

“The Great Migration-How Art Reflects Life” For Grades 9-12

In the 20th century, many African Americans left the rural south, fleeing segregation laws and limited economic opportunities, for large cities in the north and west in search of work and a better life. This was known as the “Great Migration.” In this lesson students pair works of art and personal letters pertaining to the Great Migration to explore the human struggles and passion behind the paintings. They end the mini unit by creating their own artistic pieces that explore the concept of the American Dream, and they write short pieces describing what they are conveying.

Images with usage permission are included in this lesson plan for printing and distributing and they are also in an accompanying slideshow. Links are provided for all other images.

Guiding Question: How and why does art reflect life?

DAY 1

Introduction

Start by posing the question, “Why do creatures migrate?” This can be posted and discussed online, or students might respond in writing before discussing (to gather their thoughts).

They could start by discussing animal migration. That is fine. Guide them toward discussing human migration and possible causes for people to leave an area in droves.

Next, show students **slide #2** in the accompanying slideshow. The painting, “**Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers**” was created by Aaron Douglas in 1934. Ask for impressions of what Douglas was conveying and why. This can either be done in an online discussion, in writing, or both. Ask students if they see any clues that indicate that this painting might reflect human migration.

Teaching the Lesson

Tell students or post online: “The Great Migration generally refers to the massive internal migration of Black Americans from the South to urban centers in other parts of the country. Between 1910 and 1970, an estimated 6 million Black Americans left the South” (from [US Census Bureau](#)).

1. Ask them to click on this link: [Jacob Lawrence The Migration Series](#) and examine the images.
2. Next, students will read letters from people who wanted to come north or were writing home to people in the south. They will each choose a letter to pair with a painting that seems to speak to the letter writer’s hopes. Students should submit a written explanation of the image and the letter they have chosen, describing why they believe the two go together. An exemplar is included in this lesson plan.

Letters

[Cleveland Galliard](#)

[Don't Have to Mister Every Little White Boy](#)

3rd letter on pg. (begins Mr H----, Hattiesburg, Miss.)

[Don't Have to Mister Every Little White Boy](#)

last letter on pg. (Union Springs letter (begins “Dear Old Friend”)

[Sir I Will Thank You with All My Heart](#)

first letter on pg.- Lutcher, LA, 5/13/1917

[Sir I Will Thank You with All My Heart](#)

3rd letter on pg. (from Port Arthur, TX, begins “Dear Sir: I am a reader of the Chicago Defender....”)

[Sir I Will Thank You with All My Heart](#)

last PP on pg. (begins “Gentlemen: I want to get in tuch....”)

[Additional Letters of Negro Migrants of 1916-1918](#)

Philadelphia, Oct. 7, 1917 letter

DAY 2 and beyond

1. Start by asking students to define the American Dream. This can be done in writing or in an online discussion. Here is a definition from Merriam Webster:

*“a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the U.S. especially by working hard and becoming successful. With good jobs, a nice house, two children, and plenty of money, they believed they were living the **American dream.**”*

2. If doing this lesson in person, consider handing out paper circles upon which students write a goal of the American Dream, such as owning a home, or attending college. They can place their goal circles in the branches of a tree that has been drawn on a board or poster paper at the front of the room. If doing this activity via an online discussion, draw a tree to share with students and as they state their goals, write/place them on the tree.

3. Share **slide #3**, the “**Ladder of Fortune**”, and ask students to interpret what they see. This can be done as a written assignment or a classroom/online discussion.

Talking points to consider:

- What does the ladder represent? (the way to success)
- What do the tree and its fruit represent? (the elements of a successful life)
- What is the significance of the activities going on in the background? (things that keep one from succeeding) Why are they harder to see than the rest of the image? (they are negative) What would happen if someone went that way, instead of climbing the ladder? (they would be ruined)
- What type of people are waiting to climb? (a family, with the father pointing the way to his son; businessmen, clean, well-dressed white people)
- Do you see any people of color in the image? (no) Do you think the American Dream was accessible to them too? (It was probably harder for many of them to climb that ladder, but they, too, wanted what is symbolized in the image.)

Show **slide #4**: **Horatio Alger’s quote from *Ragged Dick***

- How does this quotation by Horatio Alger go with the Ladder of Fortune image in the previous slide? (show slide 3 again as needed)

Show **slide #5**: “**Ladder for Booker T. Washington, 1996**”, by Martin Puryear. Tell students it’s not a painting; it’s like a sculpture, called an “installation”, done on a human scale. Ask:

- How does this ladder differ from the “Ladder of Fortune”? (shows a longer, more difficult journey; doesn’t indicate who it is for)
- What do you know about Booker T Washington? (Teacher should add more info. beyond what participants already know)
- Describe what you are looking at (ladder is suspended around 3 ft. off the ground & seems to float in space, rungs go from about 1 ft. at bottom to a little more than 1 inch at top)
- What would it be like to climb this ladder?
- What do you think Puryear wants the focus to be? Where does he want you to pay the most attention? What do you think Puryear wants you to feel?

- What are your associations with the ladder as a symbol? (Up from Slavery, spiritual- “We are climbing Jacob’s Ladder”, “Stairway to Heaven”)
- Although Puryear *refers* to the past in this piece, do you think it is more about the past or the present?
- What message does Puryear’s ladder give about the context for understanding African Americans today? (burdens of people in the past)

Ask students to read **slides #6 (Frederick Douglass quote) and #7 (Booker T. Washington quote)**. Reshow slide #2 of the Aaron Douglas painting, if needed.

- How might Puryear’s installation have been inspired by the Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington quotes and the Aaron Douglas painting? (Frederick Douglass needed a ladder and Washington spoke of measuring success not only by reaching better positions in life but by also measuring struggles overcome. Aaron Douglas gives the impression of upward movement by the struggles depicted in his painting.)

Further information:

[Ladder for Booker T. Washington background](#)

Ask students to read **slide #8- W. E. B. Dubois’ quote of the “Talented Tenth”**.

The “talented tenth” is a phrase coined in 1896 by white Northerners who were interested in providing the south with colleges for Black people. Their aim was for one in ten Black men to receive a higher, classical education. DuBois used the phrase as the title of a book in which he urged Black men to achieve these higher educations over “industrial training” to better become educators and leaders of their people. In this quote he is telling them that while a vocational education was good right after slavery, it was now essential to break down the barriers to the white world and to educate the talented tenth in a classical education because that was truly how any group could elevate themselves.

4. Repost [Jacob Lawrence The Migration Series](#). Ask students to look again at **slide #2** (Song of the Towers by Aaron Douglas) and view **Lawrence paintings #1, 6, 18, 58, 59**. In a whole class discussion ask for impressions- color, composition, movement, where the artists want viewers to focus (brighter, upward movement & focus, more crowds, more color, urban). As an alternative, this can be a written assignment.

If possible, students can report out and then the following quotation can be shared.

From a 1992 interview of Jacob Lawrence by Elizabeth Hutton Turner, curator of the Phillips Collection Archives of the Museum of Modern Art in NYC:

“To me, migration means movement. While I was painting, I thought about trains and people walking to the stations. I thought about field hands leaving their farms to become factory workers, and about the families that sometimes got left behind. The choices made were hard ones, so I wanted to show what made the people get on those northbound trains. I also wanted to show just what it cost to ride them. Uprooting yourself from one way of life to make your way in another involves conflict and struggle. But out of the struggle comes a kind of power, and even beauty.”

5. Ask students to create their own artistic expression that depicts what it takes to achieve their idea of the American Dream. They can paint or draw a scene or create a three-dimensional piece. Their image does not have to include a ladder, but it should include something that helps people to advance in life, like a vehicle of some sort, or a mentor, perhaps. Once they have created their image, students should write a short (150 to 300 words) explanation of their image which includes:

- Who is likely to utilize what is depicted and why?
- If their dream is not accessible to all Americans, what is/are the alternative(s) for those who may not achieve the American Dream?

This is the summative assessment for the unit.

Have students respond to the guiding question for this unit as a “ticket to leave:” activity:

- How and why does art reflect life?

Optional Lesson Extensions

A. Stage an “artwalk” of students’ creations in the classroom or create a slideshow. They can respond in writing to:

- What does each piece depict, how and why?

After sharing their thoughts, student artists can respond and explain their inspiration and interpretation.

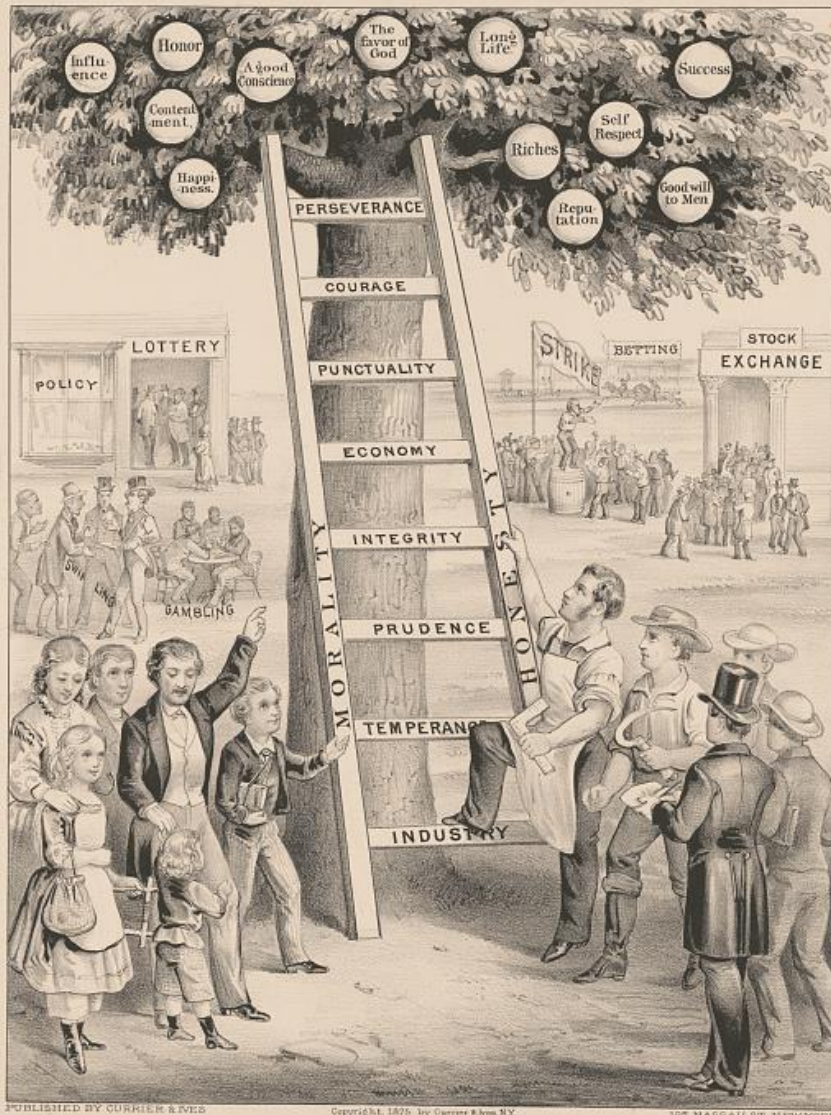
B. Have students research other influential events and African Americans including Ida B. Wells-Barnett, W. E. B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, and the Harlem Renaissance. They can do this in groups or individually and present their information at the teacher’s discretion (oral or written report, etc.)



“Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers”

by Aaron Douglas, 1934

nypl.getarchive.net



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THE LADDER OF FORTUNE.

Industry and Morality bring solid rewards. Idle schemes and speculations yield poverty and ruin.



The Ladder of Fortune.
 Industry and Morality bring solid rewards. Idle schemes and speculation yield poverty and ruin.
 1876
 Library of Congress

The Great Migration Painting and Letter Matching Assignment Exemplar

This example uses the painting shown at the beginning of the lesson. Students should choose other paintings for their documents.

This painting, "Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers", painted in 1934 by Aaron Douglas, goes with the letter below written in 1917 by a Black person in Alabama who wanted to come to the north. The painting depicts strong-looking male figures like the "able-bodied working men" described in the letter, who are "dying to leave the south." The figure in the lower left corner of the painting, (which can be considered the south) who appears to be held back by grasping hands, or ropes of some kind, could represent the "10 or 15 good working men who is out of work and are dying to leave the south". The figure carrying a suitcase as he climbs the gear heading to the tall buildings in the north of the painting represents those men who want to be "anywhere but the south." Both the painting and the letter illustrate how desperately people wanted to migrate from the south to better opportunities in the north in the early 1900s.



Dear Sir: Permitt me to inform you that I have had the pleasure of reading the Defender for the first time in my life as I never dreamed that there was such a race paper published and I must say that its some paper. However I can unhesitatingly say that it is extraordinarily interesting and had I know that there was such a paper in my town or such being handled in my vicinity I would have been a subscriber years ago. Nevertheless I read every space of the paper dated April 28th which is my first and only paper at present. Although I am greatfully anticipating the pleasure of receiving my next Defender as I now consider myself a full fledged defender fan and I have also requested the representative of said paper to deliver my Defender weekly. In reading the Defenders want ad I notice that there is lots of work to be had and if I havent miscomprehended I think I also understand that the transportation is advanced to able bodied working men who is out of work and desire work. Am I not right? with the understanding that those who have been advanced transportation same will be deducted from their salary after they have begun work. Now then if this is they proposition I have about 10 or 15 good working men who is out of work and are dying to leave the south and I assure you that they are working men and will be too glad to come north east or west, any where but the south. Now then if this is the proposition kindly let me know by return mail. However I assure you that it shall be my pleasure to furnish you with further or all information that you may undertake to ask or all information necessary concerning this communication. Thanking you in advance for the courtesy of a prompt reply with much interest. * * * BESSEMER, ALA., 5/14/17

Massachusetts History and Social Studies Curriculum Frameworks

US History I

Topic 7. Progressivism and World War I [USI.T7]

4. Analyze the strategies of African Americans to achieve basic civil rights in the early 20th century, and determine the extent to which they met their goals by researching leaders and organizations (e.g., Ida B. Wells-Barnett, W. E. B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Booker T. Washington, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).

US History II

Topic 2. Modernity in the United States: ideologies and economies [USII.T2]

1. Analyze primary sources (e.g., documents, audio or film recordings, works of art and artifacts), to develop an argument about how the conflict between traditionalism and modernity manifested itself in the major societal trends and events in first two decades of the 20th century. Trends and events students might research include: a. the arts, entrepreneurship and philanthropy of the Harlem Renaissance, including the work of individuals such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Josephine Baker, and Eubie Blake.

ELA Writing Standards (from grades 9-12)

2. Write informative/explanatory texts (e.g., essays, oral reports, biographical feature articles) to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Advanced Visual Arts Course Standards

Responding

1. Perceive and analyze artistic work. Identify ways that a contemporary artwork pushes the boundaries of a genre and discipline. (A.V.R.07)
2. Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. Analyze the ways one's own cultural and personal perspectives and biases affect understanding of a visual work. (A.V.R.08)
3. Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. Identify how bias, culture, and privilege affect the criteria used to evaluate artwork. (A.V.R.09)

Connecting

1. Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art. Explain the development of a personal aesthetic vision as a visual artist and how it is represented in a specific piece or collection. (A.V.Co.10)
2. Relate artistic ideas and works to societal, cultural and historical contexts to deepen understanding. Identify the historical and cultural contexts that caused shifting of stylistic elements between artistic movements. (A.V.Co.11)