

## LESSON: CODED SPIRITUALS- METAPHOR IN AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUALS

**OVERVIEW:** In this lesson students use four African American spirituals to explore the concepts of *metaphor* and *coded spirituals*, and to examine the struggle for freedom. The lesson uses the two cd set *Freedom Is Coming: Songs of Freedom, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad* (available from the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, 916 North Peters Street, New Orleans, La., 70116. [www.nps.gov/jazz](http://www.nps.gov/jazz)).

The lessons designed to accompany the cd set can stand alone or can be used as part of a more extensive unit exploring the experience of enslavement, resistance, escape, and the Underground Railroad. They can also be used in conjunction with the cd/lesson plans designed for *Songs of the Lower Mississippi Delta*, which can be obtained from the above address. Those lesson plans relate to slavery and to the American Civil War.

**OBJECTIVES:** Students will...

- Define the term *Metaphor: A figure of speech in which a word or phrase that normally denotes one object is used to denote another to suggest a similarity. For example: "Drowning in money" to denote being extremely rich.*
- Correctly identify metaphors from selected African American spirituals.
- Correctly explain the meaning of metaphors from selected African American spirituals.
- Develop their own metaphors.
- Define the term *Coded Spirituals. Religious songs in the African American tradition that contain coded references to forbidden activities such as escape and emancipation.*
- Explain the historical practice of coded spirituals, including the reasons for its development and use.

**MATERIALS NEEDED:**

- Two cd set *Freedom Is Coming: Songs of Freedom, Resistance, and the Underground Railroad* (available from the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, 916 North Peters Street, New Orleans, La., 70116. [www.nps.gov/jazz](http://www.nps.gov/jazz))
- Compact disc player or some other means of playing a cd to the class.
- Handouts of lyrics to four songs:
  1. Steal Away to Jesus (in the Midnight Hour) (disc 1, #2)
  2. Wade in the Water (disc 1, #4)
  3. Swing Low, Sweet Chariot (disc 1, #7)
  4. Daniel (disc 1, #13)
- Handout of worksheet (an answer key is provided)
- An answer Bank (if desired)
- Liner Notes handed out or projected.

**TIME REQUIRED:** 1 to 2 50 minute periods.

## **ORDER OF MATERIALS**

- ❖ **STEP 1: INTRODUCTION OF CONCEPTS**
- ❖ **STEP 2: DISCUSSION WITH DISCUSSION TIPS**
- ❖ **STEP 3: WORKSHEET *CODED SPIRITUALS: METAPHOR IN AFRICAN AMERICAN ANTE BELLUM MUSIC***
  - **ANSWER KEY**
- ❖ **STEP 4: SUM UP AND EXTENSION OF LESSON**
- ❖ **LINER NOTES**
- ❖ **LYRICS**

STEP I: Introduce students to the concepts of *Metaphor* and *Coded Spirituals*.  
(This could be done as a group activity with groups sharing their answers)

- Ask students to define the term *Metaphor*.
- Project or write their definition or definitions on a board.
- After discussion, provide the given definition.
- Ask them to define the term *Coded Spirituals*.(See objectives)  
They could be asked to first define the term *Spirituals*. Then discuss the idea of *Coded* spirituals. (See objectives)
- Project or read to them the short paragraph on *Coded Spirituals*.(See below)
- After discussion, project or write the given definition of *Coded Spirituals*.
- Discuss the extent to which their definitions of the term were correct.

## CODED SPIRITUALS

A spiritual is a religious song, often in the Christian African American tradition, which expresses ideas of a personal closeness and relationship with God. African American spirituals often make use of certain musical idioms. Among these are “call and response” in which one phrase is answered with another. Another characteristic is the use of “syncopated rhythm”, the accenting of a beat that would not normally be accented or the absence of a beat where one would usually be accented. Spirituals are highly emotional songs. They often express intense feelings of joy and sorrow. It is also common in African American spirituals to compare the believer or the church to figures from the Old Testament.

In African American history, especially during the experience of enslavement, spirituals were sometime coded, meaning that the meaning was intentionally disguised from the slave holders and other whites through use of words or phrases understood by the singers, but not by the slave holders. An example would be to refer to the Free States as “the promised land” or the slave holders as “Pharaoh”. Historians still debate the extent to which spirituals were intentionally coded. In any case, listeners often interpreted lyrics that referred to the suffering of biblical heroes as referencing their own personal suffering and drew strength from such songs.

STEP II: Play the musical selections for the students to create discussion. Depending on the class, you may wish to distribute lyrics at this point.

1. *Steal Away to Jesus (in the Midnight Hour)*. This is selection #3, NOT selection 10.
  - Play the song.
  - Ask students to name metaphors that they noticed in the lyrics.
  - Their answers can be listed on a white board or a projected computer document.
2. *Wade in the Water*. Selection # 4 NOT selection 12.  
Repeat the above process.
3. *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. Selection #7  
Repeat the above process.
4. *Daniel*. Selection #13.  
Repeat the above process.

When having the above discussion, use your judgment as to the extent to which you should correct their misconceptions and tell them which choices are correct. It can be advisable to point out one or two correct responses and one or two incorrect responses so they have models to guide them.

## DISCUSSION TIPS

- ❖ D1, 3 Steal Away to Jesus (in the Midnight Hour)
  - Steal, steal away to Jesus.
    - “Steal away” meant to escape. This came from the idea that slaves were property, and so escape was “stealing themselves”.
    - “To Jesus” was a metaphor for “to freedom”
- ❖ D1, 4: WADE IN THE WATER
  - Wadin’ in the water
    - A metaphor for baptism AND escape.
  - If you get there before I do  
God’s gonna trouble the water  
Tell my mother I’m comin’ too
    - If you escape first, let others know that I will escape too.
  - the children that Moses led.
    - A reference to the Jews escaping from slavery in Egypt. So here it refers to the enslaved people of America.
- ❖ D1, #7: SWING LOW SWEET CHARIOT
  - Swing low
    - Come South, into slave territory.
  - sweet chariot
    - Any way to travel North.
  - coming fore to carry me home
    - coming to help the singer to escape: Home=Freedom
  - stop and let me ride
    - help me to escape
  - I got a home on the other side
    - My true home is in freedom.
  - Jordan
    - The Jordan River signifies the border between the slave states and the free states, especially the rivers between Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, etc.
  - band of angels
    - Abolitionists, especially those active in the Underground Railroad.

## D1, #13 DANIEL

- wabash shoes
  - The intention or means to escape. The Wabash was a river that some crossed on the way to freedom.
- Slip and slide the streets
  - Escape
- Put on your moving shoes
  - Escape
- Living on borrowed land
  - Living in a place that is not really his: the slave holders land.

STEP III: Worksheet.

Now that the students have a grasp of the concepts of *Metaphor* and *Coded Spirituals* they can do a graded activity that will assess their understanding as well as give them practice in both identifying and understanding metaphor.

An ANSWER KEY is provided for the worksheet.

You could also create an answer bank if it is believed that such an aid would be useful to the students.

SEE WORKSHEET BELOW

CODED SPIRITUALS: METAPHOR IN AFRICAN AMERICAN ANTE BELLUM MUSIC

African American spirituals, especially those created in the days of slavery, often used metaphors to hide the meaning of the songs. Imagine the reaction of a master upon hearing a group of bonded persons singing "I'm going to run away". To prevent this from happening, many spirituals were "coded".  
 TASK: After hearing the songs *Steal Away to Jesus (in the Midnight Hour)*, *Wade in the Water*, *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, and *Daniel*, and then referring to the lyrics sheet of the songs, complete the section below. In some cases you have been given the metaphor. You should write what you think it means. In other cases you have been given a meaning. In those cases write a short section of the lyrics that would match the given meaning. If the song is NOT given on the sheet, you also must tell which song the metaphor is from.

METAPHOR	SELECTION	MEANING
1. Wadin' in the water		
2.	WADE IN THE WATER	God will punish the slave masters
3.	Daniel	Enslaved Persons
4. A band of angels comin' after me	CHARIOT	
5. If you get there before I do	WADE IN THE WATER	
6.	CHARIOT	slave state/ free states border
7.	CHARIOT	if you get freedom first.
8. Heaven	CHARIOT	
9. THE CHILDREN THAT MOSES LED	WADE IN THE WATER	
10.	DANIEL	Enslaved on a plantation.
11.		Come South into slave territory.
12. Slip and slide the streets		
13. The water was a little bit cold It chilled my natural body		
14. Put on your Wabash shoes		
15. Still my soul feels heavenly bound		I will be free

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METAPHOR	SELECTION	MEANING
Wadin’ in the Water		
	WADE IN THE WATER	God with punish slaveholder.
	DANIEL	ENSLAVED PERSONS
A Band of Angels Comin’ After Me.	Swing Low Sweet...	
If you get there before I do	Wade in the Water	
	Swing Low Sweet...	Free State/ Slave State Border

	Swing Low Sweet...	If you get freedom first
Heaven	Swing Low Sweet...	
The children that Moses led	Wade in the Water	
	Daniel	Enslaved on a plantation
		Come South into slave Territory
Slip and slide the streets		
The water was a little bit cold It chilled my natural body		
Put on your Wabash shoes		
Still my soul feels heavenly bound		I feel I will be free

## **KEY:**

### METAPHORS IN AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUALS

METAPHOR	SELECTION	MEANING
1. Wadin' in the water	WADE IN THE WATER	ESCAPE
2. GOD'S GONNA TROUBLE THE WATER	WADE IN THE WATER	God will punish the slave masters
3. DANIEL	Daniel	Enslaved Persons
4. A band of angels comin' after me	CHARIOT	Underground RR coming to assist escape
5. If you get there before I do	WADE IN THE WATER	IF YOU GET FREEDOM FIRST
6. Jordan (river)	CHARIOT	slave state/ free states border
7. If you get to heaven before I do.	CHARIOT	if you get freedom before I do.
8. Heaven	CHARIOT	Freedom
9. THE CHILDREN THAT MOSES LED	WADE IN THE WATER	Enslaved persons
10. Livin' on borrowed land	DANIEL	Enslaved on a plantation.
11. Swing down low	CHARIOT	Come South into slave territory.
12. Slip and slide the streets	DANIEL	ESCAPE
13. The water was a little bit cold It chilled my natural body	WADE IN THE WATER	ESCAPE IS DIFFICULT AND DANGEROUS
14. Put on your Wabash shoes	DANIEL	ESCAPE
15. Still my soul feels heavenly bound	CHARIOT	I will be free

#### STEP IV: SUMMING UP AND EXTENSION OF LEARNING.

- Graded sheets can be returned to students for discussion. Alternatively, students could exchange papers for grading. Correct answers should be discussed. It is also possible that students will discover answers that are as legitimate as those given on the key. However, in general since students were often told which song contained the answer, this may not happen to a very great extent.
- Students can now do the enrichment activity “Modern Song Coding”.
- For further extension, ask students to share/perform their songs. This could be done individually or in groups chosen by the students or the teacher. Also the web site [www.random.org](http://www.random.org) will assign students to groups.

## MODERN SONG CODING

Many songs contain coded references that are not grasped by those who do not know the subculture of the group which created the song, or the slang of the writer. Think of things as simple as *Five 0* meaning the police (a term based on the 1970's cop show "Hawaii Five 0").

YOUR TASK: Choose a tune. It can be a tune you create, one from a favorite song of yours, or any other tune.

Give the name of the tune.

Then write a set of lyrics in which you express ideas about people struggling for freedom, or in which you advise people how to get their freedom (think of "Wade in the Water" as advising people to stick to the creeks to escape the tracing hounds of slave catchers.)

Write and translate at last ten lines.

- Write a line of coded lyrics.
- Directly beneath, write the plain, uncoded meaning.

A two line example has been provided.

The grading rubric has also been provided.

TUNE: *Jingle Bells*

"Stepping out, stepping out, going for a jog.

Watching out, all the way, for that Five 0 dog"

WHICH MEANS

I am going to escape, and I must be sure to keep an eye out for the slave holder's tracking hound.

### GRADING RUBRIC

Tune given

0---1 times 10

Correct number of lines written

0--1----2----3---4---5---6---7---8---9---10

Proper translation of hidden meaning given

0--1----2----3---4---5---6---7---8---9---10

Hidden meaning properly expresses ideas of the struggle for freedom

0---1----2----3----4-----5 times 2

Student product shows sufficient complexity and understanding.

0---1----2----3----4-----5 times 2

Total points \_\_\_\_\_ times 2 = Final Grade of \_\_\_\_\_

## LINER NOTES ON LESSON SONGS

***Steal Away to Jesus (in the Midnight Hour)***: Like so many Underground Railroad songs, these lyrics held encoded and layered meanings. To steal away could be a religious call for coming closer to Jesus, or a covert call that you or someone else will attempt to find a way to freedom. In another context, this song might have been a way to share information, or that there would be a secret meeting, perhaps that night. At times, moaning the melody was used to hide the true meaning from unwanted ears. This low and mournful version evokes those calls to steal away from oppression.

***Wade in the Water***: This is another song that developed layers of encoded meaning in the context of the Underground Railroad. Primarily functioning as a baptismal song, “Wade in the Water” is also said to have referenced the most logical method for safe passage—to travel by water in order to avoid human and canine pursuers. Author James Haskins offers another example of possible hidden meanings in his book *Black Music in America*. He writes that when a slave had run away and his absence was discovered by his enslaver, the other slaves on the plantation might sing this song. Those enslaved on nearby plantations might also begin to sing the song to alert the runaway. While debates continue on the accuracy of coded meanings in spiritual lyrics and their possible use on the UGRR, there can be little doubt as to the genius of the songs creators. The fact remains that a song such as *Wade in the Water* certainly allowed for creative licenses to be taken in the interpretation of the meaning, whether for the singer (s) or the intended audience.

**Swing Low Sweet Chariot:** This song was created by a freed Choctaw man named Wallis Willis sometime in the mid-1800s. He was inspired by the Red River to write about the Prophet Elijah being taken to heaven from the Jordan River. Willis' minister transcribed several of his songs and sent them to the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University. Since the end of the Civil War, the Jubilee Singers have been bringing African American Spirituals to the world through performance and songbooks. Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., in his book *The Power of Black Music*, states that the chariot, and later the train, is a metaphor for freedom. There are at least 11 spirituals in which "Chariot" is used in the song's title (Floyd, 1995, p. 279).

**Daniel (also known as Rock Daniel):** This song was first recorded in 1941 when it was performed by Reverend CHI. Savage and his church group at Mount Ararat Missionary Baptist Church in Mississippi. The song comes from the time of slavery and Savage learned it from his grandmother when he was a boy. The song makes reference to life's trials and tribulations and calls out to Daniel, an Old Testament hero, who would understand suffering and who overcame seemingly insurmountable odds. Alan Lomax, who recorded Reverend Savage singing this song for the Library of Congress, described songs like Daniel as requiring the participants to "shout", working up the fervor of a song in a manner leading to a trance (Evans, 2001).

## LYRICS

### Disc 1, #3 Steal Away to Jesus (in the Midnight Hour)

I'm goan steal away  
In the midnight hour.  
Steal, steal away to Jesus.

Lord do you hear me?  
Do you hear me when I make my humble cry?  
I'm goan steal away  
Oh lord, in the midnight hour.  
Steal away to Jesus.  
Lord my body is wracked with pain.  
Well, when the moon,  
when the moon rises high in the sky.  
I'll be ready, I'll be ready  
To steal away.  
You may capture, you may capture my body  
But my soul, my soul will always be free.

I'm gwon steal away  
When you see the pigeons flyin in that northern sky  
Lord, Lord I'm ready to steal away  
Do you hear me, oh great father when I make my humble cry.  
Steal away, steal away to Jesus.

Oh Lord, oh Lord, in the midnight hour.

Steal away.  
Oh Lord, I'm ready.  
I'm ready to steal away.  
Maybe soon in the morning.  
I'm ready to steal away.  
Maybe in the wee wee hours .  
I'm ready to steal away.

12 o'clock in the afternoon

your child is ready to steal away.  
Oh Lord steal away to Jesus  
In the midnight hour, I'm ready

Sometimes my tongue gets stuck up in the roof of my mouth  
When I'm praying to my lord  
But I'm ready,  
Ready to steal away.

Oh Lord,  
Steal away.  
Steal away  
Steal away to Jesus.

Disc1, #4 WADE IN THE WATER

“Wadin’ in the water  
Wadin’ the water children  
Wadin’ in the water  
Wadin’ in the water, just like John  
You know that god’s gonna trouble the water

Well I moved on into the water  
The water was a little bit cold  
It chilled my natural body  
But it didn’t disturb my soul.

Wadin’ in the water  
Wadin’ in the water children  
Wadin’ in the water  
Wadin’ in the water just like John  
You know that Gods’s gonna trouble the water

If you get there before I do  
God’s gonna trouble the water  
Tell my mother I’m comin’ too  
God’s gonna trouble the water

I’m wadin’ in the water  
Wadin’ in the water children  
Wadin’ in the water  
Wadin’ in the water just like John  
You know that God’s gonna trouble the water

Wadin’ in the water  
Wadin’ in the water children  
Wadin’ in the water  
Wadin’ in the water just like John  
You know that Gods’s gonna trouble the water

I know my time for freedom  
Is way up ahead of me.  
But I keep on moving on  
I want my savior to always see that I'm a

Wadin' in the water  
Wadin' in the water children  
Wadin' in the water  
Wadin' in the water just like John  
You know that God's gonna trouble the water

Well who's the children dressed in red  
God's gonna trouble the water  
Must be the children that Moses lead.  
God's gonna trouble the water.  
Wadin' in the water  
Wadin' in the water children  
Wadin' in the water  
Wadin' in the water just like John  
You know now God's gonna trouble the water

Disc 1, #7: SWING LOW SWEET CHARIOT

INTRO

Swing low sweet chariot, coming fore to carry me home

Swing low sweet chariot, coming fore to carry me home

Oh Swing down low

Swing down chariot come and let me ride

Swing down chariot come and let me ride

Help me Lord, help me Lord

I got a home on the other side

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see?

Comin' fore to carry me home.

A band of angels comin' after me

Comin' fore to carry me home.

If you get to heaven before I do

Comin' fore to carry me home.

Tell all my friends I'm comin' too

Comin' fore to carry me home.

I'm sometimes up and sometimes down

Comin' fore to carry me home.

But still my soul feels heavenly bound

Comin' fore to carry me home.

Disc 1, #13 DANIEL

I'm gonna tell my Lord

Daniel

REPEAT 3

How they doin' me here

Daniel

REPEAT 5

Put on your wabash shoes.

Daniel

REPEAT 2

Slip and slide the streets

Daniel

REPEAT 4

Put on your moving shoes

Daniel

REPEAT 2

Getting' in a hurry now

Daniel

REPEAT 4

This ain't none of my home

Daniel

NO REPEAT

Sure ain't none of my home

Daniel

NO REPEAT

Living on borrowed land

Daniel

REPEAT 4

This ain't none of my home  
Daniel  
NO REPEAT

Sure ain't none of my home  
Daniel  
NO REPEAT

Living on borrowed land  
Daniel  
REPEAT 4

Well, I'm going to tell my Lord  
Daniel  
REPEAT 3

How they doing me here  
Daniel  
Repeat 5

Put on your Wabash shoes  
Daniel  
REPEAT 2

Slip and slide the streets  
Daniel  
REPEAT 4

Put on your moving shoes  
Daniel  
REPEAT 2

Getting in a hurry now  
Daniel  
REPEAT 4

I'm gonna tell my Lord  
Daniel  
REPEAT 3

How they doin' me here  
Daniel  
REPEAT 7