Lesson Plan: African American Literature in Art
Department of Museum Education

Suggested Grade Level: 9-10
Estimated Time: Two class periods

Introduction
In this lesson plan, students compare art and literature by examining a contemporary painting by Glenn Ligon and the essay by James Baldwin that inspired it. Students then write an essay about a personal experience that relates to the theme of being an “outsider.”

Lesson Objectives
• Identify the expressive qualities of mood and emotion in pictorial expression
• Draw comparisons between literature and art
• Gain a deeper understanding of social history by comparing it to personal experience

Key Terms
• the West
• disesteemed

Instructional Materials
• James Baldwin’s “Stranger in the Village” from Notes of a Native Son, 1955 (or later edition)
• Frederick Douglass; “The Hypocrisy of American Slavery”
• Pencils
• Paper
Procedures

Discussion

• Have students examine and discuss Glenn Ligon’s Stranger in the Village #13. Help them grasp the size of the original work by imagining how much space it would fill on a classroom wall. Ask students to imagine how the size of the work would affect them if they were standing before it. Make a list of words that describe the mood of the painting (dark, somber, scary, angry).

• Explain to students that the text in the painting comes from an essay called “Stranger in the Village” written by James Baldwin in 1953. Introduce Baldwin and have the students read his essay. Concentrate the discussion on the passages in Ligon’s painting by asking the following questions:
  o What did Baldwin encounter during his stay in Switzerland?
  o Why did he go back there when the villagers made him uncomfortable?
  o How did Baldwin’s experience in Switzerland help him to understand the relationship between blacks and whites in America?

• Have students return to Ligon’s painting and discuss it in more detail by asking:
  o Why do you think the artist made the text difficult to read?
  o How does the mood of the painting compare to that of Baldwin’s account?
  o What message about the current situation of African Americans in the United States might Ligon be conveying in this work?

Activity

Encourage students to think of a time in their own lives when they felt like outsiders. Ask them to write a three-page journal entry about this experience, how they felt, how they responded to the situation, and whether or not the experience changed them. Encourage students to use descriptive language.

Evaluation

Base students’ evaluation on their written work and participation in discussion.

Follow-Up

Ask each student to incorporate elements of their journal entry into a drawing or painting. Encourage them to arrange words and sentences in any manner on the page while considering how color can enhance the meaning of the text.
Glossary

disesteemed (adj)
held in low regard; thought unfavorably of

West (n)
the Western part of the world, primarily Europe and America, as distinguished from the East, or the Orient

Illinois Learning Standards
English Language Arts: 1-3
Fine Arts: 25