

Lesson 1: Grades 8 & Up

The Invisibility of LGBT People in History: “Peculiar Disposition of the Eyes”

Overview

This lesson explores the ways in which LGBT people, events and issues have been made invisible in mainstream accounts of history. In the first half of the lesson, students reflect on excerpts from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* to explore the impact of invisibility on people and as a jumping off point for researching how different groups have been historically marginalized in society. In the second part of the lesson, students participate in a history matching game and listen to LGBT oral histories that increase their awareness of significant LGBT people and events, and the ways in which these topics have been erased from the historical record.

[NOTE: This lesson explores LGBT issues in an open and direct way. Given the absence of this topic in the curriculum and the disproportionate rates of anti-LGBT bullying and harassment, it is important to educate students about these issues. When discussing any new or sensitive topic, however, there is the potential for some students to react in stereotypical or disrespectful ways. It is therefore imperative that educators carefully review the lesson, assess students’ maturity and readiness to engage in the lesson prior to implementation, and establish clear parameters with students that will ensure safe and constructive dialogue. See “[Establishing a Safe Learning Environment](#)” and “[Creating an Anti-Bias Learning Environment](#)” for guidelines on building safe forums for discussing sensitive issues.]

Objectives

- Students will analyze literary excerpts and make “text to self” connections.
- Students will research historically marginalized groups in society.
- Students will increase their awareness of the ways in which LGBT people have been made invisible in history.
- Students will learn about historically significant LGBT people, topics and events.

Time

2 hours; if time is limited, complete Parts III and IV only (50 mins.)

Requirements

Handouts and Resources:

- (Optional) [Excerpts from Invisible Man](#) (one per student)
- [Examples of Marginalized Groups in Society](#) (one copy)
- [History Match-Up Historical Figures](#) (one set per small group)
- [History Match-Up Biographies](#) (one per small group)
- [History Match-Up Answer Key](#) (one copy)

Other Material:

- Unheard Voices [audio interviews and transcripts](#) and [interview backgrounders](#)
- Chart paper, markers, scissors
- Computer, speakers, Internet Access

Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.
- Prepare quotes (see Part I #1 and Part II #1).

Key Words

Civil rights
Discrimination
Disposition
Invisibility
LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender)
Marginalized
Oral history
Resentment
Stereotype
Suffrage

- Using the [History Match-Up Historical Figures](#) handout, create a set of History Match-Up cards for each small group (see Part III #2). Make several photocopies, cut them into separate “cards” and mix them up. Group each set of cards so there is a complete set of historical figures for each small group.
- Make a copy of the [History Match-Up Biographies](#) for each small group (see Part III #2).
- Prepare to play [audio interviews](#) (see Part IV #2).

Techniques and Skills

analyzing primary documents, cooperative group work, critical thinking, forming opinions, historical understanding, large and small group discussion, listening skills, reading skills, research skills, writing skills

Procedures

Part I: Exploring the Impact of Invisibility (30 minutes)

1. Post the following quote from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (but do not identify the source). Ask for a volunteer to read it aloud.

“I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids... I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.”

2. Direct students to reflect on the quote and to write a paragraph in response using the following prompts:

- Describe a time when you felt “invisible”—either unseen or unheard by others.
- What caused you to feel invisible?
- Were you able to eventually overcome that feeling? If so, how? If not, why?
- How did the experience affect or change you?

Optional: If time is limited in class, have students complete this writing assignment for homework prior to conducting the lesson.

3. Have students share their experiences in pairs or ask for a few volunteers to read their paragraph aloud to the class. As a whole group, discuss the emotional impact of being unnoticed, disregarded or silenced by others.

Part II: Researching Historically Marginalized Groups (30 minutes plus time for research)

1. Post the following and explain that it is a continuation of the quote discussed earlier. Have a volunteer read it aloud.

“That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality...you’re constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision...you often doubt if you really exist...It’s when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back...You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world...”

Optional: Distribute the handout, [Excerpts from Invisible Man](#) by Ralph Ellison, so that students can read the broader passage from which the above quotes are taken.

2. Discuss some of the following questions in response to the quote:

- What do you think the narrator means by a “disposition of the eyes”? (If students need help, define disposition as a habit, tendency or attitude of mind.)
- What is the narrator’s purpose in setting apart the idea of “inner eyes” from “physical eyes”? What factors shape what our “inner eyes” see?
- What causes “poor vision”—as the narrator sees it—in some people?
- What is the impact when others don’t see you or recognize that you “exist in the world”?

3. Ask students if they have any ideas about why the narrator in this story might have felt unseen. Explain that the quote comes from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which explores many of the social issues facing African Americans in the early 20th century. Briefly discuss the reasons why some African-American people might have felt invisible during this era.
4. Ask students if they are aware of other groups that may have felt “bumped against by those of poor vision” at different times in our country’s history (or that may feel that way now). List their responses on a sheet of chart paper. Some examples are included as a reference in [Examples of Marginalized Groups in Society](#).
5. In class or for homework, have students select one group that has been marginalized or made invisible in some way for further study. Assign them to consult at least two sources to learn more about the selected group, and to write a poem or create a piece of artwork that addresses the following questions:
 - How has the group been “bumped against by those of poor vision”?
 - How has the group been made to “doubt if they really exist”?
 - How has the group “bumped people back” and “convinced themselves that they exist in the real world”?

Make time in class for students to share and discuss their poems and artwork.

Part III: History Match-Up (30 minutes)

1. Tell students that you will continue to discuss the theme of invisibility through a matching game that explores how much they know about certain historical figures. Explain that, in small groups, students will try to match cards with the names of people to a master list of corresponding biographies.

Optional: To add an element of fun, make the matching exercise a contest in which small groups compete to see who can complete the game the fastest and/or make the most matches.

2. Divide the class into small groups of four to six students. Provide each group with a copy of the handout, [History Match-Up Biographies](#), and a set of cards created from [History Match-Up Historical Figures](#). Provide a signal for groups to begin and allow about 10 minutes for students to complete the exercise.
3. When all groups have completed the exercise, review the correct answers using [History Match-Up Answer Key](#).
4. Ask students if they were aware as they were working that all of the figures in the exercise have something in common. Challenge students to identify that commonality. If they cannot, reveal that all of the figures were/are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) people.

NOTE: Make sure to explain that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender are modern terms that we use to describe people today and that many of the historical figures included in the exercise would not have used these labels to describe themselves. However, the historical record demonstrates that all of the people in the exercise had same-sex romantic or emotional attractions or relationships, or transgressed societal expectations with regard to gender.

5. Conduct a brief discussion using some of the following questions:
 - Were you surprised to find that all the figures were/are LGBT? Which ones surprised you the most? Why?
 - Which figures had you never heard of? Why do you think you never learned about them before?
 - Which figures were you aware of, but never knew they were LGBT? Why do you think you never knew about this aspect of their identity?
 - Is it important to know that these figures were/are LGBT? Why or why not? How does this information influence your understanding of history/art/politics or your worldview?
 - Why do you think the identities of LGBT people have been erased from history so frequently? What do you think is the impact of this invisibility on society?

Part IV: LGBT Oral Histories (20 minutes minimum; time will vary)

1. Tell students that three organizations—Anti-Defamation League, GLSEN and StoryCorps—teamed up to counter the invisibility of LGBT people in history by recording the oral histories of people who have made or witnessed LGBT history

in the past. Explain that by bringing these oral histories to students in schools across the country, these organizations hope to reduce anti-LGBT stereotypes, prejudice and harassment; increase awareness and appreciation of the contributions of LGBT people; and fill in some of the gaps in the history that is presented in most school books and curricula.

2. Choose one of the [interviews](#) to play for students. After students have listened, debrief using some of the discussion questions from the accompanying [interviewee's backgrounder](#).
3. Either in school or for homework, assign the student reading (found in the [interview backgrounders](#)) that accompanies the selected interview and have students complete one or more of the suggested activities.
4. Optionally, assign students to select one or two additional [interviews](#) that are of interest to them. Have them do a written reflection comparing and contrasting the various stories, and exploring some of the common threads that run through them all.

Excerpts from *Invisible Man*

By Ralph Ellison

“I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.”

“Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you’re constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren’t simply a phantom in other people’s minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It’s when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you’re a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it’s seldom successful.”

Examples of Marginalized Groups in Society

Below are examples of groups that have been unseen and unheard in different ways throughout history or, in the words of Ralph Ellison, “constantly bumped against by those of poor vision.”

1. **Women** (at one time could not own property, vote, hold elective office, attend college, make decisions about divorce or custody, enter into legal contracts)
2. **Native Americans** (experienced forced conversions and education at boarding schools, relocation from ancestral lands, denial of citizenship rights)
3. **People with Disabilities** (once considered unfit to contribute to society, forced to undergo sterilization and enter asylums, denied access to employment and educational opportunities and to public accommodations and services, such as transportation, housing, bathrooms and stores)
4. **Workers/Laborers** (once unable to organize/form unions, denied minimum wages or maximum hours of work per day/week, deprived of safe working conditions and protections for child workers)
5. **Immigrants** (have been denied job opportunities or relegated to unjust guest worker programs, kept apart from family members, denied housing or relegated to specific neighborhoods, assumed to be unpatriotic/disloyal, subject to unfair quotas and literacy tests, unjustly detained)
6. **Religious Minorities** (have been excluded from school and community celebrations, denied job opportunities and workplace accommodation, denied housing in certain neighborhoods, assumed to be unpatriotic/disloyal)

History Match-Up Historical Figures

Alexander the Great (356-323 BC)	Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906)	James Baldwin (1924-1987)
Rachel Carson (1907-1964)	George Washington Carver (1864-1943)	Willa Cather (1873-1947)
Barney Frank (1940-)	Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965)	Michelangelo (1475-1564)
Harvey Milk (1930-1978)	Bayard Rustin (1910-1987)	Pyotr Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
Alan Turing (1912-1954)	Walt Whitman (1819-1892)	We'Wha (1849-1896)

History Match-Up Biographies

<p>The King of Macedonia and conqueror of the Persian Empire. Considered one of the greatest military geniuses of all times and an inspiration for later conquerors such as Hannibal, Caesar and Napoleon.</p>	<p>A prominent American civil rights activist who played a pivotal role in the 19th century women's suffrage movement. This leader traveled across the nation fighting for a woman's right to vote and to her own property and earnings, and also for an end to slavery.</p>	<p>American writer and activist, noted for novels on personal identity and sharp essays on civil rights struggle in the United States. This author's most famous novels include <i>Go Tell It on the Mountain</i> and <i>Giovanni's Room</i>.</p>
<p>U.S. naturalist and writer, who studied zoology, worked as a marine biologist for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington, D.C. and wrote four best-sellers, including <i>The Sea Around Us</i> and <i>Silent Spring</i>.</p>	<p>An American botanist, educator, and inventor, who is famous for research on peanuts and other alternative crops. Through achievements in poetry, painting and religion, this scientist also helped to dispel the widespread stereotype of the time that blacks were intellectually inferior to whites.</p>	<p>U.S. writer who published a total of 19 books, including <i>O Pioneers!</i> and <i>My Antonia</i>. This writer's novels are frequently set in Nebraska and western pioneer farm settings, and explore the power of the land and the complex relationships of those who dwell on it.</p>
<p>U.S. Democratic politician who has represented Massachusetts in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1980. Chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, which oversees the entire financial services industry, this leader is considered to be one of the most powerful members of Congress.</p>	<p>U.S. writer and activist who started out as a journalist for <i>Freedom</i>, Paul Robeson's newspaper, and went on to write the award winning <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i>, the first play by an African-American woman to be produced on Broadway.</p>	<p>Italian sculptor, painter, architect and poet who believed that art could capture and preserve the memory of beauty. Masterpieces include <i>David</i>, <i>The Last Judgment</i> and the architectural plans for St. Peter's Basilica.</p>
<p>A San Francisco City Supervisor who, along with San Francisco mayor George Moscone, was shot and killed by Dan White, a former supervisor who had resigned his seat and who became enraged when the mayor would not reappoint him.</p>	<p>U.S. civil rights activist and writer who organized the New York Congress of Racial Equality and helped to end racial discrimination in the military. A chief political advisor, strategist, and speechwriter for Martin Luther King Jr., this activist was the lead organizer of the 1963 March on Washington.</p>	<p>This Russian composer, who struggled with depression, was the creator of symphonies, ballets, and operas including <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>, <i>Swan Lake</i>, <i>Sleeping Beauty</i> and <i>The Nutcracker</i>.</p>
<p>English mathematician and scientist most known for breaking the German "Enigma" code during World War II and for pioneering work in the field of technology. Considered by many to be the father of the modern day computer.</p>	<p>An American poet, essayist and journalist, and one of the most influential writers of the 19th century, this author's work presented an equal view of the races and called for an end to slavery. The writer's poetry collection, <i>Leaves of Grass</i>, and other works were often considered controversial.</p>	<p>A Zuni Native American from New Mexico who was an accomplished weaver, potter and spiritual leader, and also a cultural ambassador who helped bridge the divide between Native and Anglo Americans.</p>

History Match-Up Answer Key

Alexander the Great (356–323 BC): The King of Macedonia and conqueror of the Persian Empire. Considered one of the greatest military geniuses of all times and an inspiration for later conquerors such as Hannibal, Caesar and Napoleon.

Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906): A prominent American civil rights activist who played a pivotal role in the 19th century women’s suffrage movement. This leader traveled across the nation fighting for a woman’s right to vote and to her own property and earnings, and also for an end to slavery.

James Baldwin (1924–1987): American writer and activist, noted for novels on personal identity and sharp essays on civil rights struggle in the United States. This author’s most famous novels include *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni’s Room*.

Rachel Carson (1907–1964): U.S. naturalist and writer, who studied zoology, worked as a marine biologist for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington, D.C. and wrote four best-sellers, including *The Sea Around Us* and *Silent Spring*.

George Washington Carver (1864–1943): An American botanist, educator, and inventor, who is famous for research on peanuts and other alternative crops. Through achievements in poetry, painting and religion, this scientist also helped to dispel the widespread stereotype of the time that blacks were intellectually inferior to whites.

Willa Cather (1873–1947): U.S. writer who published a total of 19 books, including *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*. This writer’s novels are frequently set in Nebraska and western pioneer farm settings, and explore the power of the land and the complex relationships of those who dwell on it.

Barney Frank (1940–): U.S. Democratic politician who has represented Massachusetts in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1980. Chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, which oversees the entire financial services industry, this leader is considered to be one of the most powerful members of Congress.

Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965): U.S. writer and activist who started out as a journalist for *Freedom*, Paul Robeson’s newspaper, and went on to write the award winning *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first play by an African-American woman to be produced on Broadway.

Michelangelo (1475–1564): Italian sculptor, painter, architect and poet who believed that art could capture and preserve the memory of beauty. Masterpieces include *David*, *The Last Judgment* and the architectural plans for St. Peter’s Basilica.

Harvey Milk (1930–1978): A San Francisco City Supervisor who, along with San Francisco mayor George Moscone, was shot and killed by Dan White, a former supervisor who had resigned his seat and who became enraged when the mayor would not reappoint him.

Bayard Rustin (1910–1987): U.S. civil rights activist and writer who organized the New York Congress of Racial Equality and helped to end racial discrimination in the military. A chief political advisor, strategist, and speechwriter for Martin Luther King Jr., this activist was the lead organizer of the 1963 March on Washington.

Pyotr Tchaikovsky (1840–1893): This Russian composer, who struggled with depression, was the creator of symphonies, ballets, and operas including *Romeo and Juliet*, *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*.

Alan Turing (1912–1954): English mathematician and scientist most known for breaking the German “Enigma” code during World War II and for pioneering work in the field of technology. Considered by many to be the father of the modern day computer.

Walt Whitman (1819–1892): An American poet, essayist and journalist, and one of the most influential writers of the 19th century, this author’s work presented an equal view of the races and called for an end to slavery. The writer’s poetry collection, *Leaves of Grass*, and other works were often considered controversial.

We’Wha (1849–1896): A Zuni Native American from New Mexico who was an accomplished weaver, potter and spiritual leader, and also a cultural ambassador who helped bridge the divide between Native and Anglo Americans.