


MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE'S  
**45<sup>TH</sup>**  
**SEASON**  
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**STUDY  
GUIDE**

# THE PORCH ON WINDY HILL

A NEW PLAY WITH OLD MUSIC

WRITTEN BY **SHERRY STREGACK LUTKEN, LISA HELMI JOHANSON,  
MORGAN MORSE, & DAVID M. LUTKEN**

CONCEIVED AND DIRECTED BY **SHERRY STREGACK LUTKEN**

STUDY GUIDE BY **ALLISON BACKUS**

DESIGNED BY **EMILY BOYER**

**APRIL 3-21**



MERRIMACK REPERTORY THEATRE

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PRESENTS

# THE PORCH ON WINDY HILL

WRITTEN BY

SHERRY STREGACK LUTKEN  
LISA HELMI JOHANSON  
MORGAN MORSE  
& DAVID M. LUTKEN

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CONCEIVED AND DIRECTED BY

SHERRY STREGACK LUTKEN+

NEW YORK CASTING BY JZ CASTING

APRIL 3-21, 2024

[WWW.MRT.ORG/SHOW/PORCH-WINDY-HILL](http://WWW.MRT.ORG/SHOW/PORCH-WINDY-HILL)

FOR THE FULL *THE PORCH ON WINDY HILL* PROGRAM WHICH INCLUDES COMPREHENSIVE SHOW CREDITS, CAST AND CREW BIOS, AND MORE!



\*Member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.



+Member of the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers, a national theatrical labor union.



^The Scenic, Costume, Lighting, and Sound Designers in this production are represented by United Scenic Artists (USA) Local USA-829, IATSE.



Merrimack Repertory Theatre is a constituent of Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national organization for the American theatre.



Merrimack Repertory Theatre operates under agreements between the League of Resident Theatres (LORT), a consortium of regional theatres throughout the nation, and AEA (Actors' Equity Association), SDC (Stage Directors and Choreographers Society), and USA (United Scenic Artists).

## LEARNING STANDARDS

### AN INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT AND DIRECTOR SHERRY LUTKEN

GRADES 7-12

Theatre Arts – *Responding*  
T.R.07, T.R.08, T.R.09  
Music – *Responding*  
M.R.07, M.R.08

### AFTER THE SHOW: JOURNAL PROMPTS

GRADES 7-10

Theatre Arts – *Responding*  
T.R.07, T.R.08, T.R.09  
English Language Arts – *Speaking and Listening, Language, Writing, Reading*  
SL.1, SL.4, L.5, W.1, W.4, W.9, W.10, R.7, R.8, R.9

### ABOUT APPALACHIA

#### ROOTS: THE SCOTCH-IRISH

#### SCOTCH-IRISH AND AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC

#### FOLK: MUSICAL TERMS AND TYPES

GRADES 7-12

English Language Arts – *Reading Informational Text, Reading in History and Social Sciences*  
RI.10, RCA-H.1, RCA-H.2, RCA-H.3

### INSIDE APPALACHIA: “TRUE STORIES

#### BEHIND FOLK HEROES, RUNAWAY TRAINS, AND MURDER BALLADS”

#### COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

GRADES 7-10

English Language Arts – *Speaking and Listening*  
SL.1, SL.2, SL.3, SL.4  
Music – *Responding, Connecting*  
M.R.07, M.R.08, M.Co.02, M.Co.11

### SONG HISTORY AND CLOSE READING:

#### “PRETTY POLLY”

### ACTIVITY: CLOSE READING AND COMPARISON

GRADES 8-12

English Language Arts – *Reading Informational Text, Reading, Writing, Language*  
RI.10, R.9, R.10, W.7, W.9, L.3, L.5

### SONG HISTORY AND CLOSE READING:

#### “MOLE IN THE GROUND”

#### WRITE: MAPPING THE MOLE’S NARRATIVE

GRADES 7-8

English Language Arts – *Reading, Writing*  
R.1, R.4, R.6, W.3, W.4, W.7

### PROJECT: AMERICAN CLASSICS AND COVERS

GRADES 7-10

Music – *Responding, Connecting, Performing*  
M.R.07, M.R.08, M.Co.02, M.Co.11, M.P.04

### THE HART-CELLAR ACT OF 1965

#### THE VIETNAM WAR

GRADES 9-12

History and Social Science – *US History II, World History II*  
HSS.USII.T5.01, HSS.USII.T5.05,  
HSS.USII.T3.12, HSS.WHII.T5.03

### MAKING CONNECTIONS: TIM O’BRIEN’S *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED*

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

#### WRITE: THE THINGS HE CARRIED

GRADES 10-12

English Language Arts – *Reading Literature, Writing, Speaking and Listening*  
RL.1, RL.4, RL.6, RL.10, W.3, W.4, W.5, W.10,  
SL.1

# THE PORCH ON WINDY HILL SYNOPSIS

As the show opens, Edgar leads a “pickin’ party,” where musicians play classic folk songs together. While Edgar leads a rendition of “Columbus Stockade Blues,” Mira and Beck, a young couple at a nearby campground, struggle to start the van they have been using to travel throughout the American South. Once they start the van, they head for a local “hootenanny.” Beck and Mira arrive at Edgar’s pickin’ party, and Mira recognizes Edgar as her estranged grandfather.

Edgar, Mira, and Beck arrive at Edgar’s cabin, which Mira has not seen since she was a little girl. Edgar, a semi-retired electrician, offers to help fix the van. He leaves Mira and Beck on the porch to fetch some iced tea, and Beck questions Mira about her maternal grandfather, who he had assumed was dead. Mira tells him that she and her family moved out of North Carolina after her grandmother, Ellie died. Since then, her mother hasn’t discussed Edgar or where she grew up.

Edgar re-enters, and the three begin to talk.

Beck reveals that he is a Ph.D. student doing research for his dissertation on Appalachian folk music. Edgar

## THE PORCH ON WINDY HILL: FEATURED SONGS

*Columbus Stockade Blues*  
*Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane*  
*Haydn’s London Symphony #104*  
*Bill Cheatham*  
*Mole in the Ground*  
*Pretty Polly*  
*Sail Away Ladies*  
*Blackberry Blossom*  
*Bach’s Minuet in G Major*  
*Down in the Valley*  
*My Horses Ain’t Hungry*  
*Green Corn*  
*Over the Waterfall*

asks if Mira still plays music, and she admits she does. Together, the three play “Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane.” Mira reveals that after moving to New York with her parents, she began classical training on the violin. She plays Haydn’s “The London Symphony #4,” a classical piece inspired by a Croatian folk song. Together, the three discuss how many popular, classical, and rock and roll songs are adaptations of folk songs from around the world.

Edgar and Beck chat while Mira goes into the house to fetch her grandmother’s dulcimer. When Mira returns, she reminisces about her grandmother, Elmira, who was talented at cooking and music. Edgar tells Mira that while he was serving in Vietnam, Elmira used to send him care packages that made

him the envy of the other soldiers. Edgar plays the song “Mole in the Ground,” an old favorite from Mira’s childhood that Elmira used to play on the dulcimer.

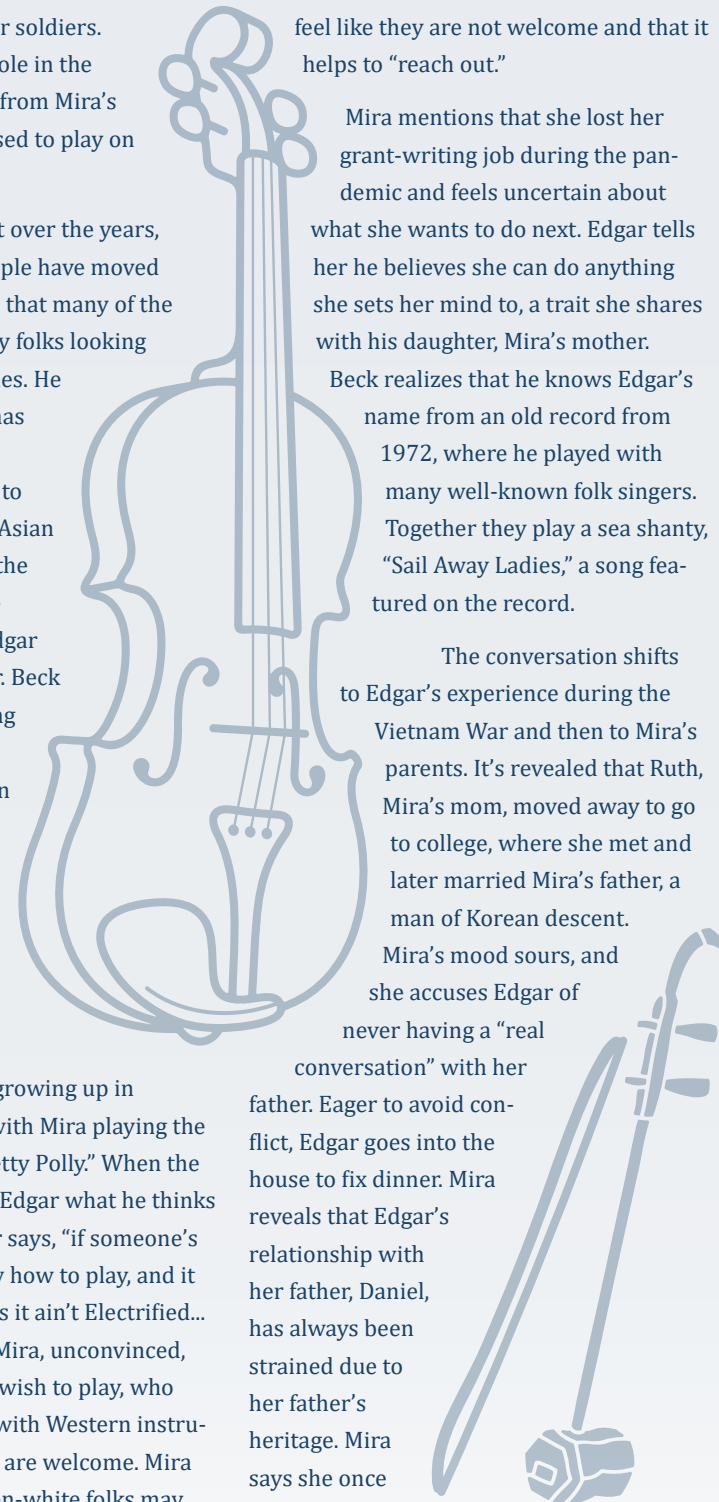
Edgar says that over the years, most of the younger people have moved away from the town and that many of the people moving in are city folks looking to purchase second homes. He mentions that the area has become more diverse in recent years, now home to Mexicans and people of Asian descent. Mira asks how the non-white residents like living in the area, and Edgar is unsure how to answer. Beck mentions how interesting it would be to hear the “new folks” non-western instruments play at a traditional pickin’ party. Mira mentions that she is learning to play the erhu, a stringed Chinese instrument similar to the Korean haegeum, which her father heard growing up in South Korea. Together, with Mira playing the erhu, the three play “Pretty Polly.” When the song finishes, Mira asks Edgar what he thinks of the instrument. Edgar says, “if someone’s got somethin’ they know how to play, and it sounds alright, as long as it ain’t Electrified... Everybody’s welcome.” Mira, unconvinced, asks if those who might wish to play, who aren’t white or familiar with Western instruments, “know” that they are welcome. Mira tells Edgar that many non-white folks may

feel like they are not welcome and that it helps to “reach out.”

Mira mentions that she lost her grant-writing job during the pandemic and feels uncertain about what she wants to do next. Edgar tells her he believes she can do anything she sets her mind to, a trait she shares with his daughter, Mira’s mother.

Beck realizes that he knows Edgar’s name from an old record from 1972, where he played with many well-known folk singers. Together they play a sea shanty, “Sail Away Ladies,” a song featured on the record.

The conversation shifts to Edgar’s experience during the Vietnam War and then to Mira’s parents. It’s revealed that Ruth, Mira’s mom, moved away to go to college, where she met and later married Mira’s father, a man of Korean descent. Mira’s mood sours, and she accuses Edgar of never having a “real conversation” with her father. Eager to avoid conflict, Edgar goes into the house to fix dinner. Mira reveals that Edgar’s relationship with her father, Daniel, has always been strained due to her father’s heritage. Mira says she once



## THE PORCH ON WINDY HILL SYNOPSIS

overheard her parents discussing the first time Daniel met Ruth's parents. Edgar made a racist and distasteful joke, saying it was the "Tet Offensive all over again." The Tet Offensive was an attack by North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops on South Vietnamese and American troops.

Mira says that while her father insisted that Edgar was simply a "product of his time and place," Mira's mom had a more challenging time with her parent's inherent prejudice.

Mira recalls an Easter 18 years ago when her ten-year-old cousin Henry, during a game of tag, called her a racial slur for Asian people and told her that his grandfather, Edgar's brother, Hank, had shot Asians while fighting in Vietnam. Mira's parents heard Henry's words and were horrified. Mira says that her cousin's cruel and racist words were all she could think of when she learned that Asian women had been killed in Atlanta by a racist shooter a few months ago during the pandemic.

Beck tells Mira they can leave anytime she wants to. When Edgar calls them both into the house for dinner, Mira decides that they will stay. (End of Act I)

Act II begins after dinner, as the three characters play a complex combination of songs, one a traditional 'fiddle tune' called "Blackberry Blossom" and "The Minuet

in G Major" by Johann Sebastian Bach. Mira's violin playing reflects her inner conflict.

They sing "Down in the Valley," and Edgar talks about his days in Vietnam, where he learned his trade as an electrician. Mira asks if he got to know any Vietnamese people during the war, and Edgar says that he did and that he even kept in touch with a man named T-hin after the war, who may or may not have been a spy. Edgar brings out corn liquor, and the three drink and play songs,

pausing to discuss the tragic history of the song "Over the Waterfall." Mira and Edgar reminisce about Elmira's funeral — the last time he saw Mira and her parents. He says that he has not spoken to Mira's mother since then. Mira encourages her grandfather to "reach out" to his daughter, and she asks why he never made more effort to mend their strained relationship. When Edgar says he called "once" after the funeral, Beck, who is a little drunk from the moonshine, calls him out for being too proud and not trying

hard enough. Beck and Edgar argue, and Edgar retreats into the house. Beck tells Mira that she has a right to "be angry." Mira says that as a white man, Beck can be angry and heard when angry. As a bi-racial woman, Mira feels that privilege does not extend to her. Beck and Mira argue, and Beck tells Mira that he feels hurt by her unwillingness to open up about her family and past. He walks away angry.

Mira takes some time to herself to leave a voicemail message for her mom.

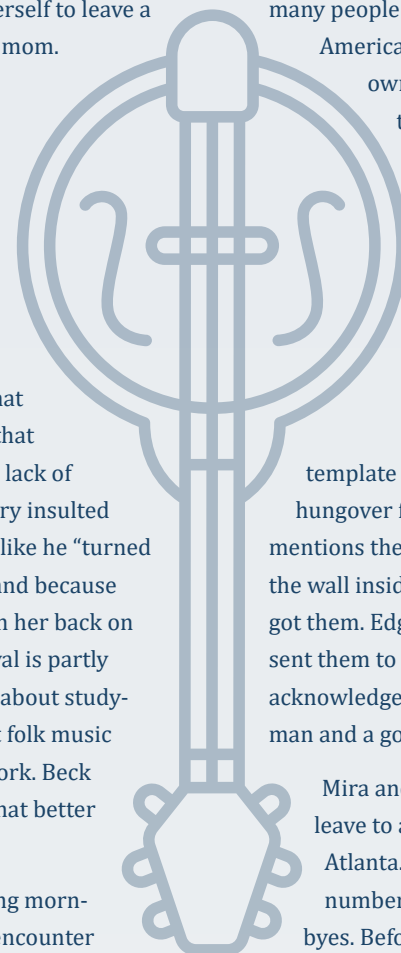
Edgar finds Mira, and the two finally discuss their strained relationship and the Easter event that ultimately caused Mira's parents to move away. Edgar admits that he has regrets about how he handled what happened that Easter, and Mira tells him that she was deeply hurt by his lack of words or action when Henry insulted her. Mira says that she felt like he "turned his back on her" that day, and because of that, she wanted to "turn her back on him." This feeling of betrayal is partly why Mira was so adamant about studying classical music and not folk music when she moved to New York. Beck returns, and all on somewhat better terms, they head for bed.

Early the following morning, Edgar is surprised to encounter Mira. After they sing "My Horses Ain't Hungry", his daughter Ruth's favorite song, Mira is surprised when Edgar says: "Gamsa Hamneeda" ("Thank you," in Korean). Edgar admits to initially harboring prejudice against Mira's father due to his race. He tells Mira that since the pandemic started, he has been appalled by the actions and words of

many people toward Asians and Asian Americans. Mira expressed her own horror and sadness at the anti-Asian sentiment in America. She says that on Easter Sunday all those years ago, she wondered how her family saw her, and now, as an adult, she wonders how the world sees her.

As Edgar and Mira contemplate the future, Beck enters, hungover from the previous night. He mentions the photos of Mira hanging on the wall inside, and Mira asks how Edgar got them. Edgar says her father, Daniel, sent them to him as Mira grew up. He acknowledges that Mira's dad is a good man and a good father.

Mira and Beck say they have to leave to attend a protest march in Atlanta. She gives Edgar her phone number, and they say their good-byes. Before leaving, Mira eyes her grandmother's dulcimer. Edgar notices and tells her it's hers if she wants to take it with her, but Mira tells him to keep it in the usual spot, indicating that she will return to visit. As Mira and Beck depart, she tells Edgar "thank you" in Korean.





## FROM THE PLAYWRIGHT AND DIRECTOR: AN INTERVIEW WITH SHERRY LUTKEN

Sherry Lutken is a director, writer, choreographer, and actor. Her recent directing credits include *Almost Heaven: the Songs of John Denver* and *Hank Williams: Lost Highway* at Riverside Theatre and *Ring of Fire* at People's Light & Theatre. Sherry also associate directed *Woody Sez: The Music of Woody Guthrie* at American Repertory Theater, Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Seattle Repertory Theatre, and Northlight Theatre in Chicago. *Woody Sez* was nominated for the Helen Hayes Award for Best Musical and the Joseph Jefferson Award for Best Musical Revue. Sherry collaborated with David Lutken, Lisa Helmi Johanson, and Morgan Morse to write *The Porch on Windy Hill*, which premiered at Ivoryton Playhouse in 2021.

### HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE IDEA FOR THIS PLAY? WAS THERE A SEED OF INSPIRATION?

This play grew out of COVID isolation and events in the spring of 2021. We all felt the loss of being able to gather and experience art—and its transformative power— together. When the idea was first forming, its inspiration came from one of my closest friends from childhood, who is biracial. She and her husband are now the parents of two amazing daughters, ages ten and twelve. The ways they are raising, teaching, and helping them navigate the constantly changing landscape inspires me daily. She and I have had many long discussions about America and Americans—the wonderful strength and generosity that human beings here and everywhere exhibit to one another, juxtaposed with the last several years' intensely bitter divisions and racially motivated crime under the magnifying glare of the COVID pandemic.

As the seed of this three-character play took shape, I bounced ideas off of David (as he and I drove many rural miles to pick up large quantities of 'isolation groceries' during months of 'lockdown')—Lisa and Morgan, actor/musician/writers we knew and wanted to work with, loved the concept and brought their own lenses to widen and sharpen our play's focus simultaneously. Lisa, as a biracial Asian woman, was the driving force in finding and creating our central character's voice. The four of us continue to find inspiration from our own experiences and the world around us.

### YOU WORKED WITH LISA HELMI JOHANSON, MORGAN MORSE, AND DAVID M. LUTKEN TO WRITE *THE PORCH ON WINDY HILL*. WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE COLLABORATION PROCESS? WERE THERE CHALLENGES? SURPRISES?

It has, at times, been very challenging to bring together four points of view on everything from themes and metaphors to a turn-of-phrase, or sometimes, surprisingly

perhaps, even a single word! However, collaboration on a script such as this is, at its best, a way to open yourself to answering questions and learning lessons—large and small, familiar and foreign—by means of nuanced, honest communication of complicated ideas through these imaginary characters and situations.

### YOU HAVE WORKED ON MANY THEATRICAL PRODUCTIONS THAT FOCUS ON FOLK MUSIC. WHAT IS IT ABOUT FOLK-MUSIC-CENTERED STORIES THAT YOU ENJOY?

The simplicity and straightforwardness of folk and traditional music is a direct emotional path into our collective consciousness because its fundamental structures, rhythms, and building blocks exist in our American DNA. The audience may not know any of the songs in the play, and yet something about them feels "familiar". When the characters on stage sing a song like "Down in the Valley," a palpable energy crosses the footlights—in both directions—with and within an audience. Less familiar melodies like "Mole in the Ground," "Pretty Polly," or "My Horses Ain't Hungry" are funny, surprising, ruthlessly tragic, or achingly bittersweet because, in the same instant, they strike a multi-dimensional note of recognition.

### *THE PORCH ON WINDY HILL* FEATURES MANY CLASSIC FOLK AND BLUEGRASS SONGS. WHAT WAS THE SONG SELECTION PROCESS LIKE? HOW DID YOU DECIDE WHICH SONGS TO FEATURE?

Our music director, my husband David Lutken, chose the songs. He has a great deal of experience and a fantastic community of very knowledgeable musician friends and resources. During the writing process, the four of us constructed the twelve songs' unique versions (arrangements and orchestrations) through discussion, experimentation, and improvisation. Unlike a musical, however, these songs' lyrics do not directly "advance the plot." Rather, the

melodies, the poetry, the various instruments, and the different playing styles of each character and of each song help reveal the soul of the ‘family’ that comes to exist during the story.

**RACIAL AND FAMILIAL TENSIONS PLAY A KEY ROLE IN THIS PLAY. HOW DID YOU NAVIGATE EXPLORING THESE HEAVIER TOPICS? WHAT WAS MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU WHEN EXPLORING THESE ISSUES?**

The story is a generational family tragedy. It is purposefully small—only three on-stage characters—and geographically and culturally specific. Our approach has been a theatrical ‘camera obscura’: to elucidate a larger picture through a tiny lens. Navigating these difficult topics has been challenging, as it should be. We have stumbled and picked ourselves back up, which is all-important to the process. Frank discussion, personal experiences, and imaginative storytelling have been the tools among all four of us. Most importantly, it has been building and shaping our small story and its music to try to bring that larger picture and its cultural issues into sharper focus, effectively and honestly. Our hope is that the racial and family tension depicted in this small story, its generational, societal, philosophical, and experiential differences and seemingly irreconcilable points of view, can illuminate at least a part of the panorama of our flawed but beautiful, larger family: America.

**THIS PLAY DEALS WITH THEMES OF FAMILY, RACE, PREJUDICE, STORYTELLING, MUSIC, AND MORE—WHAT DO YOU HOPE MRT AUDIENCES TAKE AWAY FROM THIS**

**PRODUCTION?**

*The Porch on Windy Hill* is a collaboratively written ‘play-with-music’. Lisa Helmi Johanson, Morgan Morse, David Lutken, and I spent numerous hours on Zoom discussing many of those thematic elements and how music, particularly early American or ‘Roots’ music, can serve as a metaphor for our country’s origin story: how we all think—or have been conditioned to think—about it, and how we live out its effects. By focusing the story on a biracial young woman coming to terms with the rift and trauma perpetrated by members of her own family, we hope to elicit discussion of difficult truths about our past and present—as Americans and as human beings—and how it can be possible to reframe our future.

**OUR HOPE IS THAT... THIS SMALL STORY...CAN ILLUMINATE AT LEAST A PART OF THE PANORAMA OF OUR FLAWED BUT BEAUTIFUL LARGER FAMILY: AMERICA**

Music is one of the strongest communal art forms. It brings people from different backgrounds and experiences together in a way that sparks joy, healing, and a sense of community. It is a portal through which we can see each other’s humanity. I hope the audience will experience that and, hearing these characters making music together, feel the joy of community and a sense of belonging. It’s our hope that they will realize that feeling of connectedness should continue when the music stops. It is our responsibility to keep listening and asking more of ourselves to ensure that we are building a world where that is not only possible, but part of the fabric of our society for everyone.

The following questions can be assigned as a warm-up writing exercise for the class’s first 10-15 minutes. These questions are designed to encourage students to think

critically and creatively about Merrimack Repertory Theatre’s production of *The Porch on Windy Hill*. If desired, these prompts can also be used as discussion questions.

1. What is the significance of Edgar being a Vietnam Veteran? How does this affect the play as a whole?
2. After Edgar, Mira, and Beck play “Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane,” Beck mentions that the original version of the song has horrible stereotypes due to the fact that it was written as a minstrel song in the 19th century. Edgar asks if that means he “shouldn’t play that song” anymore, and Beck says that is not the case but that “it’s good to know where things come from,” even if they have morphed over time. Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. While Mira was named after her grandmother Elmira, she prefers her name to be pronounced “Mee-ra” instead of “my-ra.” What do you think this says about tradition? Does this moment in the play comment on the larger themes of the play? How so?
4. At one point in the show, Mira says that she’s never understood why some people refer to music as having “roots.” Instead, Mira says she prefers to think about music history as a rope or tapestry. What is the difference between these images? Why do you think Mira likes to think of music as a tapestry or rope? What does this image evoke?
5. Mira says, “music’s good for getting things across that you can’t say.” Do you agree? Why? Can you give examples?
6. Writer and director Sherry Lutken describes the play as a “generational family tragedy.” What does this mean? What is tragic about this particular play?
7. Lutken says her goal with *The Porch on Windy Hill* was to “elucidate a larger picture through a tiny lens.” If the tiny lens is Edgar, Mira, and Beck’s story, what is the “larger picture”?
8. Lutken says that music “is one of the strongest communal art forms.” How does the communal nature of music affect the characters throughout the play? How does the communal nature of music affect the audience watching the play?
9. *The Porch on Windy Hill* is not a musical because the songs featured in the show do not “advance the plot.” Sherry Lutken says that the featured songs “reveal the soul of the ‘family’ that comes to exist during the course of the story.” At what point in the show did you feel the music best revealed the characters’ souls? What made this effective?

# ABOUT APPALACHIA

Named for the Appalachian Mountain range that runs throughout much of the Eastern United States, the Appalachian region geographically covers the entire state of West Virginia and parts of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.

Native American peoples first settled in Appalachia about 16,000 years ago. Cherokee, Iroquois, Powhatan, Shawnee, Mohican, Susquehanna, and Penacook were some of the tribes that emerged and settled there.

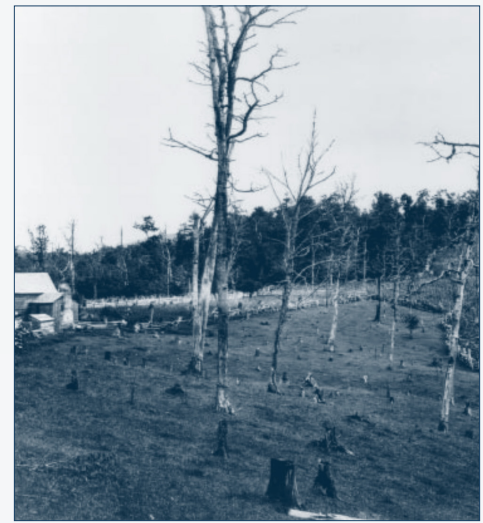
By the turn of the 18th century, European settlers began arriving in the region. Many of these settlers were

Scotch-Irish immigrants who immigrated in the hope of finding religious freedom and economic prosperity in what would later become the United States. As more immigrants arrived throughout the century, the need for more land increased, resulting in the often bloody removal of indigenous peoples from their native land.

By the 19th century, settlers had amassed most of the land in Southern Appalachia, running farms and livestock ranches and organizing trade routes throughout the region. By the 1830s, the region's mountain valleys began to see a rise in tourism; Appalachia became a convenient destination for "wealthy visitors escaping the heat."<sup>1</sup> Dairy, grain, and vegetable farming were all crucial to the Appalachian economy. By the middle of the 19th century, grist mills, distilleries, and small textile factories contributed to the economic growth of the region. In 1838, the infamous Trail of Tears forced many of the remaining tribes west, leading to the death of over 4,000.

After the American Civil War, mining became another crucial industry throughout Appalachia, particularly in the South, where coal, gold, copper, zinc, and lead were abundant. Railroads were built to transport mined goods to mints and smelters. In the late 19th century, tourism rose to the level it had been before the war, and land speculation increased as wealthy investors sought to make money in the coal, iron, and lumber industries.

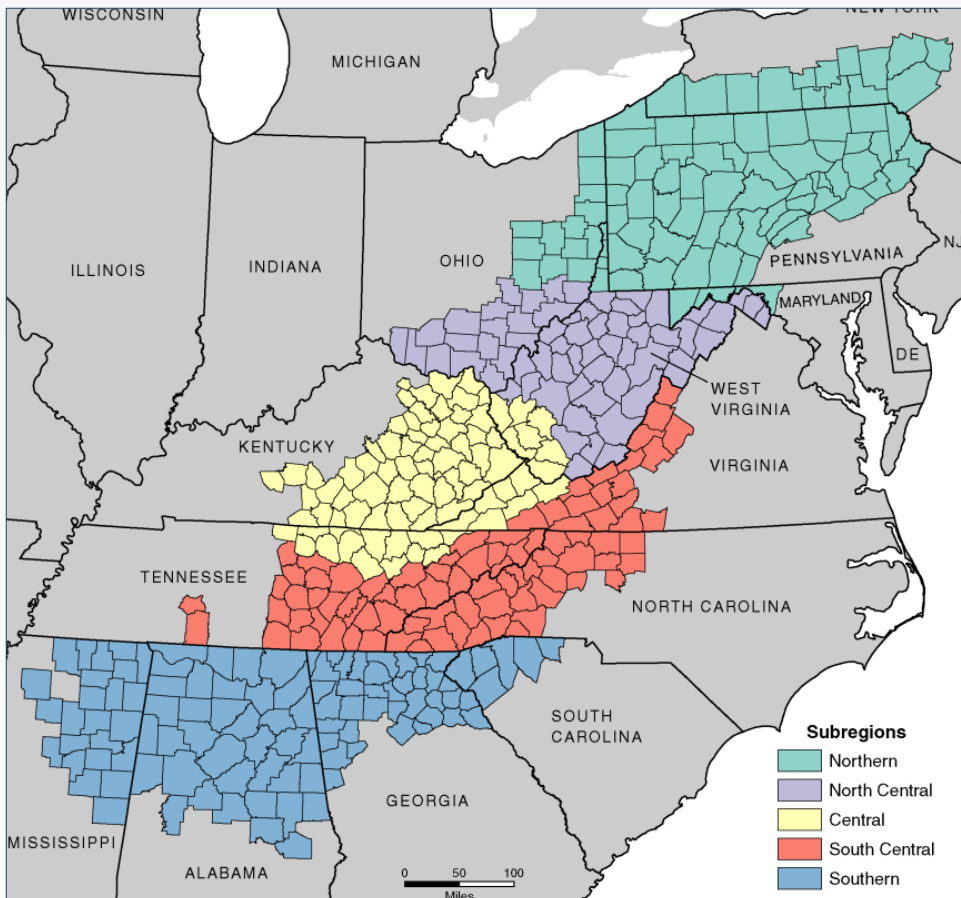
By the turn of the 20th century, most of these new investors "from



TREES KILLED BY GIRDLING TO CLEAR FOR A FARM IN THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS. FOREST HISTORY SOCIETY, DURHAM, NC. | [HTTPS://WWW.SRS.FS.USDA.GOV/PUBS/GTR/GTR\\_SRS018.PDF](https://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/gtr/gtr_srs018.pdf)

outside the region" had "obtained the mineral and timber rights along the railroads." Having sold these rights for a sum, "many mountain farmers lost their agricultural livelihoods" since "clearcutting and mining reduced or destroyed the land's agricultural productivity." In order to support themselves and their families, most of these farmers "became dependent on wage labor in the mines and sawmills," where work was hazardous and grueling. Throughout the rest of the 20th century, the Appalachian economy and industry continued to change. Despite a conservation movement, population growth and industry continued to limit agriculture, and the lumber industry that emerged in the early 19th century led to deforestation and decimation of the region's natural wildlife. The economic boost of the early 1900s was also harmful. The

MAP BY: APPALACHIAN REGIONAL COMMISSION, NOVEMBER 2009. A REGIONAL MAP OF APPALACHIA | [WWW.WKYUFM.ORG/ECONOMY/2019-05-22/SURVEY-REPORT-REVEALS-DISPARITIES-IN-APPALACHIAN-SUBREGIONS](http://WWW.WKYUFM.ORG/ECONOMY/2019-05-22/SURVEY-REPORT-REVEALS-DISPARITIES-IN-APPALACHIAN-SUBREGIONS)



<sup>1</sup> Susan L.Yarnell, "The Southern Appalachians: A History of the Landscape," *United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service*, May, 1998, [https://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/gtr/gtr\\_srs018.pdf](https://www.srs.fs.usda.gov/pubs/gtr/gtr_srs018.pdf).

## ABOUT APPALACHIA

demand for coal during the First World War “fueled further expansion.” However, the coal market became unstable, and the wages of the miners were drastically cut, leading to protests, unionization, and violence. With the Great Depression, the entire coal industry “collapsed,” causing brutal poverty. To make matters worse, machination in the mines had a detrimental effect on miners’ health, and many died of Black lung and pneumonia.

While the “booming economy” during World War II bettered the Appalachian economy for a time, this did not last. By the 1960s, education, employment rates, and income were significantly lower in Appalachia than in the rest of the United States. The Kennedy and Johnson Administrations sought to improve the living conditions of those in Appalachia with employment programs. However,

these programs “failed to restructure the extractive economies that sent profits to investors outside of the region and provided few benefits for local populations.”

Today, the Appalachian region is home to 26.3 million people. Education and income rates continue to be lower than those of the rest of the country, and poverty and disability rates are generally higher in Appalachia than in any other region in the United States. The region is also less ethnically diverse than the nation, with non-white minorities making up only 19% of the population. In modern media and literature, Appalachians are often reduced to simplistic stereotypes that depict them as ignorant, impoverished, and closed-minded. These stereotypes fail to account for the region’s rich, complicated history and culture which continue to thrive today.

## ROOTS: THE SCOTCH-IRISH

From 1603 to 1625, King James I ruled England, Scotland, and Ireland. James, a fervid protestant, was wary of the primarily Catholic Ireland. In the hopes of quelling unrest and rebellion, James seized Irish-owned land for the British Crown in the North Irish region of Ulster and set up the Plantation of Ulster. James encouraged those in southern Scotland to immigrate and colonize Northern Ireland by settling with their families and working the farms newly owned by wealthy English landowners. King James saw the Plantation of Ulster as an oppor-

tunity to convert many native Irish to Protestantism, and he hoped that colonization would lead to English replacing the native Gaelic dialect. As a result, those wishing to immigrate to Ulster were required to be Protestant, English-speaking individuals loyal to the British Crown.

Unsurprisingly, the Irish natives were deeply embittered by their loss of land and culture to those they viewed as foreigners, often leading to hostility and violence. Nevertheless, settler-colonialism in the region continued throughout

## ROOTS: THE SCOTCH-IRISH

the rest of the 17th century, and as time passed, intermingling and even intermarriage occurred between the native Irish and the Scottish settlers. By 1690, Scottish Presbyterians made up the majority of the Ulster population.

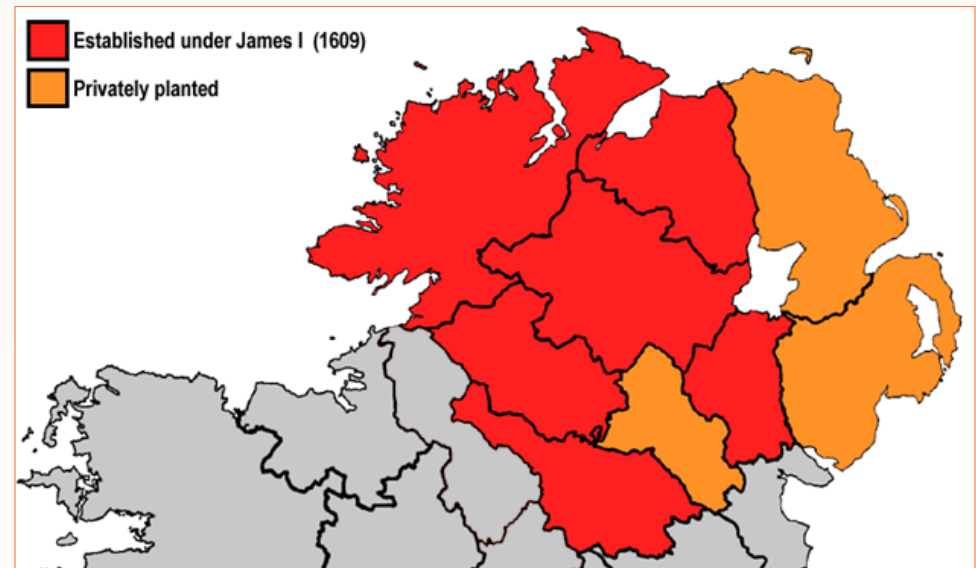
By the turn of the 18th century, many Scottish and Scotch-Irish Ulster residents became frustrated and disillusioned with farming land they did not own. They resented the restrictions placed on them by the British Crown and the Church of England. Shortly thereafter, this population, known today as the Scotch-Irish, began immigrating to the American British Colonies. By the time of the American Revolutionary War, more than 250,000 Scotch-Irish had settled in what would become the United States.

A large portion of this population settled in the Appalachian region in the

southeast, where they found the life and freedom they had previously longed for, and many were instrumental in fighting the British during the Revolutionary War. However, as settler-colonialists, the Scotch-Irish ultimately displaced many of the indigenous peoples native to the Appalachian region, including the Mohican, Susquehanna, and Penacook peoples in Northern Appalachia, and the Cherokee peoples in Southern Appalachia. As the Scottish low-landers had displaced many Irish natives a century before, the Scotch-Irish displaced much of the indigenous American population in Appalachia.

The Scotch-Irish brought their cultural traditions to Appalachia, ultimately shaping the region’s cultural identity with their music, religion, language, art, and agricultural practices.

A MAP OF THE ULSTER PLANTATION. | [EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/PLANTATION\\_OF\\_ULSTER#](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plantation_of_Ulster#)





# SCOTCH-IRISH AND AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC

Both Scottish and Irish cultures were rich with folk music of different sorts, including ballads, love songs, drinking songs, sea shanties, and jigs. After Scottish settlement in Ulster, Scottish and Irish folk traditions merged together, adapting old songs and creating new ones, often referencing the counties and towns of the Ulster region. Music was played at weddings, funerals, and christenings, on holidays and at social gatherings and dances, shaping the lives and traditions of the Scottish, Irish, and Scotch-Irish peoples. Many of these traditional folk songs spoke to the lived experiences of those in the region; love, work, religion, and leaving home were all popular topics explored in the lyrics of these songs.

By the 17th century, traditional music in the Ulster region was “enriched by an array of instruments from other lands.” Metal and wooden flutes, concertinas, accordions, tin whistles, jaw-harps and tambourines joined with the traditional Celtic folk instruments: fiddles, bagpipes and harps. In their musical history book, *Wayfaring Strangers*, Fiona Ritchie and Doug Orr describe the intermingling of instruments and cultures that transpired in Ulster, and later, in the United States:

“An assortment of threads and textures would have colored the musical fabric as smaller ethnic groups

also came to Ulster...Welsh, French, Huguenots, and English plantation settlers among them, foreshadowing the later melting-pot scenario of the United States. Through the ages, traditional musicians have exhibited openness and a strong democratic streak, inviting a diversity of people and their music into the circle. No one person, or indeed any community has ever been able to constrain the power of a song and a tune as a force for mutual understanding and shared joy.”<sup>2</sup>

In America, traditional Scotch-Irish folk music became ingrained in American culture, particularly in the Appalachian region, where many Scotch-Irish immigrants ultimately settled. However, these songs, traditions, and musical practices continued to morph as immigrants from other countries and cultures settled in the United States. Perhaps most influential on American folk music were the rhythms and instruments that came from Africa to the United States via the slave trade. Enslaved people made makeshift drums and banjos to accompany their singing. They adapted and created their own songs, imbuing African culture and musical practice into the fabric of American music.

## FOLK: MUSICAL TERMS AND TYPES

**BALLAD** – A ballad is a song that tells a story. While the narrative of a ballad is often sad or melancholy, ballads can also be cheerful or funny. Ballads often rhyme by quatrain, with either the 1st and 3rd line of every stanza rhyming, or every 2nd and 4th line of every stanza rhyming.

**BLUEGRASS** – Bluegrass is a type of music within the broader American folk genre. Like many of the other folk genres, Bluegrass is generally played on acoustic instruments. Bluegrass also frequently allows for improvisation from performers, and usually features a fast tempo and a sound that inspires high-energy in its listeners.

**CALL AND RESPONSE** – Call and response is a musical form where one person sings a phrase or a line, which is repeated or responded to by a group. Call and response has its roots in African musical culture, but today, this popular musical form can be found in folk music, jazz, blues, gospel, soul, and rock music.

**DRINKING SONG** – Drinking songs are a common type of traditional folk songs from Scotland and Ireland. Drinking songs are meant to be performed while drinking, often with a group of people. While not all drinking songs make direct references to alcohol, many do.

**IRISH REBEL SONGS** – Rebel songs date back to at least the 17th century. Rebel songs were originally written to celebrate and memorialize various uprisings and battles against the British Crown.

**KEENING** – Keening is a specific type of Irish lament that expresses deep mourning for the recently deceased. Keening was generally performed at a loved one's grave, and often featured repetition and rhythmic chanting. The words sung were meant to be specific to the person who had died.

**LOVE SONG** – Love songs are all about romantic love, covering topics such as heartbreak, marriage, courting, and unrequited affection.

**MURDER BALLAD** – A subgenre of ballad, murder ballads tell stories of murder, violence and crime, sometimes from the perspective of the murderer themselves, and sometimes from an outsider's point of view.

**OLD-TIME MUSIC** – Old-time music is a sub-genre of American folk music which developed in the late 19th century to accompany various types of folk dancing.

<sup>2</sup> Fiona Ritchie and Doug Orr, “Wayfaring Strangers: The Musical Voyage,” (2014).

## FOLK: MUSICAL TERMS AND TYPES

**PICKIN' PARTY (HOOTENANNY)** – A social gathering where folk musicians get together and play traditional music.

**PROTEST SONGS** – Protest songs are designed to inspire people to take social and political action. Protest songs were perhaps most popular during the folk revival period of the 1960s and 1970s.

**SEA SHANTY** – A sea shanty is a type of work song written for sailors and seamen to sing while doing any number of tasks aboard a ship. Sea shanties are believed to have originated sometime in the 16th century on merchant ships. Many sea shanties were written to accompany specific work related actions aboard a ship, like raising sails or moving ropes, and many shanties utilized “call and response.”

**WORK SONG** – Work songs are folk songs designed to be sung while doing physical labor of some kind.

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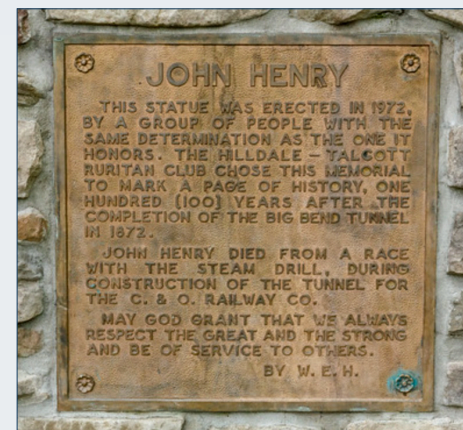
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## INSIDE APPALACHIA: "TRUE STORIES BEHIND FOLK HEROES, RUNAWAY TRAINS, AND MURDER BALLADS"

The podcast *Inside Appalachia* explores the richness and complexity of Appalachian culture and history. The episode “True Stories Behind Folk Heroes, Runaway Trains, and Murder Ballads,” offers a deep dive into some classic Appalachian folk songs and what they mean to different people throughout the region. In the first segment of the podcast, different guests comment on their feelings about the Appalachian ballad “John Henry.” For students to best engage with the activity, it is recommended that they listen to at least one version of the song before listening to the podcast.

By actively listening to this podcast and discussing the following questions, students will be able to reflect on musical culture, folk traditions, and the complexities of loving, performing, and understanding songs that hold different meanings for different people. The podcast segment dedicated to discussing “John Henry” runs from the start to 12:20.



A PLAQUE IN WEST VIRGINIA HONORING JOHN HENRY. | [WWW.FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/TGPOTTER-FIELD/28250644242](http://WWW.FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/TGPOTTER-FIELD/28250644242)

### COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the song “John Henry” about?
2. How does Theresa Gloster feel about “John Henry”? What memories does she associate with this song?
3. How does the second guest, Ruby Daniels, feel about “John Henry”? Why?
4. Based on Ruby’s description, what was life like for coal miners in Appalachia?
5. How does singer and songwriter Amethyst Kiah feel about the song?
6. As a child, Theresa Gloster was unfamiliar with versions of the song referencing Polly Ann. Now aware of these versions, how does Theresa feel about the role of Polly Ann in the greater narrative of John Henry? Why does she feel this way?

## INSIDE APPALACHIA: "TRUE STORIES BEHIND FOLK HEROES, RUNAWAY TRAINS, AND MURDER BALLADS"

### COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

7. Amethyst Kiah wrote the song "Polly Ann's Hammer." What is the song about? How does this song re-imagine the story of John Henry?
8. One line in Amethyst Kiah's song is: "throw that hammer down." What is the message behind this line?

### DISCUSS

1. Having listened to the song "John Henry" and the podcast, what are your feelings about the song? Why?
2. How do you feel about Amethyst Kiah's song, "Polly Ann's Hammer"? Do you think there is value in re-imagining old folk songs? Why or why not?
3. What are other songs that were written in response to another song? What do you think inspired the songwriter to do this?

## SONG HISTORY AND ANALYSIS: "MOLE IN THE GROUND"

*The Porch on Windy Hill* features many classic folk songs. Among them is "Mole in the Ground," a favorite song of Mira's that made her laugh as a child. While the song was made famous by Bascom Lamar Lunsford in 1928, Lunsford acknowledged that the song was not his and that he had first heard the song in North Carolina from a man named Fred Mooney in 1901.

In the song, the narrator laments that he wishes he was "a mole in the ground" and later a "lizard in the spring." Many music scholars believe that the

"pen" the narrator refers to is the Big Bend Penitentiary, implying that the narrator is in jail, longing to be free. In this respect, the narrator's desire to be a "mole in the ground" might have to do with a longing to tunnel out of prison and escape. "Tippy's" line of "baby, where you been so long," also seems to support this reading of the song. Why the narrator has a desire to be a lizard in the spring is less clear. However, in old Appalachian dialect, "spring lizards," were the name used for the salamanders found near springs and forests.

## SONG HISTORY AND ANALYSIS: "MOLE IN THE GROUND"

As with many folk songs, there are numerous versions of "Mole in the Ground." In some versions, the "pen" is referred to as the "bend," and "Tippy" is sometimes named "Kimpy" or "Tempe," and it is her name repeated before the phrase "let your hair role down" and not Molly's. Additionally, some versions of the song feature a verse where the narrator confesses he "don't like a railroad man," because he'll "kill you when he can" and "drink up your blood like wine."

While modern-day listeners can discern that the song is likely about a man imprisoned who longs to be free so he can "hear his sweetheart sing," the exact meaning of the rest is murky. As American Studies scholar Robert Cantwell eloquently expresses:

"How is the imagination to resolve these contraries – the voice that tells the story, a figure of folklore, whose heart is fixed on the lizard and the mole, on Tempe's curls and her nine-dollar shawl, on rough convicts and the long days behind bars, the treacherous railroad men – what unseen incidents tie these images together we can only guess."<sup>3</sup>

To Cantwell, "resolving" the plot-holes within the song's story is not necessary to enjoy it. The pleasure of hearing the song comes from its simplicity, absurdity, and mood of longing and "poignant melancholy."

<sup>3</sup> Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival*, Harvard University Press, 1996.

## PROJECT: MAPPING THE MOLE'S NARRATIVE

### WHAT IT IS

A creative writing opportunity where students write their own short story based on the song "Mole in the Ground." This short project allows students to closely examine the song's text, and consider how the different elements of the song might make sense in a narrative. Who is Tippy? Why does the narrator of the song want to be a mole? Why do they want to be a lizard? How long have they been away from Tippy? Who is Molly, and why should her hair roll down? Who are the rough and rowdy men the narrator sings about? The students decide!

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. To begin, students should choose a particular version of the song to base their stories and poems on. Students can use the version of the song sung in the play, or they can choose another version of the song with slightly different lyrics.

**INSTRUCTIONS** CONT.

2. Once students have chosen their preferred version, they should brainstorm for their stories and poems, making sure to include all the characters, sentiments, and events that are featured in their chosen version. Their stories should have clear and cohesive syntax and narrative structure, with strong language, and correct grammar and punctuation.
3. Students should complete a first draft of their three-page story, and swap it with peers in class so that all the stories can be peer-reviewed.
4. Once students have received feedback, they should complete a final draft of their stories to turn in.

*I wish I was a mole in the ground  
 Yes, I wish I was a mole in the ground  
 If I's a mole in the ground I'd root that mountain down  
 And I wish I was a mole in the ground*

*Yes, Tippy wants a nine dollar shawl  
 Yes, Tippy wants a nine dollar shawl  
 When I come o'er the hill with a forty dollar bill  
 Baby, where you been so long?*

*I been in the Pen so long  
 I been in the Pen so long  
 I been in the Pen with the rough and rowdy men  
 Baby, where you been so long?*

*Molly, let your hair roll down  
 Molly, let your hair roll down  
 Let your hair roll down and your bangs curl round  
 Oh Molly, let your hair roll down*

*Oh, I wish I was a lizard in the spring  
 Oh, I wish I was a lizard in the spring  
 If I's a lizard in the spring I'd hear my sweetheart sing  
 And I wish I was a lizard in the spring.*

*I wish I was a mole in the ground  
 I wish I was a mole in the ground  
 If I's a mole in the ground I'd root that mountain down  
 And I wish I was a mole in the ground*

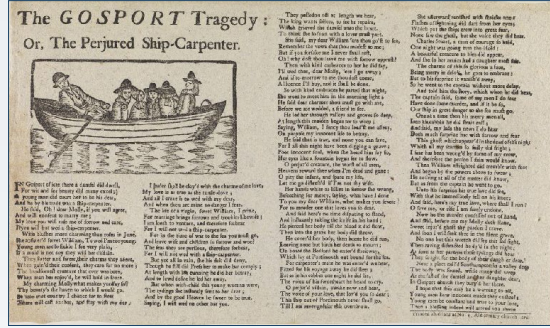
# SONG HISTORY AND ANALYSIS: "PRETTY POLLY" AND "THE GOSPORT TRAGEDY"

Among the many songs featured in *The Porch on Windy Hill*, "Pretty Polly," is likely one of the oldest. The song is a murder ballad that tells the tale of a young woman who is courted by a man, only to be lured into a forest and killed by him. The song is a simpler, modified version of "The Gosport Tragedy," a ballad first printed in Britain sometime during the first half of the 18th century. As with many printed ballads of the era, the publication suggests an existing tune to which the ballad is to be sung. "The Gosport Tragedy" is meant to be sung to the tune of another well-known folk song, "Peggy's Gone Over Sea."

In "The Gosport Tragedy," Polly is named Molly, and her murderer's name is William instead of the shortened "Willy." However, the plot and many of the story's details remain the same in "Pretty Polly." Molly is a beautiful "damsel" living in Gosport who meets a ship carpenter named William. William confesses his love to Molly and declares he wishes to marry her. However, Molly distrusts him, having witnessed how "fickle" young men can be in their love. William persists, flattering Molly and making her promises of marriage, and he leads her "astray" to "lewd desires."

Molly soon falls pregnant and tells William that she is carrying his child. He again promises to marry

her before returning to sea. However, he ultimately tricks Molly, luring her into the forest and stabbing her to death despite her pleas for mercy. He buries her in the forest "where none but birds" can mourn her. William leaves to prepare his ship, *The Bedford*, for military travel. In his cabin, Molly's ghost haunts him. She tells him the ship "out of Portsmouth never shall go" until she is "revenged for this overthrow." Only William and a "courageous" crew member named Charles Stewart can see Molly's ghost, but the rest of the crew can hear her wailing. The captain gathers that a member of his crew has "done some murder," and he interrogates his men, including William, who denies any wrongdoing. As he leaves the captain's cabin, however, Molly's ghost again appears before him, and William, wrought with grief and guilt, confesses to the crime. He is driven mad and ultimately dies. Molly's body is located by her parents,



AN EARLY PRINTED VERSION OF "THE GOSPORT TRAGEDY." LIKELY PRINTED BETWEEN 1727 AND 1800. | [COLLECTIONS.LIBRARY.YALE.EDU/IIIF/2/16025444/FULL/1000,699/0/DEFAULT.JPG](https://collections.library.yale.edu/iiif/2/16025444/full/1000,699/0/default.jpg)

## SONG HISTORY & ANALYSIS: "PRETTY POLLY" & "THE GOSPORT TRAGEDY"

and she is buried at Gosport Church, where she is properly mourned. The ballad ends with a “warning” to all “young men” to be “confident and true” in their love, lest they meet the same fate as William.

It has long been said that the story of “The Gosport Tragedy” and the subsequent “Pretty Polly” are based at least partially on fact. Scholar David C. Fowler researched the historical origins of the tale and published his findings in an article in 1979. Fowler found that in the early 18th century, a ship called *The Bedford* did exist and spent significant time in the Portsmouth Harbor from 1723 to 1725. The ship’s carpenter during this time was named John Billson and not William. However, records indicate Billson had a crewmember named Charles Stewart, just as in the ballad.

In 1726, *The Bedford* departed Portsmouth for the Baltic region, and shortly after its journey began, the ship sailed through a terrible storm, which, according to the captain’s log, caused great damage to the ship, leading the captain to believe that his ship was in “grave danger.”<sup>4</sup> It was a common belief at this time that “a ship in peril of the sea and storms is probably carrying a criminal.”<sup>5</sup> This sentiment is echoed in “The Gosport Tragedy,” when the captain, worrying there is a murderer aboard the ship says, “Our ship in great danger to the sea must go.” Fowler’s research additionally shows that John Billson died shortly after this storm, likely of scurvy.

Fowler hypothesizes that if Billson did admit to the murder of a young woman

before his death, it was perhaps Charles Stewart, who, “bold” as he was, relayed the confession and misfortunes of Billson to a London publisher, who would have filled in the missing details of the tale, and transformed it into verse. Fowler places the original publication date of the ballad at around 1727 when *The Bedford* returned from the Baltic region. Numerous printed and re-printed versions of the ballad were circulated throughout the following two centuries. During this time, “oral tradition was undoubtedly working its own changes in the ballad.” By the 19th century, many versions featured a young woman by the name of “Polly.” By 1820, versions of “The Gosport Tragedy” were being printed in America.

“Having traced our ballad through print and oral tradition,” writes Fowler, “it is very satisfying to find, at the end of the trail, a modern form of it that is highly lyrical, shaped almost exclusively by oral tradition.” Today, as many versions of “Pretty Polly” exist as “The Gosport Tragedy.” In some, “Willie” is still a seaman; in others, he is a gambler; sometimes, his profession is unclear. “Pretty Polly” does not explicitly reference the namesakes’ pregnancy or any ghost. Many of the finer details found in “The Gosport Tragedy” are omitted in “Pretty Polly,” but the “haunting folk song... preserves the emotional core of the narrative,” a narrative that has moved listeners and readers for nearly 300 years.

## ACTIVITY:

# STUDENT CLOSE READING AND COMPARISON

### WHAT IT IS

An opportunity for students to practice their literary analysis skills by close reading and comparing “The Gosport Tragedy” and “Pretty Polly.” This close reading activity encourages students to focus on the importance of language, narrative, and form and consider how and why texts and songs change over time. This exercise also encourages students to practice textual annotation on the page to draw connections between the two texts visually.

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. As an introduction to the texts, have students read “Song History and Analysis: ‘Pretty Polly’ and ‘The Gosport Tragedy.’” Reading can be done silently and individually, or out loud in groups or as a class.
2. Hand out the lyrics to both “The Gosport Tragedy” and “Pretty Polly.” Individually, have students highlight and mark the two texts, marking differences and similarities in form, language, and narrative.
3. When they’ve finished, students should be sorted into small groups so they can discuss their findings. Guiding questions for their discussion can be found below.
  - a. How does the form of “Pretty Polly” differ from the form of “The Gosport Tragedy”? Why do you think this change was made?
  - b. What specific details and language in the text prove that “The Gosport Tragedy” inspired “Pretty Polly”?
  - c. What is the narration style of each song? (First person, second person, third person limited, third person omniscient). What is the effect of each narration style on its song?
  - d. How is William portrayed in “The Gosport Tragedy”? How is Willie portrayed in “Pretty Polly”? How are they different? How are they similar?
  - e. Compare the settings of these two songs. How are they different? How does the difference in setting affect the narrative as a whole?
  - f. Unlike Molly, Polly in “Pretty Polly” does not haunt her murderer for revenge. How does this change affect the narrative?
  - g. There is a clear moral in “The Gosport Tragedy.” Is there a moral in “Pretty Polly”? If yes, what is it? If not, why not?

<sup>4</sup> David C. Fowler, “The Gosport Tragedy: Story of a Ballad,” *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. 43, Issue 3-4, (1979). Accessed on Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/details/sim\\_southern-folklore-quarterly\\_1979\\_43\\_3-4/page/162/mode/lup](https://archive.org/details/sim_southern-folklore-quarterly_1979_43_3-4/page/162/mode/lup).

<sup>5</sup> MacEdward Leach, qtd. in David C. Fowler, “The Gosport Tragedy: Story of a Ballad,” *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, Vol. 43, Issue 3-4, (1979).

## PROJECT:

# AMERICAN CLASSICS AND COVERS

## WHAT IT IS

An opportunity for students to use their critical thinking and music-knowledge skills to research a particular Appalachian folk song.

## INSTRUCTIONS

1. In small groups, students should choose a classic Appalachian folk. Songs featured in *The Porch on Windy Hill* are recommended, but students can choose another Appalachian folk song if they have a strong inclination to do so. Once the songs are chosen, each group will research their particular song, organizing their research to answer the research questions below.
2. Students should then listen to at least 3 different versions of song and choose their two favorites. Students should take notes on how the two covers of the same songs differ, using the guiding questions to help them.
3. Students should organize their research and findings in a digital presentation using Power Point, Google Slides, Adobe or iMovie.
4. Students will then do a group presentation for class, showcasing their knowledge of the song they chose: It's history, it's meaning, how it's been played differently over time, and how it connects to the greater themes represented in the Appalachian folk music genre.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Roughly how old is this song? What is the first record of it being played?
2. What was happening in Appalachia during the time this song was written?
3. Where in Appalachia is this song from? Is there a record of who wrote this particular song? If yes, who were they?
4. When was this song first recorded? Who recorded it?
5. What is this song about? Are there any traditional folk-music themes you recognize?

## GUIDING MUSICAL ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

1. What is the structure of this song? AABB? ABAB?
2. Who sings each of these versions of the song? What are their voices like?
3. When were each of these recordings released? Were they popular?
4. Do the lyrics differ between these two versions? If yes, how so?

## GUIDING MUSICAL ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

5. What instruments are utilized on these particular recordings?
6. What differences are there between these two recordings? Number of singers? Tempo? Key? Differences in creative expression? Improvisation?



# THE HART-CELLAR ACT OF 1965

On October 3rd, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 into law. This act of immigration reform, also known as the Hart-Cellar Act, abolished the immigration quota systems that had been in effect since the 1920s. These racist immigration policies, sometimes referred to as the National Origins Formula, severely limited the number of non-white, non-western, and

non-English-speaking immigrants allowed to enter the United States. These laws were a direct response to the American xenophobia following an influx of Asian, Southern and Eastern European immigration in the early 20th century. In 1929, congress implemented a long-lasting immigration quota system aimed at preserving the ethnic make-up of the United States as of 1920: a nation of primarily white, educated,

protestant, English-speaking individuals.

With the abolishment of these quota systems in 1965, immigration, particularly from Asia and Latin America drastically increased, ultimately leading to greater diversity in the American population. The Hart-Cellar Act implemented a priority system for accepting immigrants: Immigrants accepted for the purposes of family re-unification made of 75% of the annual immigration pool, immigrants accepted on the basis of work made up 20% of the immigration pool, and refugees made up the remaining 5%. Parents, spouses, and children under the age of 18 were non-quota immigrants, and were allowed to immigrate freely. Before this immigration reform, the

number of immigrants legally entering the United States was under 300,000 per year. After the Hart Cellar Act, this number rose to an annual average of 1 million incoming legal immigrants.

President Johnson signed the bill into law on Liberty Island, where he gave a speech declaring that the immigration reform law would “repair a very deep and painful flaw in the fabric of American justice,” and that the new law would “correct” a “cruel and enduring wrong in the conduct of the American Nation.”<sup>6</sup> On the quota system, Johnson continued:

...This system violated the basic principle of American democracy—the principle that values and rewards each man on the basis of his merit as a man. It has been un-American in the highest sense, because it has been untrue to the faith that brought thousands to these shores even before we were a country. Today, with my signature, this system is abolished.

In *The Porch on Windy Hill*, Mira’s father, Daniel is a Korean immigrant who came to the United States as a young boy with his family. Daniel’s legal immigration would have been made possible by the Hart-Cellar Act, which allowed many families and individuals to legally start a new life in the United States.

<sup>6</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, “Signing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 on Liberty Island,” transcript of speech delivered at Liberty Island, NY, 3 October, 1965, <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/APA/Historical-Essays/Growing-Diversity/Hart-Cellar/#:~:text=The%201965%20Hart%E2%80%93Cellar%20Act,revolution%20in%20the%20U.S.%20population.>

PRESIDENT JOHNSON SIGNS THE HART-CELLAR ACT AT LIBERTY ISLAND ON OCTOBER 3RD, 1965. | [REIMAGININGIMMIGRATION.ORG](https://REIMAGININGIMMIGRATION.ORG)



# THE VIETNAM WAR

In 1954, Vietnam became independent from French Imperialist rule. However, the country was politically divided between the communist North Vietnam and the republican South Vietnam. North Vietnamese leaders wished to unite the country under a single communist government. In contrast, the South Vietnamese wished for a governmental design similar to that of the Untitled States and other Western nations. At the 1954 Geneva Conference, negotiators agreed to divide the country in half. The communists, led by Ho Chi Minh and backed by the Peoples' Republic of China and the Soviet Union, would maintain control of the North. The republican government, backed by the United States and led by prime minister Ngo Dinh Diem, would maintain control of the South.

However, in December of 1960, an organization called the National Libera-



NAPALM AIR STRIKES RAISE CLOUDS INTO GRAY MONSOON SKIES AS HOUSEBOATS GLIDE DOWN THE PERFUME RIVER TOWARD HUE IN VIETNAM ON FEBRUARY 28, 1963. | [AP VIA THE ATLANTIC](#)

tion Front, or the Viet Cong, challenged the Southern government in an attempt to unify the country under communist leadership, causing a civil war. The United States government, in the midst of the Cold War, grew increasingly concerned about the growth of foreign communism and believed that one

country falling to communism would lead to others following suit, leading to a wave of communism that could potentially overtake the globe. This idea, known as the “domino theory,” led to the belief that American inter-

vention in Vietnam was necessary. The threat of the domino theory led the United States to the practice of containment, a concept first articulated by Foreign Service Officer George Kennan in 1946. Kennan believed that the best way to counter “Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the Western world” was to prevent the spread of communism in other countries.”<sup>7</sup>

Given the strong anti-communist sentiments of the time, the break out of civil war in Vietnam seemed to those in the American government to be a falling domino that could not be ignored. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy doubled the number of American troops in Vietnam and provided additional military advisors to aid the Southern government. He approved the use of chemical weapons, including herbicides and napalm, used to clear the dense forests in Vietnam and Cambodia.

In 1964, a confrontation between North Korean ships and the United States Navy occurred in the Gulf of Tonkin. American Naval officers reported that the North Korean Navy had fired on them. While this incident is now known to have



FLYING LOW OVER THE JUNGLE, AN A-1 SKYRAIDER DROPS 500-POUND BOMBS ON A VIET CONG POSITION BELOW AS SMOKE RISES FROM A PREVIOUS PASS AT THE TARGET, ON DECEMBER 26, 1964. | [HORST FAAS/AP VIA THE ATLANTIC](#)

been misrepresented and falsified, word of mouth that the North Korean Navy had attacked United States ships led to the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Passed by Congress, this resolution gave President Lyndon B. Johnson the power to take “any measures he believed were

necessary to retaliate and to promote the maintenance of international peace and security in southeast Asia.”<sup>8</sup> This resolution laid the legal groundwork for the drastic escalation of American military involvement in Southeast Asia. By 1968, 548,000 United States troops were deployed in Vietnam, and over 30,000 United States troops had died. In December of 1969, a draft lottery was implemented, forcing randomly selected, non-disabled men to join the war effort abroad. The United States became

A NAPALM STRIKE ERUPTS IN A FIREBALL NEAR U.S. TROOPS ON PATROL IN SOUTH VIETNAM IN 1966. | [AP VIA THE ATLANTIC](#)



1965—AMERICAN HELICOPTERS COVER SOUTH VIETNAMESE TROOPS AS THEY ADVANCE TOWARDS A VIET CONG CAMP ON THE BORDER OF CAMBODIA. | [HORST FAAS/AP VIA THE ATLANTIC](#)

<sup>7</sup> Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute United States Department of State, “Kennan and Containment, 1947,” <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/kennan>.

<sup>8</sup> Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute United States Department of State, “U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War: the Gulf of Tonkin and Escalation, 1964,” <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/gulf-of-tonkin>.



# THE VIETNAM WAR



A U.S. TROOPER RUNS PAST A BURNING BUILDING IN SAIGON IN JUNE OF 1968. | AP VIA THE ATLANTIC

name capital of Saigon, which North Vietnamese troops were subsequently invading. Once the city of Saigon was taken, the country was re-unified as the communist Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The Vietnam War proved to be a brutal and bloody conflict, and the war was viewed through photographs and TV footage shown in American homes. The effects of the war were significant – Southeastern Asian governments were destabilized by American violence and interference, and countries like Cambodia and Laos turned to communism as a result. The casualties of both military personnel and civilians were devastating. In Vietnam, an estimated 1 to 3 million Vietnamese citizens were killed, along with 300,000



AS U.S. "EAGLE FLIGHT" HELICOPTERS HOVER OVERHEAD, SOUTH VIETNAMESE TROOPS WADE THROUGH A RICE PADDY IN LONG AN PROVINCE, IN DECEMBER OF 1964. | HORST FAAS/AP VIA THE ATLANTIC

Cambodians and between 20,00 and 60,000 Laotians. 58,000 Americans died during the conflict, and many of those who returned suffered from war-gotten injuries and PTSD. Today, many view the United States' interference in Vietnam as a mistake, as a conflict

that ultimately caused more harm to the countries involved than it did good.

## TERMS TO KNOW

THE VIETNAM WAR, COMMUNISM, COLD WAR, GENEVA CONVENTION OF 1954, VIET CONG, DRAFT, DOMINO THEORY, CONTAINMENT, THE GULF OF TONKIN INCIDENT, THE TONKIN GULF RESOLUTION, DOVES AND HAWKS

increasingly divided between those in favor of containment and American military involvement in Vietnam and those who strongly opposed it. These two camps, the "hawks" and the "doves," clashed as the war raged with no clear conclusion. Popularity for the war began to wane. Many Americans felt that the domino theory was more fearmongering than a real threat, and many young men resented the draft for sending them abroad to fight in a war they saw little to no point in fighting.

President Richard Nixon took office in 1969 after running on a platform that

promised to end the Vietnam War. However, during his first months in office, Nixon drastically increased carpet bombing on the Vietnamese-Cambodian border, hoping to scatter and kill the Viet Cong hiding in the jungles. Nixon hoped that these carpet bombings and the significant loss of life that came with them would encourage the North Vietnamese to consider negotiating, but this was not the case. By the summer of 1969, Nixon began withdrawing American troops and continued to do so over the next few years. In 1975, the last American troops were air-lifted out of the South Viet-



THOUSANDS ATTEND A RALLY ON THE GROUNDS OF THE WASHINGTON MONUMENT IN WASHINGTON ON APRIL 17, 1965. THE RALLY FOLLOWED PICKETING OF THE WHITE HOUSE BY STUDENTS DEMANDING AN END TO VIETNAM FIGHTING. | CHARLES TASNADI/AP VIA THE ATLANTIC



MILITARY POLICE, REINFORCED BY ARMY TROOPS, THROW BACK ANTI-WAR DEMONSTRATORS AS THEY TRIED TO STORM A MALL ENTRANCE DOORWAY AT THE PENTAGON IN WASHINGTON, D.C., ON OCTOBER 21, 1967. | AP VIA THE ATLANTIC



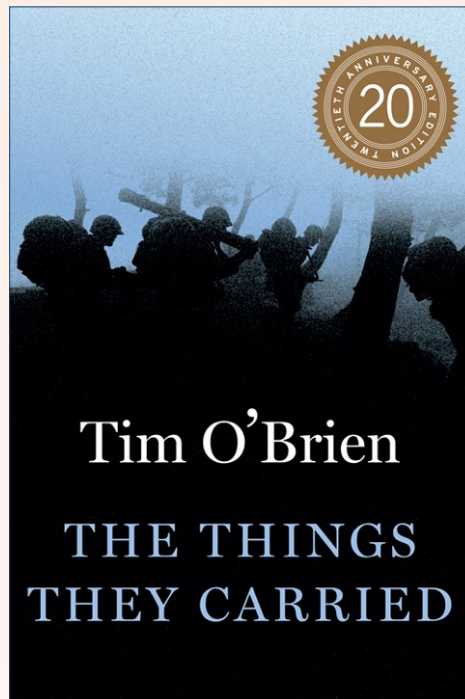
IN BERKELEY-OAKLAND CITY, CALIFORNIA, DEMONSTRATORS MARCH AGAINST THE WAR IN VIETNAM IN DECEMBER OF 1965. | AP VIA THE ATLANTIC

# MAKING CONNECTIONS: TIM O'BRIEN'S *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED*

Tim O'Brien is a writer and Vietnam veteran. O'Brien is best known for his 1990 book of connecting short stories titled *The Things They Carried*, which chronicles the lives of soldiers in the fictional Alpha Company during the Vietnam War. The book is semi-biographical, and O'Brien seamlessly blurs the lines of fiction and truth throughout the novel. *The Things They Carried* is today regarded as a classic within the war fiction genre.

**Read:** After seeing *The Porch on Windy Hill* at Merrimack Repertory Theatre, have students read the first short story in *The Things They Carried*. Reading this short story will give them insight into the genre of war fiction and allow them to reflect on what life was like for American soldiers in

Vietnam. Students will also be encouraged to consider the significance of Edgar being a Vietnam veteran in *The Porch on Windy Hill*, and how this adds to the narrative as a whole. A full PDF of *The Things They Carried* can be found [HERE](#).<sup>9</sup>



O'BRIEN'S 1990 NOVEL, *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED*. | [WWW.ARTS.GOV/INITIATIVES/NEA-BIG-READ/THINGS-  
THEY-CARRIED](http://WWW.ARTS.GOV/INITIATIVES/NEA-BIG-READ/THINGS-THEY-CARRIED)

## DISCUSS

1. How does O'Brien depict the life of the soldiers in *The Things They Carried*? What details are particularly evocative?
2. How does O'Brien's description of weight affect the story?
3. What sorts of things do the soldiers carry? What is different about what O'Brien lists as being carried at the start of the story versus what O'Brien lists as being carried towards the end of the short story?

## DISCUSS (CONT.)

4. What literary devices do you recognize? Symbolism? Metaphor? Repetition? Colloquialism? Euphemism? Imagery? Paradox? Simile? What effect do specific literary devices have on the reader?
5. Why does Lieutenant Jimmy Cross burn Martha's letters and photographs?
6. What are some of the thoughts that help the soldiers continue on? What is comforting about these thoughts?
7. O'Brien writes: "Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to. It was what had brought them to the war in the first place, nothing positive, no dreams of glory or honor, just to avoid the blush of dishonor." What does this say about these characters? What does it say about war in general?
8. After reading "*The Things They Carried*," has your view of Edgar in *The Porch on Windy Hill* changed? Based on what you know of the Vietnam War, why might Sherry Lutken and the other writers have chosen to make Edgar a Vietnam veteran?

MARINES WADE ASHORE WITH HEAVY EQUIPMENT AT FIRST LIGHT AT RED BEACH NEAR DA NANG IN SAIGON ON APRIL 10, 1965. | [AP VIA THE ATLANTIC](#)



<sup>9</sup> Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, (1990), PDF at [https://lessonbank.kyae.ky.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/TTTC\\_Full\\_Text.pdf](https://lessonbank.kyae.ky.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/TTTC_Full_Text.pdf)

# WRITE: THE THINGS HE CARRIED

## WHAT IT IS

A writing exercise where students write a two-page story about what they imagine Edgar would have carried during his time in Vietnam. This exercise encourages students to actively engage with O'Brien's writing style, and consider the authors language, character, and narrative choices.

## INSTRUCTIONS

1. After reading the first chapter of *The Things They Carried* and discussing it in class, students should list at least seven “things” they imagine Edgar would have carried during his time in Vietnam. Students are encouraged to think creatively but critically; everything Edgar carries should be able to be backed up with evidence from the play. The list should include physical “things” and metaphorical “things,” just as O'Brien does in his short story.
2. When students have finished their list, they should choose three “things” to write about in detail (students can reference all the “things” on the list, but only three should be described and explored in depth). Once they have chosen their three things, students should take time to outline their stories, taking particular care to consider how O'Brien describes the “things” and their effect on the soldier carrying them—Think about: Why is Edgar carrying this? How does he feel about it? How does he engage with this “thing”? What is happening around him? With whom does he interact?
3. Students should use their outline to complete a first draft of their story. It is recommended that students take time to peer-review so that they can practice giving and receiving editing and writing feedback.
4. Once students have edited their stories, they can turn in a final draft.