

Example CMD Activity Plan:

6-12 ELA: Poetry in Prison Songs

See the lesson [Life on the Inside](#)

Watch a 6 min. [demonstration video](#) of a this activity

1) Teaching Context

- **Grade level:** HS
- **Subject area:** ELA, English
- **Unit:** Poetry
- **What might come before or after this activity:** Analyzing and discussing different types of poems (including song lyrics), including some challenging poems that describe challenges faced by people of color.
- **Other relevant contextual information:** It will also be important to talk about the relationship between race and imprisonment (the disproportionate presence of black and brown men in the U.S. prison system).

2) Content Objectives:

- Recognize the power of poetry when presented in the form of songs.
- Identify the symbolism and metaphors that appear in the words of the songs.

Literacy/Critical Thinking Objectives: (i.e., CCSS for literacy, media literacy)

- Compare and contrast how different musicians/composers portray prison life.
- Discuss how the lived experience of musicians/composers is reflected in the lyrics of their songs.

3) Document(s) description and link:

This activity is taken from the lesson [Life on the Inside](#)

4) Key Questions:

- What are the messages (in this song) about life in prison?
- What words and phrases are particularly powerful in conveying those messages?
- Are there metaphors or examples of symbolism in this song?
- How does this musician's (composer's) lived experience show up in their lyrics and performance?

5) Decoding Plan:

- Make copies of the song lyrics and worksheet to hand out.
- Explain that we're going to read poems analyze some songs written and sung about life in prison, covering the decades from the 1930s to the late 1990s.
- Divide the class into pairs or small groups, giving each group a different song to analyze, using the first 3 questions. Then encourage students to do some background research (online) about the musician/composer (Leadbelly, Robert Pete Williams, Johnny Cash, Nas), relating their lived experience and background to the song they wrote and sang.
- Bring the students back together for a whole group discussion. Play each song, and then have the students who had that song to analyze lead the rest of the class in a discussion about the messages of the song and the poetry techniques used to convey those messages, sharing information about the background of the singer/composer.
- After all 4 songs have been discussed, lead a discussion about the songs taken together as a group, asking questions about:
 - The overall messages about prison life, including similarities and differences across the 4 songs
 - Issues raised in the songs about social justice
 - Beliefs or actions suggested by the songwriter that prisoners can use to come to terms with prison life
 - The power of language and music to convey emotions related to the difficulties faced by prisoners
 - The difference between reading poems, hearing poems read aloud, and listening to poems sung, and the benefits (and limitations) of each format