Composition II

Assignment 2: Song Lyric Analysis

The following assignment is a miniature research essay on a song popular in our culture.

Goals:

Writing Goals

- To select a text within a specific genre that is worthy of analysis
- To practice writing annotations
- To organize and write an analysis
- To use the MLA Research style in a final draft.

Cultural Goals:

- To review and reflect on music in popular culture.
- To reflect on various cultural values reflected in music.
- To reflect on your own values as they are embedded in music.

Due Dates:

1/22: Topics Due – Assembling a Playlist (5 points)
1/27: Rough Draft due -- In-class work on composition and research (10 points)
1/29: First Draft due – Peer review workshop (10 points)
2/3: Final Draft Due (100 points)
       Playlist presentation (10 points)

The Required Elements:

The essay will need to contain at least 5 outside sources that you should find on the internet.

The assignment should be typed in MLA style

Possible sources can include:

1. The source of the song lyrics themselves
2. Locations on the internet where the song can be listened to (YouTube)
3. MP3 files
4. A source giving information about the performers of the songs (information about them, including discussion of popularity, style, gossip, etc.)
5. A source describing the genre of the song – source can help with the definition
6. Sources used to help explain the references to places and history made in the song (if any)

7. Sources containing reviews or analysis of the song

8. The source on the internet that contains the platform for the song (Pandora, Spotify, etc.)

These sources will need to be documented in MLA Research Style used in English Departments in the United States. You will NOT need to put your essay into MLA style until you have completed the first draft.

HOWEVER, as you write your first draft, please be sure the make a note of where you used an outside source in your essay. It is from these notes that you will create an essay in MLA style. It is a good idea to paste into your essay the internet address of each source as you use it. So throughout your essay, there should be scattered a number of Internet addresses.

**The Assignment**

Select a song that you like which has interesting lyrics and is clearly within a specific musical genre.

Here are some guidelines. Please avoid songs that are:

A. Simply patriot.

B. Very long

C. Too simple, with little to say and rely mostly on melody or musical arrangement and repetition

D. Part of a musical or a play in which the song then becomes a part of a larger story.

The song should:

A. Have interesting lyrics that may include a number of verses and perhaps a refrain

B. Be nationally known – that is, the song should have a broad appeal in popular culture.

Please do not select a song that is not known outside the circle of your own friends.

C. Be from a specific musical genre, such as:

   Rock (and its various forms)

   Pop (and its various forms)
Rap

Hip Hop

Folk (and its many various forms/languages/cultures)

D. Be "word-oriented" such that the song tells a story or expresses an idea or point of view or describes a situation. The purpose of the song should not be simply to show off the virtuosity of the performers or focus on the instrumentation or melody.

E. Be found on commercial musical sites or artist's commercial web pages.

Type up the lyrics to the song or copy and paste them. The lyrics should be typed up in the form of a poem (see my example below).

Typically popular songs have 1) a writer of the words or a lyricist 2) a writer of the music 3) the performers of the song. However, sometimes the writer/musician/performer is all the same person.

However, sometimes performers use traditional or folk music, which has no lyricist or music writer.

Sometimes a contemporary writer who is a musician will write a song for another performer. Or the song may have been recorded numerous times by different artists. You need to keep these issues in mind when selecting and writing about a song.

The Introduction to the Essay

In the introduction to the essay, give the song title (titles of songs go in quotation marks), the writer of the song (which could be several people) and the major performers of the song, which can be an individual or group. Discuss the date of the song's release (if known) or the major popular recordings of the song and the date of their releases. This task should be easy for popular songs that get downloaded a lot. Also discuss the popularity of the song or the song's performers. The information about the song and its history may take several paragraphs.

Personal Connection

Next, explain why you personally chose the song and why you like it. You may discuss your fascination with the song's performers or concerts you have attended where the song has been performed.

You may wish to talk about moments in your life which the song has been a part of. You may want to talk about ideas in the song that speak to you personally so that you can really relate to it.

For my example, I am going to choose the song “Walking in Memphis.” Why? Well, I am originally from the southern state of Tennessee and Memphis is in Tennessee, where I have
visited. I also love music and the song itself is about the history of American Blues. The song has all sorts of rich references to music in 20th-century America. These are a few of the reasons I would give (though in more elaborate form) for why I selected this specific song.

**Song Lyric Annotations**

Next, insert the lyrics into the text of your essay... Also give the internet address where your readers might listen to the song.

For instance, I chose the song "Walking in Memphis" by Marc Cohn. This song has been recorded and rerecorded.

Here is the first verse of it and its chorus

"Walking in Memphis"

By Marc Cohn

Put on my blue suede shoes

And I boarded the plane

Touched down in the land of the Delta Blues

In the middle of the pouring rain

W.C. Handy -- won't you look down over me

Yeah I got a first class ticket

But I'm as blue as a boy can be

Then I'm walking in Memphis

Walking with my feet ten feet off of Beale

Walking in Memphis

But do I really feel the way I feel

6. Next, annotate the lyrics.

Note: Your annotations should be written in complete sentences as you are trying to clearly explain to someone else the meaning of the lyrics. You are not simply making notes

While writing the annotations, you need to think about people who do not live in your culture or your way of life or inside your perspective or have your musical background or tastes. You will need to explain the song to them. This means that for each phrase that might be confusing to a
reader in another culture, that has references to geography or history or moments in the news, or cultural information, idioms, set phrases or colloquial language, you will need to write an explanation. Place numbers after each phrase in the song that requires a discussion and in the next section explain the phrase.

Here's an example:

"Walking in Memphis"

Put on my blue suede shoes (1)
And I boarded the plane
Touched down in the land of the Delta Blues (2)
In the middle of the pouring rain
W.C. Handy (3) -- won't you look down over me
Yeah I got a first class ticket
But I'm as blue as a boy can be
Then I'm walking in Memphis
Walking with my feet ten feet off of Beale (4)
Walking in Memphis
But do I really feel the way I feel

In the first stanza of the song there are three items that others in the class may not understand:
1. The song "Blue Suede Shoes" was an enormously popular song recorded by both Carl Perkins and Elvis Presley in 1956. Elvis Presley was the first American Rock 'n' Roll star and he also enjoyed international success. He still has millions of fans, even today. Elvis lived in Memphis and the blues style of music is a part of the character of his performances.
http://rcs-discography.com/rcs/ss/03/ss3384.mp3
2. The plane in the song is landing in Memphis, Tennessee. Tennessee is a southern state, just east of the Mississippi River, and Memphis is the largest city in Tennessee. Memphis is home to a long tradition of "blues" music. The Delta Blues originated in Memphis and is poor man's
music played on guitar and harmonica. There used to be a lot of poverty in Memphis and the
delta was home to cotton farms and the workers who planted and harvested it.

http://www.pbs.org/theblues/roadtrip/deltahist.html
http://blues.about.com/od/abluesprimer/a/MsDeltaBlues.htm
http://historic-memphis.com/memphis-historic/beale/bealestreet.html

3. W. C. Handy was an African American musician from the early part of the 20th century and
is said to be the "father of the blues." To say that he is “looking down” over the singer of the
song, means that Handy is in heaven looking down over other blues musicians and guiding

4. The line "walking with my feet ten feet off of Beale" refers to a number of ideas. First of
all, we have a saying in English. When someone is very happy, we say they are "walking ten
feet off the ground." That means, they are so happy they are floating. "Beale" is the name of
the street where numerous Blues musicians play. There is even a song called "The Beale

These are examples of the annotations I might write for the first verse of the song.

Conclusion

Explain the ways in which the song is representative of our American culture and why it should
be included on a playlist for the college’s online radio station.

P.S.

List a few other songs by the same artists, in the same style, or the same genre. Include links for
the location of these songs on the internet.