Ballad tradition in American folk and literary history:
 - Quatrains, rhyme schemes (ABAB, ABCB), repetition, and narrative voice.
 - Historical role of ballads in expressing struggle, protest, or cultural identity.

Research/Preparation Needed

Teachers may need to:

- Review exemplar ballads and folk songs.
- Analyze the texts students have read for examples of theme, tone, imagery, and perspective to model.
- Plan scaffolded rhyme scheme examples, vocabulary banks, and sentence starters.
- Optional: provide a simple melody or rhythm pattern if connecting to *This Land Is Your Land*.
- Anticipate common challenges: Students may struggle with rhyme, rhythm, or integrating themes with personal experience. Some may need support translating abstract ideas about the American Dream into verse.

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Helpful Hints

1. Use a Spotify version of the song to loop for students so it can play continuously as they create and perform.
2. Be prepared for some pushback initially on the music, depending on the culture of your student population.

Student Needs:

Prior Knowledge

Students will already be familiar with the historical concept of and different perspectives on the American Dream from previous readings. Students will also have experience reading different genres, analysing texts for theme, tone, and purpose, and writing creatively. They will hold strong opinions about essential ideas like “freedom,” “equality,” and “justice.” Students may also know some of the song examples and have prior experience with concepts like rhyme and beat.

Student Voice

Students will choose the stories, struggles, or aspirations they want to highlight, giving them control over content and narrative. Students also perform their work, allowing students to demonstrate ownership of their interpretations. They will integrate personal insights, showing how literature and history relate to their lived experiences.

Vocabulary

- **Ballad** – A type of poem or song that tells a story using simple language, quatrains, rhyme, repetition, a narrative voice, and themes of struggle
- **Quatrain** – four-line stanzas

EVIDENCE OF OUTCOMES

Students show their learning through completed notes and annotations on works by Yeziarska, Roosevelt, Whitman, Hughes, and Alvarez that identify themes, perspectives, and tone, as well as written responses to discussion questions about different views of the American Dream. Students use connections to these texts as evidence in their original ballads and write short reflections explaining how their ballads relate to the readings and how ballad writing helped them prepare for their American Dream essays. Students also share a personal view on current

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American Dream issues, perform or read their ballads aloud to demonstrate tone, rhythm, and emotion, and show the ability to combine ideas from multiple texts in both their ballad presentations and final essays.

LEARNING PLAN

Teaching Inquiry

How can students use ballad form and tone to express their own perspectives on the American Dream while connecting to the themes and struggles presented in historical and literary texts?

Essential Question(s)

1. What is the American Dream, and how has its meaning changed over time for different communities?
2. How do authors and historical figures use tone, perspective, and language to express their vision of America?
3. In what ways do obstacles—social, economic, or cultural—shape access to the American Dream?
4. How can creative forms like ballads help us communicate personal and collective experiences of hope, struggle, and resilience?
5. How does understanding multiple voices and perspectives in literature and history deepen our understanding of contemporary issues?

Resources/Materials

- Walt Whitman's *I Hear America Singing*
- Langston Hughes's *I, Too, Sing America*
- Julia Alvarez's *I, Too, Sing América*
- [Handout](#) with scaffolds for discussion, graphic organizers, and ballad writing instructions
- [Slide deck](#) overviewing ballad form, rhyme schemes, and examples from folk tradition
- [Music track](#) and audio equipment of some kind
- Notes on historical/cultural context for the American Dream and immigrant/worker perspectives
- Cleverboard or other screen projection access
- Optional audio recordings of classic American ballads (*This Land Is Your Land*, Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, Bob Dylan or current ballads included in the intro slide deck)

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Hook/Bell Ringer Prompt

What do you think a ballad is? Write down this definition: A ballad is a narrative poem or song that tells a story. Can you think of a few examples?

Main Lesson Narrative/Sequence

Day 1 (50 min.):

1. Students pick up folders with their handouts we have been working on (the poems), and their notebooks. They respond to the bell ringer prompt on the screen.
2. Teacher facilitates a short and informal dialogue about the bell ringer responses.
3. Teacher leads notes and discussion about ballads from the student handout (also on slide deck) and dialogues with students.
4. Students practice a beat and identify rhyme schemes with a two-verse sample.
5. Next, the teacher leads a short note/discussion session about ballads, their history, and how they have functioned in American society.
6. Students will hear a small audio clip of “This Little Light of Mine” recently heard in the movie “Sinners.”
7. Students will listen to a small sampling of “This Land is Your Land” by Woody Guthrie and discuss the controversial lyrics that are not in the song recording.
8. Students will also hear small excerpts from modern day ballads including “The Wellerman,” “Love Story,” by Taylor Swift, and “Someone Like You” by Adele.
9. There will be a brief discussion about how the narrative form, imagery, and in many cases, rhyme stay intact in all forms and genres of the ballad.
10. Next, students will have a chance to write their own verses as a table group in a ballad that reflects their tone and ideas to address concepts they find issues with years later in America that were once believed to be a part of the American dream based on the text and visual reading and analysis in class.
11. If their table group verse is not complete, they can finish it for homework and come to class with a mostly polished verse.

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Day 2 (50 min.):

1. Students will have 15 minutes to finalize their verse, practice, and make any adjustments. The music track will play as they work.
2. As students finish, they will have their verse typed onto a Google Slide by the teacher, so it can be projected to the class for the performance.
3. Students will then have 10 minutes to practice the whole song, getting the rhythm and beats down.
4. Finally, students (and teacher) will perform as a class all the verses and the provided chorus for their new American ballad.
5. Students can then use these concepts and ideas to help craft their analysis for their American dream essay.

Demonstration of Learning and Student Artifacts

- [American Dream Essay Assignment](#)
- [American Dream Essay Rubric](#)
- Ballad [Slide Stack](#)
- Final Essay samples
 - [Sample 1](#)
 - [Sample 2](#)
 - [Sample 3](#)
- Audio Recordings of Process Conversations
 - [Conversation 1](#)
 - [Conversation 2](#)
 - [Conversation 3](#)
- [Final lyrics of song](#)
- Sample Reflection Question Responses: How did your ballad, or others from the class, connect to the concept of the American Dream?

It expanded how many people feel/felt about the American dream, including rce, wealth, and equality all in our ballad.

Other people from my class believed the American Dream is great but is not attainable in this year.

the verse how it talks about us being different and how we should all come together to be one

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The immigrant from "America and I" and the black man from "I too America"

very influential

Even though you can't achieve the American dream, but you can still try to achieve it.

Some people had the same education problems because their language.

POST-LESSON REFLECTION

Students: Initially, students were reluctant to try something that maybe wasn't their typical type of music. Through the two-day process, almost, if not all of the students were engaged in the creation of lyrics. By the end many students expressed gratitude for the opportunity to do something less "book work" or a "packet," which they honestly get in a lot of classes, and were happy to try a hands-on, creative approach.

Teacher: I have to say, I was pleasantly surprised by how students almost immediately took ownership of their lyrics, and almost every single student in all three of the classes who completed this lesson sang, one even standing up for a "big finish." Many verses in each class spoke of optimism and hope, as well as a contradictory and real concern for America. It should not really surprise me any more how students take to creative, arts-approaching lessons, but I still get a little thrill when it becomes a hit.

I think this activity helped many students see the direction they wanted their essays to move in and allowed them to build upon the concepts that were addressed in their songs. While I was shocked that more students did not know "This Land is Your Land," the music still provided a good structure for their writing. I think hands-on activities can support students in their prewriting process, especially ELL students who need to see content presented in a different way. I loved how it became a call and response to the Whitman, Hughes, and Alvarez poems as well, and they touched on topics of the economy, racial struggles, and increasing violence in a very uncertain country. I am proud to have a classroom where they can express these concerns and thoughts safely.