

### Overview

This lesson explores the connection between history and the arts. Students will analyze three pieces by Kansan Gordon Parks and identify the ways his early life influenced his later artistic endeavors. They will study the theme of discrimination as it applies to Kansas culture today. This lesson is designed to take two class periods, but can be adjusted as necessary.

### Standards

Current standards can be found on [kshs.org](http://kshs.org).

### Objectives

#### Content:

- The student will be able to explain how discrimination experienced by Gordon Parks in his childhood in Kansas affected his literary and artistic work.

#### Skills:

- The student will be able to identify an author's point of view.
- The student will be able to create a poem, story, or illustration depicting discrimination in Kansas today.

### Essential Questions

- Why would the place a person grows up have an impact on the things that person creates?

## Activities

This activity uses the following *Read Kansas!* cards:

- **Gordon Parks: A Kansas Original**
- “**Kansas Land**”/*The Learning Tree*/*Ella Watson*

### Day 1

1. Introduce the idea of using novels and poetry to explore topics in history. Some authors incorporate their personal life experiences into their writing, so do some artists. Explain that Gordon Parks used his experiences with racism and discrimination in many of his writings and photographs.
2. Provide each student with the **Gordon Parks: A Kansas Original** *Read Kansas!* card to read for background information, as well as a copy of the worksheet by the same name. To shorten the lesson, use the questions from the worksheet for a class discussion. Otherwise, have students use their completed worksheets to share ideas in a class discussion.
3. Have students select their preference to work with prose, poetry, or photographs then provide them with the following materials. Each student will only be responsible for one worksheet activity.
  - a. Students will read “Kansas Land” and complete the **Analyzing Literature** worksheet.
  - b. Students will read a brief excerpt from *The Learning Tree* and complete the **Analyzing Literature** worksheet.
  - c. Students will examine the *Ella Watson* photograph and complete the **Analyzing A Photograph** worksheet.

### Day 2

1. Bring the class back together.
2. Select a student to read aloud the poem “Kansas Land.” Review the worksheet questions and ask students who worked with the poem to share their answers. Write their answers on the board for each question.
  - a. What is the author’s point of view?
  - b. Why did he feel this way?
  - c. Was there anything he liked about Kansas?
3. Ask for volunteers to read their poems to the class.
4. Repeat activity with the excerpt from *The Learning Tree*.
5. Share the photograph of Ella Watson so everyone can see it. Review the worksheet questions and ask students to share their answers. Write their answers on the board for each question.
  - a. Describe what you see in this picture.
  - b. Why do you think Parks chose to photograph *Ella Watson* in front of an American flag?
  - c. How do you think people reacted to this photograph?
  - d. If you have time, show the class a picture of the Grant Wood painting *American Gothic*.  
Ask students to compare and contrast the two images.
6. Ask for volunteers to share their illustrations.
7. Ask students to identify the major themes that are present in Gordon Parks’s work based on their study of his poetry, prose, and photography. Write their answers on the board.
8. Have students answer the following question. “How does Gordon Parks’s description of Kansas conflict with the image of Kansas during the territorial period (1854-1861)?” They should be able to identify three ways Kansas was promoted in the territorial period and three ways Kansas was described by Gordon Parks. This can be done as a class discussion or as an individual activity and used as an assessment.

**Extended activity:**

What Civil Rights events occurred during Gordon Parks's lifetime? Create an illustrated timeline of the historical events. Include events in Gordon Parks's life as part of the timeline.

## Assessment

1. Evaluate the students' ability to complete the **Gordon Parks: A Kansas Original** worksheet.
2. Evaluate the students' ability to complete the **Analyzing Literature** or **Analyzing a Photograph** worksheet.
3. Evaluate the students' ability to answer the question "How does Gordon Parks's description of Kansas conflict with the image of Kansas during the territorial period(1854-1861)?"

## For the Teacher

If you are using the textbook, *The Kansas Journey*, this lesson can be used with pages 257 and 265. Other primary sources are available at [kansasmemory.org](http://kansasmemory.org).

Answers:

1. **Analyzing Literature** worksheet—"Kansas Land"
  - a. What is the author's point of view? *He is writing about Kansas as he remembers it from living there.*
  - b. Why did he feel this way? *He is black and faced discrimination, racism, and hatred in Kansas.*
  - c. Was there anything he liked about Kansas? *Yes, he remembered many sites, sounds, and smells that made him happy.*
2. **Analyzing Literature** worksheet—*The Learning Tree*
  - a. What is the author's point of view? *He is writing about his childhood during a time of racial segregation.*
  - b. Why did he feel this way? *He is black and faced discrimination. Even though it was not the law it was the practice in his town that African Americans and whites had separate places and opportunities.*
  - c. Was there anything he liked about Kansas? *He could play with all children and go to the movies.*
3. **Analyzing A Photograph** worksheet.—*Ella Watson*
  - a. Describe what you see in this picture. *A tired black woman. You can tell she is a cleaning lady because she is holding a broom and a mop.*
  - b. Why do you think Parks chose to photograph Ella Watson in front of an American flag? *To remind the viewer that even in America, "the land of the free," not all people were free or equal.*
  - c. How do you think people reacted to this photograph? *It would probably have depended on whether they were white or black. White people at the time may not have liked seeing America portrayed as racist. Black people at the time may have thought it was a good example of showing discrimination in America.*
4. How does Gordon Parks's description of Kansas conflict with the image of Kansas during the territorial period (1854-1861)? *During the territorial period Kansans were fighting against the spread of slavery. They raided Missouri to free slaves. Lane's Trail was a major escape route for the Underground Railroad. Kansas Territory was promoted by abolitionists as a "free" state. John Brown, a major abolitionist, lived in Kansas and helped slaves escape.*  
*Gordon Parks described a racist Kansas. Blacks were only able to get low paying jobs. They lived in fear. They were victims of racial violence.*

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Resources for this lesson are from:

- Kansas Historical Society collections
- Library of Congress
- Gordon Parks Center for Culture and Diversity



Name \_\_\_\_\_

## Analyzing Literature

Title of document: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is the author's point of view?

2. Why did Parks feel this way?

3. Was there anything he liked about Kansas?

4. What story/poem would you write to illustrate discrimination in Kansas today? Do so in the space provided below.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

## Analyzing a Photograph

1. Describe what you see in this picture.

2. Why do you think Parks chose to photograph Ella Watson in front of an American flag?

3. How do you think people reacted to this photograph?

4. What picture would you take to illustrate discrimination in Kansas? Draw a picture in the space provided below.

