



“Glory” and the Continuing Civil Rights Movement

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How does Common and John Legend's “Glory” signal Civil Rights movements of the past and the present?

OVERVIEW

In October 2014, the production of *Selma*, a film recounting the 1965 Civil Rights marches, was nearing completion. But before the cast disassembled, director Ava DuVernay approached rapper Common, who was playing the role of activist James Bevel in the film, and asked him if he was interested in writing a song for the end credits.



Photo: Selma

In a later interview with Katie Couric, Common recalled that he was “moved so much by the experience” of being a part of *Selma* that he embraced the idea of providing a song for the film. He also knew who he wanted to collaborate with for the project: “I thought John Legend would be the perfect voice,” Common told Couric, “because he is a very soulful artist and a meaningful artist but he also is active in helping out the community.”

Working over the phone and internet, Common and Legend wrote the song more quickly than they anticipated. “It was really one of those moments when the thoughts just come to you, and you really are truly inspired and you don’t let your ego get in the way,” Common later told *Variety*. With Common writing the lyrics and Legend the melody, the two created the foundation of the song “Glory” within a few days. When they gave DuVernay a rough recording of the song, she responded, “you might get an Oscar nomination for this!” As it turned out, not only was “Glory” nominated for an Oscar for Best Original Song—it won the award.

From the beginning of the collaboration, both Common and Legend agreed that the song could not just be about Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Civil Rights Marches, which happened almost 50 years ago. It also had to speak for the current moment. Following this motivation, Common penned lyrics that intertwined references to the marches in Selma with references to the more recent protests occurring after the 2014 killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, thus creating a parallel between the two movements. As Legend later admitted to *Deadline Hollywood*, bringing such contemporary issues into the song may have been “a little controversial,” but to him it was the best way to honor the legacy Martin Luther King, Jr. “Dr. King was controversial,” Legend reminds us, “he was seen as a radical by a lot of people. So



for us to talk about things that may not be popular with everybody, it is part of carrying on with his spirit." In his Oscar acceptance speech, Legend stated, "Selma is now because the struggle for justice is right now."

In this lesson, students compare the music video for "Glory" with archival footage of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s March on Washington, and draw parallels between the lyrics of "Glory" and Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. Students then analyze Alicia Garza's speech "Why Black Lives Matter," to discover how Common and Legend draw parallels between the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and the Black Lives Matter Movement occurring when the song "Glory" was written.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The motivation behind John Legend and Common's song "Glory"
- About Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech
- About Alicia Garza's "Why Black Lives Matter" speech
- How popular songs reference larger social movements

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to explain how the song "Glory" references both the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s as well as the Black Lives Matter movement by analyzing the music video and song lyrics.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Tell students: imagine a Hollywood producer has asked you to write a song that will be featured in an upcoming movie about Joan of Arc. The producer wants the song to be contemporary, but at the same time reference the time when Joan of Arc lived. (*Teachers are free to substitute Joan of Arc with any historical figure they feel the class might relate to.*) As a class, then brainstorm how to create such a song:

- How could the song's instrumentals be contemporary, but also reference the Middle Ages when Joan of Arc lived? (*Encourage students to think about choices in instruments, samples, rhythms, etc.*)
- How could the lyrics speak to contemporary issues while still reference Joan of Arc's life? (*Students might consider the virtues of bravery, devoutness, confidence, or other attributes that remain important today.*)

PROCEDURE:

1. Tell students that in 2014, artist Common had the same task: to create a song for the movie *Selma* that could be contemporary, but also represent the time the movie took place. Ask students:
 - Have you seen the movie *Selma*? What is it about? (*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1965 Selma to Montgomery March for Voting Rights.*)
 - *Selma* was received with critical acclaim, was nominated and won many awards. Why might a movie about the Civil Rights Movement, which occurred many decades ago, still be relevant today?
2. Play Common and John Legend's "Glory." (*Note: the official song is on YouTube, we suggest loading the video before class to avoid showing advertising during class.*) Ask students:
 - How does the music video reference Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement?
 - How does Common's performance in the video reference Martin Luther King, Jr.? (*If helpful, play the video again from 0:35-1:20, and encourage students to think about what language Common uses, what he is wearing, and his body language.*)
 - What emotion might John Legend and Common be trying to get across in this song? Is it depressing? Hopeful? Angry?
3. Play **Clip 1, "I Have a Dream."** Ask students:
 - Who is giving this speech?
 - Have you heard this speech before? Where?
 - Where was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when this speech was given? (*Note: This speech is from The March on Washington.*)
 - Do you find any similarities between this video and the video for "Glory?" (*Encourage students to think about the amount of people in each video, or the tone of the message.*)
 - What is happening at the end of this video? Do you know the song they are singing? (*The Civil Rights anthem "We Shall Overcome."*)
4. Show **Image 1, "Lyrics Compared."** Ask students:
 - What do you see as similar between the refrain of the song "We Shall Overcome" and the chorus to "Glory"? (*Encourage students to think how both are looking toward the future, and speaking to equality, peace, and justice.*)
5. Pass out to each student **Handout 1 - Text Map**, and have them follow the instructions on the handout.
6. Use a whiparound activity to ask students for some of the connections they found between the three documents, and have them explain their reasoning for making such connections.



SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:

- Having read "I Have A Dream" and "Why Black Lives Matter," how might you generalize the similarities and differences between the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and the Black Lives Matter movement today?
- What do you think is the message behind "Glory"?
- Do you think Common and John Legend were successful in combining the past with the present in "Glory"? Why or why not?
- In the bridge of "Glory," John Legend sings "Now the war is not over, victory isn't won, And we'll fight on to the finish, then when it's all done, we'll cry glory." What might John Legend mean when he sings this?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Do some research on other historical movements that remain relevant today (examples might include movements related to criminal justice, the environment, or poverty). Then, like Common and John Legend, write a song that references the history of the movement while also speaking to the present day.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)

Comprehension & Collaboration 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.

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Comprehension & Collaboration 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Presentation of Knowledge 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.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language(K-12)

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language,

word relationships, and nuances in a word meaning.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting #11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.



NJSLSA.W9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. - "I Have A Dream"

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - Text Map