



Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

The American Dream Lesson Plan

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High School; 1-2 Periods

Introduction:

By comparing Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" to Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, students will investigate the American dream as a consistent theme in literature, and will describe in words and in images their own American dream.

Learning Objectives:

Compare and contrast two mid-20th century texts for content, theme and the author's experience in America.

Guiding Questions:

- What is the American dream?
- What obstacles exist within different populations towards achieving that dream?

Common Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9

Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

Materials:

- *Poem v. Play: The American Voice* handout (attached)
- *Compare the Dream* handout (attached)
- *What Do You Think?* handout (attached)
- *My American Dream* handout (attached)
- *Translate Your American Dream* handout (attached)

Classroom Activities:

- **Lesson Activity One: Comparing a Poem to a Play**
 - Compare “Harlem” to *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.
- **Lesson Activity Two: Background on the Authors**
 - Learn historical information about the texts.
- **Lesson Activity Three: Diving Deeper**
 - Make assertions about how they think and feel about the texts.
- **Lesson Activity Four: Personal Connections**
 - Identify and connect with the theme of the American Dream.
- **Lesson Activity Five: Written Word to Artistic Form**
 - Students will create an original poem or short scene portraying their own obstacles.

Lesson Activity One: Comparing a Poem to a Play

(Estimated time: 10 minutes)

Using the handout *Poem v. Play: The American Voice*, students should work in pairs to read aloud both the poem and the scene from the play. Students should alternate lines of the poem and assign parts of Martha and George when reading the play.

In their pairs, students should discuss:

- What are the differences and similarities between the two texts?
- What emotions or experiences are evident in both?
- Can you identify with one or both of these texts?
- Which text did you like more? Why?

Lesson Activity Two: Background on the Authors

(Estimated time: 5-7 minutes)

In those same pairs, one student should read the Langston Hughes paragraphs, and one should read the Edward Albee ones, alternating reading aloud.

Lesson Activity Three: Diving Deeper & Discussion

(Estimated time: 15-20 minutes)

Individually, students should complete at least one section of the *What Do You Think?* handout (either the poem or the play, or both if they want to and time permits).

As a class, discuss the responses the students listed on their *What Do You Think?* handout. As they discuss, look for opposing viewpoints and ask for evidence from the text to support the opinions.

- Ask students to define the term “The American Dream.” On the board, note aspects of the definitions and connotations.
- Ask students if the “American Dream” is still possible. If so, is it easy to achieve? If not, why?
- Then, ask them how easy/difficult it is for different people or groups to achieve that dream. List obstacles people face towards achieving the American Dream.

Lesson Activity Four: Personal Connections

(Estimated time: 15 minutes, or homework)

If time permits, students should complete the *My American Dream* handout. Otherwise, this can be assigned as homework with the accompanying handout, *Translate Your American Dream*.

Assessment:

In small groups of 3-5, have students share their work. Students can read their own poems aloud, or have another student read it. Students who wrote a scene can cast the parts or read one themselves. Encourage students in the small groups to ask each other:

- How are you alike in your dreams? How are you different?

- How does knowing each other's American dream help you to have empathy for each other's experience in America?

Poem Vs. Play: The American Voice

Read these two texts aloud with a partner, then go to the next page to make comparisons.

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| <p><i>Harlem</i> by Langston Hughes (1951) (Read alternating lines)</p> | <p><i>Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</i> by Edward Albee (1962) (Read alternating parts)</p> |
| <p>What happens to a dream deferred?</p> <p>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?</p> <p>Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.</p> <p><i>Or does it explode?</i></p> | <p>(Martha and George are married. This scene is condensed.)</p> <p>MARTHA: Well, Georgie-boy had lots of big ambitions, in spite of something funny in this past...Which Georgie-boy here turned into a novel...His first attempt and also his last...</p> <p>GEORGE: I warn you, Martha.</p> <p>MARTHA: But Daddy took a look at Georgie's novel...</p> <p>GEORGE: I will not tolerate this!</p> <p>MARTHA: And Daddy said...Look here, kid, you don't think for a second I'm going to let you publish this crap, do you? Not on your life, baby...not while you're teaching here... You publish that book and you're out...on your ass!</p> <p>GEORGE: I will not be made a mock of!</p> |

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| | <p>MARTHA: He caved in is what he did. He came home and he threw the book in the fireplace and burned it!</p> <p>GEORGE: I'LL KILL YOU!</p> |
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Compare Texts

What do we know about these two works and their authors?

(Alternate reading these aloud with your partner)

| | “Harlem” by Langston Hughes | <i>Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</i> by Edward Albee |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| The Writer | A poem written by an African-American, male poet in 1950. Langston Hughes’ life and work were enormously important in shaping the artistic contributions of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. He “differed from most of his predecessors among black poets . . . in that he addressed his poetry to the people, specifically to black people.” (Donald B. Gibson, <i>Modern Black Poets: A Collection of Critical Essays</i> , Prentice Hall, 1973) Hughes sought to faithfully portray the nuances of black life and its frustrations. | A play written by a European-American, male playwright in 1962. Edward Albee was adopted into a very wealthy but distant New England family. He depicted their world in his plays, requiring that his casts be played by white actors. In his plays, he portrayed “the gap between self-delusion and truth and the roiling desperation beneath the façade of contemporary life.” (Bruce Weber, “Edward Albee, Trenchant Playwright Who Laid Bare Modern Life, Dies at 88,” <i>The New York Times</i> , September 16, 2016) |
| The Title | The title, “Harlem”, refers to the African-American neighborhood in northern Manhattan, in New York City. Historically, Harlem was an epicenter of music, dance and art, including blues and jazz of The Harlem Renaissance. Later, it gave birth to soul and hip-hop. | Virginia Woolf was a British writer in the early 20 th century who wrote about feeling limited by her gender. She suffered from depression and ultimately committed suicide. Her books, like <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> , often show women putting on a façade to get through their lives. Albee said in a 1966 interview that, “...Of course, who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf means who’s afraid of the big bad wolf . . . who’s afraid of living life without false illusions.” |
| Structure & Content | There is a rhyme scheme, making it sing-songy, musical and light. However, the content is serious and ultimately threatening. | The language of the play is modern and was shocking to its 1962 audience for its vulgarity, sexuality and realism. Neither marriage, nor women, had been portrayed like this before. |

What Do You Think?

(Complete this on your own.)

“Harlem” by Langston Hughes

Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? by Edward Albee

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| I think this poem is about: | I think this passage of the play is about: |
| The feeling I get from reading this poem is: | The feeling I get from reading this scene is: |
| What makes this poem uniquely American? | How is the American dream portrayed here? |
| Whose experience is Hughes writing about? Why <i>wouldn’t</i> dreams come true for his subjects? | What does Martha think about George’s novel? What does George feel about it? |

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My American Dream Is...

What is your American dream? Who is part of your dream? What will be gained or lost from achieving it? Where will it take place? Are there people who are proud of you? How do they express their pride? Where and how do you live? How will your American dream impact other people? How will your dream affect the Earth or future generations?

The things that could keep me from fulfilling this dream are: (list a minimum of 5 obstacles that could hold you back)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Translate Your Dream Into Literature

Option 1: Write a short scene between you and someone who is an obstacle to you achieving your American dream.

In this scene you are the protagonist (main character) and the person opposing you is the antagonist. Is it possible to portray both characters' side of the story? Try to make us feel empathy for both characters.

Try to format your scene like the one in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Option 2: Write a poem about the barriers you face in achieving your American dream. Using your description on the My American Dream Is... handout, select three words that have great feeling or imagery. Build your poem around those three words.