

May 31, 2021 marks 100 years since the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. The Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma was once a thriving Black community, destroyed in less than 24 hours by white rioters. Like many events involving racially motivated violence, the massacre was deliberately covered up for many years. We will explore *Black Wall Street* by Noah Davis to uncover the history and to learn about storytelling through art. This activity features a work of art from *Black Refractions: Highlights from The Studio Museum in Harlem*, a special exhibition at the Frye Art Museum.



Noah Davis. *Black Wall Street*, 2008. Oil and acrylic on canvas. 60 x 62 in. The Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of David Hoberman 2014.17.2.  
© The Estate of Noah Davis

## COMPLEX CONVERSATIONS

*Black Wall Street* addresses a devastating moment in American history driven by racially motivated violence. Before you begin this lesson, here are suggestions on how to lead complex conversations. When discussing topics such as racially motivated violence, it is important to create a safe learning environment for students. One way to achieve that is to provide content warnings. Students who have been exposed to various traumas and violence may be uniquely negatively impacted by content that relates to these experiences. Referred to as “triggers,” this exposure can cause uncontrollable flashbacks, make the student feel as though they are physically reliving the experience, and may otherwise cause significant distress. As educators, we may not be able to guarantee a safe or harm-free classroom, but we can attempt to minimize the negative impacts that our classes can have on students.

As part of the recovery process, many people develop tools for managing exposure to potentially triggering content. Such tools can only be activated when we give them advance notice about class content. Therefore, educators are advised to offer content warnings (also called trigger warnings) on trauma-related content (e.g., depictions of sexual assault, child abuse, physical assault, racially motivated violence, abuse, and suicide).

### Best Practices for Trigger Warnings

- Signal potentially triggering images/readings/lectures/videos in your curriculum; this allows students to prepare ahead of time to engage with the material in a meaningful way.
- At the start of class, let students know what to expect (e.g., a film that shows \_\_\_\_\_); this will also help students prepare themselves.
- Normalize self-care by encouraging students to step out when needed, to get water, or to take a break.
- Remind students of any support services that may be available.

Before leading conversations with your students, reflect on your own identity and be cognizant of how that identity shapes your personal perspective and biases. Prepare your students for these conversations with the following techniques, which are adapted from The Studio Museum in Harlem presentation at the 2017 National Arts Education Association Museum Education Division Pre-Conference.

- At the beginning of the discussion or visit, set group expectations of a respectful dialogue.
- Honor individual experiences and avoid stereotyping with “I” statements.
- When possible, begin with less controversial information and build to more complex topics.
- Encourage students to step up and step back—create space for those to speak who do not normally do so and encourage thoughtful listening.
- If a student says something concerning, try to ask for more information to find an underlying issue. Create an environment in which the group can unpack the statement, to take the spotlight off the student who voiced this and help others who may feel similarly to process.
- Allow time for quiet reflection and check in with students after difficult conversations.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

**Take a moment to look closely at this artwork on your own. Here are questions for you to consider before leading conversations with students.**

- What is going on in this work? What do you see that makes you say that?
- There are a number of figures in this painting. What do you think they might be thinking or feeling?
- How would you describe the mood that the artist has created in this artwork?
- What colors do you see in this painting? In what ways do they contribute to the mood of the artwork?
- Why do you think the artist chose to depict this moment?
- If you could add background music to this image, what might it sound like?
- How is this painting relevant to our present time?

## ABOUT BLACK WALL STREET AND THE TULSA RACE MASSACRE

After World War I, much of the United States saw an increase in racial tensions. The city of Tulsa, Oklahoma was growing rapidly as part of an oil boom, but it was also highly segregated. By 1921, Greenwood was a thriving African American neighborhood in Tulsa. Greenwood included a business district and a residential area referred to as “Black Wall Street.” In June 1921, nearly all of Greenwood was destroyed as part of the Tulsa Race Massacre.

On May 30, 1921, a young Black man named Dick Rowland was riding in an elevator with a white woman named Sarah Page. Details of what happened vary from person to person, and rumors about the incident traveled quickly among Tulsa’s white community. Rowland was arrested the following day for assault. A front-page story in the Tulsa Tribune on May 31 contributed to a confrontation between the city’s Black and white communities outside the courthouse. Shots were fired and the outnumbered African Americans retreated to Greenwood. On June 1, Greenwood was looted and burned by white residents, destroying homes, businesses, schools, churches, and other community spaces. Ultimately, 35 city blocks were in ruins, more than 800 people were treated for injuries, over 8,000 people were left without homes, and historians believe as many as 300 people may have died.

For years following the Tulsa Race Massacre, news of what happened was covered up. As a result, this event was rarely mentioned in history books, taught in schools, or even discussed. In 2001, an official Race Riot Commission was formed to review what happened during the event. The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission was formed in 2016 to leverage the rich history surrounding the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre by facilitating actions, activities, and events that memorialize the massacre and educate all citizens.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in Seattle, Noah Davis (1983–2015) is known for his large-scale paintings depicting shadowy, isolated figures against rich color fields with dripping textures and mixed media installations. After dropping out of New York’s Cooper Union, Davis exhibited internationally. An avid student of art history, his sources of inspiration were wide-ranging, including family photographs, people in his life, pop culture, and obscure literary sources.

In 2012, he and his wife, Karon Davis, founded The Underground Museum in Los Angeles. Located in the working class neighborhood of Arlington Heights, The Underground Museum is an independent art space that is dedicated to ensuring access to contemporary art and ideas for all.

Learn more about *Black Wall Street* on The Studio Museum in Harlem’s website: <https://studiomuseum.org/collection-item/black-wall-street>

## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

With works in a variety of mediums by nearly eighty artists dating from the 1920s to the present, *Black Refractions: Highlights from The Studio Museum in Harlem* presents close to a century of creative achievements by artists of African descent. Celebrating The Studio Museum in Harlem’s role as a site for the dynamic exchange of ideas about art and society, this landmark exhibition proposes a plurality of narratives of Black artistic production and multiple approaches to understanding these works. Organized by the American Federation of Arts and The Studio Museum in Harlem, the exhibition reveals the breadth and expansive growth of the Studio Museum’s permanent collection and includes iconic pieces by artists such as Barkley Hendricks, Faith Ringgold, Lorna Simpson, Alma Thomas, and James VanDerZee, as well as Seattle’s own Jacob Lawrence and Noah Davis, among many others.

The Studio Museum in Harlem has served as a nexus for artists of African descent locally, nationally, and internationally since its founding in 1968—a watershed year that saw the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, major demonstrations against the Vietnam War, and Tommie Smith and John Carlos’s Black Power salute at the Summer Olympics. The Museum’s founders were a diverse group of artists, activists, and philanthropists, all committed to creating a working space for artists and a forum in which communities could view and interpret art in Harlem. At the same time, they sought to foreground the work of Black artists amid larger discussions of exclusionary practices in cultural institutions across the United States.

The Studio Museum’s Artist-in-Residence program—providing the “Studio” in the Museum’s name—was established as an opportunity for emerging artists to create new work in the heart of Harlem, a neighborhood historically associated with Black cultural production. The program has supported many distinguished creators at decisive stages in their careers, including Chakaia Booker, Jordan Casteel, David Hammons, Kerry James Marshall, Wangechi Mutu, Mickalene Thomas, and Kehinde Wiley, all of whom have work included in the exhibition. *Black Refractions* will allow audiences across the country to engage more deeply with this important collection and provide additional contexts in which we can understand its powerful works.

## ACTIVITY

Through close-looking and open-ended discussion, students will spend time with *Black Wall Street* by Noah Davis from the exhibition *Black Refractions: Highlights from The Studio Museum in Harlem*. In particular, this is an opportunity to dive into the history of Black Wall Street and the events that led up to the Tulsa Race Massacre in 1921. Together, we will identify how artwork discussion builds 21st century skills before exploring ways to use art as inspiration for storytelling.

### Materials

- Image of *Black Wall Street* by Noah Davis
- Visual Thinking Strategies resources
- Elements of a Narrative Arc worksheet
- The Story Spine worksheet

### Instructions

1. As a warm-up activity, start with a close-looking exercise for this artwork. Using Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), you can help students interact with artwork with a focus on narrative. With the open-ended questions that make up VTS, you can help students build an understanding of the artwork. Open-ended questions allow students to hint at narratives that might be happening in this painting without limiting their response. This exercise will help hone critical thinking, observation, analytical, and communication skills. When leading the artwork discussion, keep in mind to:
  - Listen carefully to each comment.
  - Point to features described in the artwork through the discussion.
  - Paraphrase all comments while remaining neutral.
  - Link related comments together to form connections and model building on the ideas of others.

Plan to spend at least 15 minutes for the artwork discussion. Since you want students to create a narrative arc using only visual evidence, let students know that you will only share the artwork title, artist, and additional background information on this artwork at the end of the activity. Ask students the following questions:

- What is going on this picture?
  - What do you see that makes you say that?
  - What more can we find?
2. Now that you've had a chance to build an understanding of what might be going on in the painting, focus the discussion on what might have happened just before the scene that is depicted. Here are some questions for students to consider:
    - There are many figures in this painting. Focus on one or two of them. What are they doing in the painting? What do you think they were doing right before this scene? What might they be reacting to? What might they be thinking or feeling? What do you see that makes you say that?
    - What do you notice about the structures included in this image?
    - What other details can you find in the painting?
    - Why do you think the artist chose to depict this moment?
    - How is this painting relevant to our present time?
  3. After visually analyzing the painting without giving away the title and background information on the artwork, have students explore what might happen next by creating a **narrative arc**, also known as a story arc, which is the path that a story follows. Ask students to use visual evidence from the painting to back up their ideas. Introduce the concept of a narrative arc with the following resources:
    - A traditional narrative arc has five elements: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.
    - In his book *The Seven Basic Plots*, Christopher Booker outlines seven main archetypal narrative arcs: overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage and return, comedy, tragedy, and rebirth.

*Adapted from "Learn About Narrative Arcs: Definition, Examples, and How to Create a Narrative Arc in Your Writing" by MasterClass*
  4. As students begin shaping their narrative arc, ask them to think critically about the future that they would like to build for the story that is being told in the artwork. Review the following steps on how to build a narrative arc:
    - Choose an archetypal narrative arc. What is the story you want to tell? What is the main character experiencing?
    - Identify your beginning, middle, and end. Who are the main characters? What are they doing? When, where, and why are they doing it? What is all of this building up to?
    - Plug your events into a narrative arc. Use a visual diagram to map out the narrative arc and place the events of

your story along the arc (see attached worksheet). This provides an overview of your story so that you can quickly identify problems or fill in gaps.

- Adjust as needed. Every story is different. Stay flexible to see where your story goes.

*Adapted from "Learn About Narrative Arcs: Definition, Examples, and How to Create a Narrative Arc in Your Writing" by MasterClass*

5. Another technique for creating a story is the concept of "The Story Spine." The Synergy Theater's Artistic Director Kenn Adams originally developed this as an improvisational theatre technique for giving structure to a story, but it has since been adapted by many others, including Pixar. Have students lay out their story using The Story Spine (see attached worksheet).
  - Once upon a time there was \_\_\_\_\_. Every day, \_\_\_\_\_. One day \_\_\_\_\_. Because of that, \_\_\_\_\_. Because of that, \_\_\_\_\_. Until finally \_\_\_\_\_. And ever since that day \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Once your students have created narrative arcs, share information about the artwork and artist along with the history of Black Wall Street and the Tulsa Race Massacre. You may also want to share some of the additional resources outlined below. Close with a future-focused discussion with your students, asking them the following questions:
  - How is this event in history relevant to our present time?
  - What might the Greenwood community need in order to heal from the trauma? What kind of future do you want to see for the Greenwood community?
  - How might you be involved in creating that future?

## EXTENSION IDEAS

- Illustrate the story. Have students create a drawing or painting based on their narrative arc.
- Write a short story or screenplay based on the class discussion.
- Act out the story. Have students create costumes and props, develop a script, and run rehearsals. Students can perform during class time or record the performance as a video.
- Connect this activity to a history lesson on the Tulsa Race Massacre, focusing on the analysis of primary source photos and documents.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Noah Davis

<https://theunderground-museum.org>

### Tulsa Race Massacre

<https://www.tulsaahistory.org>

<https://www.tulsa2021.org>

<https://learninglab.si.edu/q/r/5861510>

<https://www.alvinailey.org/performances/repertory/greenwood>

### Narrative Arc

<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-are-the-elements-of-a-narrative-arc-and-how-do-you-create-one-in-writing#what-is-the-difference-between-narrative-arc-and-plot>

<https://www.aerogrammestudio.com/2013/06/05/back-to-the-story-spine/>

<https://www.curiographic.com/blog/2017/2/18/jumpstart-your-story-with-the-story-spine>

### Visual Thinking Strategies

<https://vtshome.org>

[https://www.educationworld.com/a\\_lesson/teaching\\_visual\\_thinking\\_strategies.shtml](https://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/teaching_visual_thinking_strategies.shtml)

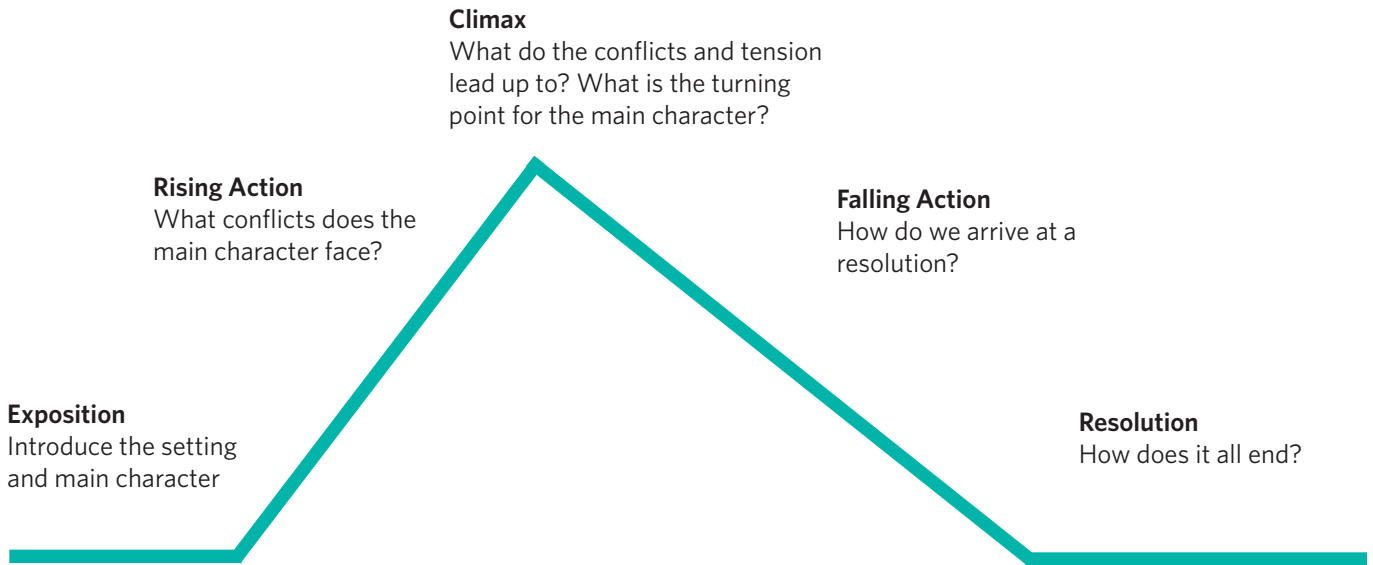
<https://www.nytimes.com/column/learning-whats-going-on-in-this-picture>

<https://youtu.be/mKb4uuRAYmM>

Visit [fryefromhome.blog](https://fryefromhome.blog) for more activities and inspiration.

## ELEMENTS OF A NARRATIVE ARC

Here is a basic illustration of a narrative or story arc. Map out your story below.



<b>Exposition</b>	
<b>Rising Action</b>	
<b>Climax</b>	
<b>Falling Action</b>	
<b>Resolution</b>	

## THE STORY SPINE

The Story Spine offers a structured formula for developing a story. Complete the sentences below to create a story. Think of each step as a sentence starter to help you map out your story.

The Story Spine	Structure	Function
Once upon a time...	Beginning	The world of the story is introduced and the main character's routine is established.
Every day...		
But one day...	The Event	The main character breaks the routine.
Because of that...	Middle	There are dire consequences for having broken the routine. It is unclear if the main character will come out alright in the end.
Because of that...		
Until finally...	The Climax	The main character embarks on a success or failure
And ever since then...	End	The main character succeeds or fails and a new routine is established.

*Adapted from aerogrammestudio.com*

Once upon a time there was \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Every day, \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

But one day \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Because of that, \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Because of that, \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Until finally \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

And ever since then \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## STANDARDS

### National Core Arts Standards

#### RESPONDING

Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

#### CONNECTING

Anchor Standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historic context to deepen understanding.

### Common Core State Standards: English Language Arts

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.5

Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1

Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.4

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

### Washington Social Studies Learning Standards, Grades 9-12

H2: Understands and analyzes causal factors that have shaped major events in history.

H3: Understands that there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of historical events.

H4: Understands how historical events inform analysis of contemporary issues and events.



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*Black Refractions: Highlights from The Studio Museum in Harlem* is organized by the American Federation of Arts and The Studio Museum in Harlem. This exhibition is curated by Connie H. Choi, Associate Curator of the Permanent Collection at The Studio Museum in Harlem. The presentation at the Frye Art Museum is coordinated by Amanda Donnan, Chief Curator, with David Strand, Associate Curator.



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