

Power of Poetry: Sufi Poets, Past to Present

Overview

Sufism is a mystical, or spiritual, type of Islam. Sufis follow a spiritual path towards God based on enlightenment and revelation. This lesson will focus on the works of two Sufis: Rumi, a 13th Century Persian poet, and Youssou N'Dour, a 21st Century Senegalese musician. Rumi, arguably the most well-known Sufi in the literary world, believed in music, dance, and poetry as a way to reach God. Rumi's powerful poetic works transcended both time and place, developing a vast and far-reaching influence. Youssou N'Dour is a Senegalese Sufi singer and performer. Like Rumi's poetry, his musical lyrics have transcended time and place to make him one of the most influential Muslim performers of our time. In this lesson, students will learn about Sufism by analyzing texts of Rumi and Youssou N'Dour.

Grade

9-10

Subject

English-Language Arts, Humanities

Essential Standards

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1 - Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 - Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.6 - Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

Essential Questions

- What can we learn about Sufism from works of Rumi and Youssou N'Dour?
- What traditional messages or themes are present in Rumi's poetry?
- How does Youssou N'Dour blend traditional Islamic teachings with modern messages?
- How has Sufism evolved to meet the needs of a changing world?

Materials

- Video: Sufi Soul - The Mystic Music of the Islam: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4s-6HCpr1U>
- Comparing Rumi to N'Dour Venn Diagram (attached)
- Computer with projection capabilities and speakers
- Messages of Rumi (attached)
- Analysis of 7 Seconds by Youssou N'Dour (attached)
- Video of 7 Seconds: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqCpiFMvz-k>
- Short Essay Assignment (attached)
- Short Essay Rubric (attached)
- Handout 6: Optional Creative Extension

Duration

On block scheduling, 5 class periods.

Student Preparation

Students should have a basic understanding of Islam, as well as annotation strategies, before beginning this lesson.

Procedure

Sufism Video

1. Have students create a KWL Chart (Three columns, labeled "Know," "Want to Know," and "Learned"). Tell students that they will be learning about Sufism, the mystical approach to Islam. To activate prior knowledge, have students complete the "Know" column with what they already know about Sufism. If they have taken world history, they should have a little bit of knowledge. Some of the ideas in this column may be misconceptions, but that is okay because the video should dispel these. Have students share out loud what they already know about Sufism.
2. Then, have students fill in what they "Want to Learn." At this point, it might be useful to allow them to discuss ideas with a partner to help them develop their thinking.
3. Show students the video, "Sufi Soul - The Mystic Music of the Islam" (about 50 minutes). Ask students to record things that are learning in the "Learned" column as they watch. Video Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4s-6HCpr1U>. Stop to review major ideas throughout the video:
 - At 3:41, pause and discuss:
 - What words does the narrator use to describe Sufism? (popular, mystical, tolerant, peace-loving, pluralistic).
 - What is the role of music in Sufism? (becoming closer to God, experiencing a state of spiritual ecstasy)
 - At 12:42, pause and discuss:
 - What is zikr? (literally: a remembrance of God, prayers, chanting)
 - Describe the music featured in the narrator's visit to Syria. What instruments are played? What does the music sound like? Who is present?
 - The narrator states that Rumi was the best-selling poet in America in the 1990s. Does this surprise you? Why or why not? Are you familiar with any of Rumi's poetry?
 - At 21:10, pause and discuss:
 - What is the purpose of the whirling of the Mevlevi Sufis, also known as the "Whirling Dervishes"?
 - What is the relationship between the Turkish state and Sufism?
 - At 28:00, pause and discuss:
 - How is the twirling of the Sufis in Pakistan different than that of the Mevlevi order in Turkey?
 - Where is qawali performed?
 - Do you think that the qawali music should have been used in a Coca-Cola commercial? Why or why not?
 - At 37:25, pause and discuss:
 - Why do some Muslims disapprove of music?
 - What is one common ambiguity present in Sufi poetry? (love story - metaphor for love of God, ambiguity between human and divine love)
 - At the end of the film, pause and discuss:
 - Describe the music that is played by Sufi groups in Morocco. What instruments are used?
 - What is the relationship between Sufism and local culture?
 - What is the idea of the Festival of Sacred Music in Fes?

Compare Rumi and N'Dour

4. Tell students that they will be reading texts from two of the people mentioned in the video on Sufism; Rumi and Youssou N'Dour. Pass out the Comparing Youssou N'Dour to Rumi Venn diagram, and have students complete the handout in pairs. Students should read and annotate both pieces before looking for commonalities.
5. Hold a class discussion and complete a Venn diagram on the projector using ideas shared by the students.

Rumi Analysis

6. Tell students background information about Rumi. Share that Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (known in the West simply as Rumi), was born in 1207 in modern-day Afghanistan, then on the eastern edge of the Persian Empire. Rumi descended from a long line of Islamic jurists, theologians, and mystics, including his father. When Rumi was still a young man, his father led their family more than 2,000 miles west to avoid the invasion of Genghis Khan's armies. They settled in present-day Turkey, where Rumi lived and wrote most of his life. Many of Rumi's poems were inspired by the disappearance of a close friend and mentor, Shams Tabriz. His mourning for Shams led to the outpouring of more than 40,000 verses, including odes, eulogies, quatrains, and other styles of Eastern-Islamic poetry. Rumi died in 1273 in Konya, Turkey. Thousands of visitors of all faiths visit his tomb each month.
7. Tell students that they will read and annotate poems provided on the "Messages of Rumi" handout. Teachers: You may choose how you want to teach this (whole group, small group, or individual). In the "Word Splash" area, students will collect words and ideas related to the poems. They should fill the box with as many ideas as possible.
8. In small groups, have students compare word splashes, looking for common messages and themes.
9. Hold a class discussion about the themes present in Rumi's poetry.

N'Dour Analysis

10. Tell students background information about Youssou N'Dour. Youssou was born in 1959 in Dakar, the capital of Senegal. Share that Islam is the predominant religion in Senegal; about 95% of the country's population is Muslim and belongs to a Sufi brotherhood. His mother was a *griot* in the community, meaning that she was a respected elder who kept the oral tradition of the community's history alive through traditional songs and moral teachings. Youssou began singing at ceremonial parties as a child, and was performing for large audiences by age 14. Today, Youssou is extremely popular with audiences both in Senegal and around the world. His pop music combines modern and spiritual Sufi messages. Through his music, Youssou works to bring better understanding of Islam as a peaceful religion.
11. Have students read "7 Seconds" by N'Dour. You can also play the music video, linked [here](#). Ask students to complete the bottom of the handout by filling in traditional messages as well as modern messages. Teachers: You can decide if they do this in small groups or individually.
12. Hold a class discussion about the traditional and modern messages seen in Youssou's lyrics.

Short Essay

13. Using their notes from class, instruct students to compose a short essay that addresses the following prompt: *Based on our study of Rumi and Youssou N'Dour, what are the universal messages, or themes, of Sufism and how has Sufi expression evolved to meet a changing world?* This can be done in class or as

homework. An optional rubric is attached; teachers are encouraged to provide other expectations regarding structure and organization as needed.

Creative Extension

14. Because Sufi poetry is inherently artistic, it lends itself to creative interpretations by students. If time allows, have students choose from the following creative activities as homework or as an in-class project:
 - a. Write your own poem in the style of Rumi. Decorate the poem with appropriate images to match the theme(s) of the poem. BONUS: Write in calligraphy!
 - b. Write your own song in the style of Youssou N'Dour. Perform it for the class. BONUS: Use instruments!
 - c. Create a visual work of art that conveys the theme(s) of a Rumi poem or a N'Dour song.

Comparing Youssou N'Dour to Rumi: Read and annotate each of the following works. Then, record any common traits, themes, ideas, words, etc. in the middle of the Venn diagram.

Youssou N'Dour
Birima

He assumed the throne of Cajor
And became well-known for his festive reign
Where every occasion was reason for
Celebration in great style
Having inherited a rich oral tradition
He encouraged local musicians
And his patronage gave rise to the flourishing of
The music known as mbaboor

Ah! Birima!
A day spent in your presence
Was the picture of hospitality!

This music was transmitted by the griots
Who painted vivid portraits of the kingdom
Mbaboor became inextricably linked
To the history of Cajor
Most importantly, it forged a new and enduring link
Between royalty and the common people
Where relations had been different before
As the classes lived and struggled and
Celebrated together
Common experience allowed them to identify
With one another

Ah! Birima!
A day spent in your presence
Was the picture of hospitality

Rumi

Where Everything Is Music
Don't worry about saving these songs!
And if one of our instruments breaks,
it doesn't matter.

We have fallen into the place
where everything is music.

The strumming and the flute notes
rise into the atmosphere,
and even if the whole world's harp
should burn up, there will still be
hidden instruments playing.

So the candle flickers and goes out.
We have a piece of flint, and a spark.

This singing art is sea foam.
The graceful movements come from a pearl
somewhere on the ocean floor.

Poems reach up like spindrift and the edge
of driftwood along the beach, wanting!

They derive
from a slow and powerful root
that we can't see.

Stop the words now.
Open the window in the center of your chest,
and let the spirits fly in and out.

Messages of Rumi: Read and annotate each of the following Rumi poems. Then, create a word splash that contains words, themes, and messages from the poems (especially things they each have in common).

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Light Up The Fire</p> <p>I gaze into the heart, lowly it may be, Thought the words be higher still. For the heart is all the substance, The speech an accident. How many phrases will you speak, Too many for me. How much burning, burning will you feel, Be friendly with the fire, enough for me. Light up the fire of love inside, And blaze the thoughts away.</p> | <p>Solitude</p> <p>Spiritual joys come only from solitude, So the wise choose the bottom of the well, For the darkness down there beats The darkness up here. He who follows at the heels of the world Never saves his head.</p> | <p>Visit the Sick</p> <p>Visit the sick, and you will heal yourself. The ill person may be a Sufi master, And your kindness will be repaid in wisdom. Even if the sick person is your enemy, You will still benefit, For kindness has the power to transform Sworn enemies into firm friends. And if there is no healing of bad feeling, There certainly will be less ill will, Because kindness is the greatest of all balms.</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;">Word Splash</p> | | |

Analysis of “7 Seconds” by Youssou N’Dour

Merging traditions of Sufism with modern music

7 Seconds
Youssou N’Dour

Don't see me from a distance, don't look at my smile
And think that I don't know what's under and behind
me
I don't want you to look at me and think
What's in you is in me, what's in me is to help them

Roughneck and rudeness,
We should be using, on the ones who practice wicked
charms
For the sword and the stone
Bad to the bone
Battle is not over
Even when it's won
And when a child is born into this world
It has no concept
Of the tone the skin is living in

(CHORUS)
It's not a second, seven seconds away
Just as long as I stay, I'll be waiting
It's not a second, seven seconds away
Just as long as stay, I'll be waiting
I'll be waiting,
I'll be waiting

I assume the reasons that push us to change
I would like that they forget about their color,
so that they can have hope
Too many views on race that make them desperate
I like the doors wide open
So that friends can talk about their pain and their joy
Then we can give them information, that will bring us
all together

(CHORUS)
It's not a second, seven seconds away
Just as long as I stay, I'll be waiting
It's not a second, seven seconds away
Just as long as I stay, I'll be waiting
I'll be waiting,
I'll be waiting

And when a child is born into this world
It has no concept
Of the tone of the skin he's living in
And there's a million voices
And there's a million voices
To tell you what she should be thinking
So you better sober up for just a second

Seven seconds away
Just as long as I stay, I'll be waiting
It's not a second, seven seconds away
Just as long as I stay, I'll be waiting
It's not a second, seven seconds away
Just as long as I stay, I'll be waiting
It's not a second, seven seconds away
Just as long as stay, I'll be waiting
It's not a second, seven seconds away
Just as long as I stay, I'll be waiting

Traditional Messages

Modern Messages

Short Essay Rubric

Student Name: _____

| Component | Exceptional (A) | Proficient (B/C) | Developing (C/D) | Failing (F) |
|------------------|---|---|---|--|
| Thesis | Clearly and intellectually addresses all aspects of the prompt. Demonstrates a thorough understanding of the concepts. | Addresses all aspects of the prompt. | Addresses at least one aspect of the prompt. | Thesis statement is not easily identified or is not present. |
| Evidence | Uses a variety of appropriate evidence from classwork and discussions to support ideas. | Uses some evidence to support support ideas, but the use of more evidence would strengthen the paper. | Attempts to use evidence but falls short of supporting thesis. | Evidence is not related to thesis or is not present. |
| Written Analysis | Clearly and effectively draws connections between evidence and thesis. Offers exceptional and thorough analysis. | Clearly draws connections between evidence and thesis. Acceptable level analysis. | Attempts to draw connections, but falls short. May contain summary instead of analysis. | Does not provide analysis with evidence. |
| Conventions | Paper is free from errors in grammar, spelling, and/or punctuation. | There may be some errors in grammar, spelling, and/or punctuation but they do not detract from meaning. | Many errors in conventions that detract from meaning. | Paper is unreadable due to the number of errors. |
| Final Grade: | Comments: | | | |