

Jacob Lawrence and Langston Hughes:  
Traveling from Harlem to Los Angeles

Stephen Metts, Art

Paul Ali, English Literature

Manual Arts High School,

Los Angeles Unified School District, Humanitas Program

Terry Barrett, Consultant

Ohio State University

The stature of Jacob Lawrence and Langston Hughes, two artists of the Harlem Renaissance, has increased with the passage of time. The similarity between the Harlem Riots of 1935 and the Watts riots in 1965 and the Rodney King riots in 1992 in Los Angeles are clear; the conditions under which both artists worked are familiar. Jacob Lawrence's documentation of African American experiences in his *Migration Series* is particularly apt in our own era of immigration issues. The direct portrayal of African Americans in exodus from the plantation South to the industrial North resonates today as we experience many of the same suspended states of reality and expectations in our teaching and learning with students in South Central Los Angeles and other urban areas.

Langston Hughes's "Montage of a Dream Deferred" is a possessing echo of both Harlem's past and of our own students' depictions of their present and future. Within the 75 page poem, Hughes employs a "jam-session technique" which has relevance to vernacular languages in use today. The characterizing quality of Hughes's poetry is its simplicity: the common acts of everyday people written in the common language of their speech. This quality coincides with the artistic style of Jacob Lawrence and has meaning for our students in their everyday experiences which they tell in their writing and art making.

This unit is divided into six interdisciplinary activities, and takes approximately one month to complete. Upon completing this unit, students have constructed understandings of the Harlem Renaissance and two of its artists' contributions. Students will be able to relate experiences important to Jacob Lawrence and Langston Hughes to their own experiences as they will learn about Harlem Renaissance artists and develop their own voices in literature and visual art.

### **Art Activity 1 Introducing Students to the Work of Jacob Lawrence**

An historical framework will be helpful to introduce students to the work of Jacob Lawrence. During the Harlem Renaissance, Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes collaborated on *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a pictorial documentary of Harlem as seen through the eyes of Sister Mary Bradley, a resident of Harlem. Students can compare and contrast this documentary with Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration Series* of the same period. Through this comparison students will gain a more comprehensive sense of the social and artistic climate of the Harlem Renaissance.

As students become familiar with Harlem of the late 1930s and 40s, they can also make comparisons to contemporary urban spaces. *The New American Ghetto*, a pictorial documentary by Camilo José Vergara, is an excellent source for viewing our contemporary urban spaces and their social climates. During this discussion students should learn that the Harlem Renaissance artists possessed a determination that led to the triumph of creativity during an era of strife and social upheaval.

When looking at the paintings of Jacob Lawrence and the photographs of Roy DeCarava, some of the following discussion prompts may be used:

- What are the recurring images of Harlem past found in the paintings of Jacob Lawrence and the photographs of Roy DeCarava? What do these images tell us about Harlem past?
- Both Jacob Lawrence and Roy DeCarava capture their subjects in the midst of movement to and through Harlem. How do these artists use the city and its movement to comment on their subjects' day to day and emotional lives?
- If we compare the cityscapes of Jacob Lawrence and Roy DeCarava to the contemporary cityscapes found in Vergara's *The New American Ghetto*, what are some obvious differences and similarities in the architecture, streets, signs, and human expressions?

The work of Jacob Lawrence, especially in *The Migration Series*, is marked by a simplicity with which he captured complex feelings of travel, movement, and suspended notions of place and identity. Because many students have had experiences similar to those depicted in *The Migration Series*, they can bring these experiences to the discussion. Have students draw comparisons between their experiences and those portrayed by Jacob Lawrence. Some of the prompts that may help students see the work of Jacob Lawrence in light of their own experiences are:

- Can we determine several categories or topics that recur in *The Migration Series*? For instance, many of the paintings feature train imagery so one category could be identified as Train Paintings.

- Can we locate unifying elements that exist throughout the paintings? For instance, Jacob Lawrence uses spikes, nails, and hammers through many of his paintings.
- What is the effect of Lawrence's use of bold primary colors and a direct distinctive drawing style?
- Taking into consideration Lawrence's style of picture making, how do you react to these paintings? Do they make you sad, determined, happy, or leave you feeling neutral? What elements in the picture make you feel this way?
- Do you think Lawrence's paintings make strong points about social issues, or do you think they are personal accounts of private experiences? Can they be both at the same time?

To help students come to a culminating stance about the paintings of Jacob Lawrence, ask them to compare them to Roy DeCarava's photographs. Students should be able to ascertain some similarities and differences in subject matter of the two artists and their respective series. In a further comparison, students can start to form a critical stance on the effectiveness of Jacob Lawrence's departure from the documentary aspects of Roy DeCarava's photographs.

- Compared to the photographs of DeCarava, how do you think Lawrence's paintings are successful in capturing a sense of Harlem, its residents, and their lives?
- If you were living in the Harlem as pictured by DeCarava, and you were a painter colleague of Lawrence, what would you choose to concentrate on? How would you make your paintings similar or different?
- In looking at Lawrence's paintings during our prior discussions, what do you think are his most outstanding strengths? Why?
- If you could own a Lawrence painting or a DeCarava photograph, which would you choose? If you had free choice of selection in a comprehensive museum, would you chose a photograph or painting of theirs, or artworks from a different art historical period or style? Please explain your choice.

### **Literature Activity 1** **Building Strategies and Vocabulary for Criticizing Visual Artwork**

Present two opposing examples of paintings: one, painted in bright and warm colors, depicting positive subject matter; the other, painted in dark gloomy shades concerned with a depressing theme. (For examples, an Impressionist painting of a still-life and Edward Munch's *The Scream* are ideal as they are well known and diametrically opposed in tone.) Elicit discussion mapping the differences between two paintings. Direct the discussion in terms of perception and meaning: What do you see? What does it mean to you? What is your evidence?

Pass out copies of the Language Wheel and project a transparency of it. The Wheel encompasses the opposites of Light/Dark, Cheerful/Sad, etc. Using a Venn Diagram with two circles that overlap to form two segments for “different qualities” and a common segment in the middle for “similar qualities,” map-out opposing and similar qualities of both paintings. Discuss the effect compositional elements (line, shape, color, contrast, size, scale)

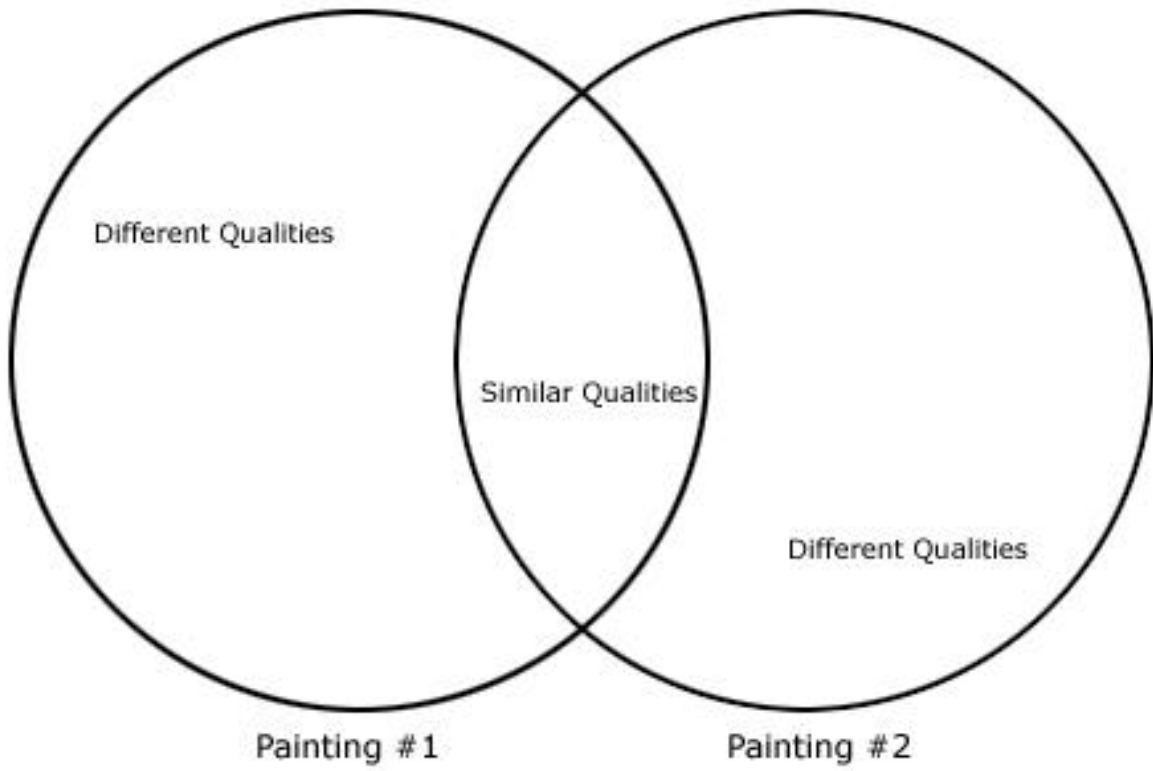
have on the subject matter of each paintings. How do the subject matters and compositional elements combine to effect meaning in each of the paintings? How do differences in subject matters and compositional elements in both paintings effect their meanings?

**Space Break for Diagrams to follow on next page:**

**Language Wheel**



Venn Diagram



To expand the students' vocabulary, pass out Thesauruses and instruct the class to look up synonyms for each of the words on the Language Wheel to create a word bank for later assignments. The labor for this task can be divided by separating the class into small groups. They can look up three or four words each. When all the groups are finished, one member from each group can move to a different group to share this information. Continue sharing until all groups possess a complete list of vocabulary.

**Writing Assignment:** Ask students to select a painting made by Jacob Lawrence and write a descriptive analysis of it. Students should use their notes, Language Wheel, and word banks. Use the following four point rubric to evaluate their essays.

**4 points:** Contains a detailed description of the painting. The subject matter, color, and form are all thoroughly covered. Personal reflections are supported by examples from the painting. The essay follows all the conventions of English grammar and spelling.

**3 points:** Full description of the painting, but not as detailed as a 4 paper. Subject matter, color, and form are all considered. Some examples from the painting are used to support personal reflections. This essay contains some spelling and grammar errors, but is readable.

**2 points:** The painting is only partially described. Of the subject matter, color, and form, the student may have mentioned only one of these elements. The student may have written personal reflections but backed them up with no examples from the painting. This essay contains multiple spelling and grammatical errors.

**1 point:** The description of this painting is clearly incomplete. No mention is made of the elements of subject matter, form, or color. Personal reflections are not backed up by examples from the painting. The essay is practically unreadable.

## **Art Activity 2**

### **Creating a Painting Based on the Work of Jacob Lawrence and Personal Experience**

In this art lesson, students explore movement in their own lives and in the work of three artists: *The Migration Series* by Jacob Lawrence, portrayals of African Americans in *Telling Stories*, a book of paintings by Kerry James Marshall, and photographs of architecture by Camilo José Vergara in his book, *The New American Ghetto*. Movement, both metaphorical movement and the implied visual movement of people and things in still pictures, is a key element in Jacob's migration series. Vergara's photographs provide an enthralling account of the cataclysmic urban changes and movements taking place in cities across America today. Marshall implies potent psychological movement in his narrative paintings through juxtapositions of charged imagery, as if his subjects are witnessing both the creation and undoing of their own identities.

Invite discussion about different senses of movement in these different artworks. Help students to consider the personal, psychological consequences of their transitions over time in their social climates. Encourage students to make connections and comparisons from the artworks to their own experiences. They may refer to their past experiences of moving from one city or country to another, their movements through different social settings and expectations, as well as movements entailed in simply growing older.

Following the discussion, have students make half a dozen 8 1/2 x 11 inch sketches of architecture found in their neighborhood, portrayals of family members, family trees, family trips, or past migratory experiences, as well as the interiors of familiar rooms in homes they have lived in. At this point in the sketching exercise, students should not be overly concerned with ultimate meanings of their images, but rather they should render whatever comes to mind.

As students finish the sketches, they should lay them out on a table in a grid. They can move the sketches from place to place within the grid to establish different juxtapositions of rhythm and tone. Help students finalize a grid of juxtaposed sketches that emphasizes movement on both figurative and metaphorical levels.

Once students have decided on their juxtaposed structure of drawings, they can begin to consider how each of the drawings relates to the other drawings and the composition as a whole. Ask students to write down quick responses to each of their drawings. Why did I draw this image? What does it represent? How is it effected by the drawings that are next to it? Students can now continue to draw and bring out implicit meanings located in both the drawings and their arrangement. Ask students to also reconsider the work of Lawrence, Marshall, and Vergara, to see if they can adopt some of the artists' strategies to make clearer the implicit meanings located in their own drawings.

Once structures for the final paintings have been arranged, students can start working on paintings. Sheets of plywood or masonite cut to 17 x 33 inches will accommodate a grid of six drawings. Prime the plywood or masonite surface with white or black acrylic gesso. Students can transfer their sketches to the primed support either by repeating the sketches free-hand or by using carbon paper under the drawing they are transferring to the painting support. They can then begin painting with acrylic colors.

Encourage students to keep detailed passages to a minimum; the purpose of the painting is to capture a sense of movement through juxtaposition and relatively simple rendering as found in *The Migration Series*.

Well after the paintings are finished and dry, display them in a manner that enhances their presence. Facilitate an interpretive discussion of what the paintings depict and imply about the lives of the students and the movements they have experienced.

Supply List:

Sketch paper-- 8 1/2 x 11 inches, 10 sheets per student

Pencils and carbon paper

Rigid paint support, 17 x 33 inch--plywood or masonite work well

Acrylic brushes

Acrylic white or black gesso

Masking tape

Acrylic paint colors

To evaluate the paintings, use the following 4 point rubric:

4 points: The painting embodies movement in different senses. The juxtapositions of images within the painting capture meaning through movement. Color choice is bold and interesting. The painting is executed so that mistakes do not obstruct the viewing experience.

3 points: The painting maintains a sense of movement established by juxtapositions of different images, although it may not have a direct relationship to the meanings found in each image that comprise the painting. The colors and execution of the painting are relatively successful; a sense of movement is achieved, but it is not as striking as in a 4 painting.

2 points: The drawing activity was not transferred into the final painting. Its execution and color does little to convey a sense of movement. Mistakes in the painting detract from its viewing.

1 point: The painting is lackluster and lacks the juxtaposition of imagery and color to convey a sense of movement. The drawing activity was not transferred to the final painting. The execution of the painting is without effort. The painting seems incomplete.

### **Literature Activity 2** **Exploring Common Elements in Langston Hughes's Poems** **and Jacob Lawrence's Paintings**

Students can gain an understanding of how imagery conveys a theme by studying its use in two different media. By juxtaposing Langston Hughes's poetry with Jacob Lawrence's painting, students can contrast and compare how both artists utilized imagery in their work.

Hughes's monumental work *Harlem* explores the theme of the Black Urban experience in the Industrial Northeast during the 1920s. This piece, composed of a long series of poems, encompasses a wide swath of voices to cite this population's common experience. Students should begin exploring this collection by first reading its most famous poem, "Harlem."

## Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore--  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over--  
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Martin Luther King's speech, "I Have a Dream," is an excellent introduction to this poem. By referring to the spirit of King's "Dream," students may be able to empathize with Hughes's disappointment of a "dream deferred."

To understand the meaning of this poem is to comprehend its imagery. Take each separate image and analyze it using the language wheel. Ask why Hughes employs such negative imagery in the poem. Discuss the build-up of tension. Does it justify the final word "explode" in its last line?

After reading and discussing other poems in this collection, draw students' attention to strategies Hughes and Lawrence share in common in their works.

- Hughes's poetry seems more like dialogue stripped of the rhyme and meter common amongst his contemporaries. Analysis, however, reveals a complex pattern of rhythm and rhyme.

Jacob Lawrence's painting may seem simplistic at first viewing, but his images and patterns are carefully balanced.

- The points-of-view in Hughes's poetry range from someone cruising Harlem's night life to an old woman sitting on a stoop. He effects an every-person feeling to "Harlem," reflecting the view of a whole population.

The faces in Lawrence's paintings are often blank. He doesn't paint individuals so much as members of a culture.

- Hughes's environment is urban and often hostile. Lawrence's people on the move may pass through a rural landscape, but their destination mirrors Hughes's view of the city.

An advantage of teaching visual art and poetry simultaneously is that both picture and word lend to each other. Additional insight into Hughes's and Lawrence's work can be gained by examining their common themes and discovering how each artist manifests those themes through imagery. Writing Assignment: To reinforce students' understanding of the correlations between paintings and poems, and to provide an evaluation of their

progress, assign a critical essay in which the students compare one Jacob Lawrence painting to one Langston Hughes poem.

The following rubric may be used to evaluate the student essays:

4 points: Specifically addresses both works. Backs conclusions about the painting and the poem with examples. Definite point-of-view is developed, backed by reasonable examples and arguments. Follows conventions of spelling and grammar.

3 points: Makes clear point-of-view but does not always support arguments with examples. A balance in comparing and contrasting may not exist. Some examples are missing, and some grammar and spelling need to be corrected.

2 Points: Point-of-view is not developed. Essay is somewhat disorganized. Many spelling and grammatical errors exist. Supporting examples from painting and poem are few.

1 Point: Point-of-view cannot be determined. No examples of the painting and poem are included. Essay is difficult to read due to grammatical and spelling errors.

### **Literature Activity 3**

#### **Creating a Poem Based upon Critical Reflection of Each Student's Painting**

Bring students together so that they may view their paintings in completed or semi-completed form. Have students view their paintings and write a descriptive essay using the format of Literature Activity 1. Instead of writing about an artwork found outside of themselves, students will now have a chance to bring their critical reflections to their own work.

Following this group exercise, have students edit their critical essays by underlining the most significant words and lines. Have students then write their essays into short lines similar to poem form. Have them cut these lines apart so that they exist now as singular units. Using magazines and periodicals, let students cut out words and ideas relevant to their poem and critical essay. The students can then splice together their poem lines replacing key words and concepts with their media cutouts. This is essentially a "found" poem; the result should look somewhat like a ransom note. Once the poem has been rearranged into its final form, students should paste their clippings onto an 8 1/2 x 11 inch tag board or substantial art paper. Display the poems along with the final paintings. The following 3 point rubric may be used to evaluate the poems:

3 points: The poem is based upon specifics of the painting. The poem compliments the painting. Use of media cutouts enhances the meaning of the poem.

2 points: The poem's imagery does not always correspond with the painting. Media cutouts may simply substitute words as opposed to enhancing the themes of the poem.

1 point: Student clearly does not exhibit understanding of the poem's intent. There is little or no correspondence between the painting and the poem.

**Final Art and Literature Activity:  
Bringing Critical Reflection to Students' Own Creative Work**

To summarize the creative, descriptive, and critical components of the unit, and to bring closure with the display of the students' work, assign a critical essay based upon the painting and poem. Unlike the previous descriptive essay based only on the students' paintings, this essay takes into consideration both the painting and poem, allowing students to draw comparisons similar to those in the Literature Activity 2. In addition to writing formally and critically about the painting and poem, encourage students to comment on their own motivations and choices involved in the making of their own works. In writing this critical essay, students will have come full circle from experiencing art work as a phenomenon outside of themselves to one in which they have participation on many levels of thinking and creating. To evaluate this final essay, refer to the rubric in Literature Activity 2.

### **Bibliography and Videography**

- DeCarava, Roy, and Langston Hughes. *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. Washington D. C.: Howard University Press, 1985.
- Galassi, Peter. *Roy DeCarava Retrospective*. Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY: Abrams Press, 1996.
- Lawrence, Jacob. *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series*, Elizabeth Hutton Turner, ed. Rappahannock Press: Emeryville, CA. 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Harriet and the Promised Land*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1993.  
(A children's book, reading level of ages 4-8, with good reproductions of Lawrence's work.)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Great Migration: An American Story*. NY: Harpercollins Juvenile Books, 1998.  
(A juvenile book, reading level, ages 9-12, with good quality reproductions of Lawrence's work.)
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Jacob Lawrence: An Intimate Portrait*. VHS video, Home Vision.
- Marshall, James. *Telling Stories: Selected Paintings of Kerry James Marshall*. Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, 1994.
- National Center of Afro-American Artists. *Five famous Black artists presented by the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists: Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Horace Pippin, Charles White, Hale Woodruff*. National Center of Afro-American Artists: Boston, 1970.
- Vergara, Camilio José. *The New American Ghetto*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995.
- Witherspoon, Roger Wm. *Martin Luther King. "I Have a Dream."* Garden City, NJ: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1985.