

Activism through Art: Grades 9-12



Kara Elizabeth Walker, [The Means to an End... A Shadow Drama in Five Acts](#), 1995, etching, 35 1/4 x 23 1/4 in. William R. Mitchell Endowment Fund purchase, 1995.55a-e

The Means to an End... A Shadow Drama in Five Acts, Kara Elizabeth Walker

Content Warning

The content of this lesson plan will engage with themes of racism and violence.

Key Idea

Artists can engage in activism by highlighting systems of oppression and stereotypes.

Keywords

Antebellum: occurring or existing before a particular war, especially the American Civil War.

Power: the ability to influence and make decisions that impact others.

Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Closely examine *The Means to an End... A Shadow Drama in Five Acts* by Kara Walker
2. Consider historical and contemporary context around the work of art
3. Explore the theme of activism by working individually and in groups on select learning activities

Lesson

1. Choose a close-looking prompt (from the introduction page) to encourage students to study the artwork. You may also ask suggested questions under “Look” in the section below.
2. Provide the class with some background information using the “About the Artist” and “About the Artwork” sections below.
3. Engage the class in conversation using the suggested discussion questions.
4. Follow up the class discussion with a recommended activity in the “Connect Ideas” section below.

LOOK

Take a moment to closely examine *The Means to an End... A Shadow Drama in Five Acts* by Kara Walker.

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1. Can you identify any particular characteristics of the figures? How would you describe them?
2. Look at each panel individually and consider your emotional response. What emotions does the work elicit? What in the artwork is causing you to feel this way?
3. Where does the story start? Where does it end? What do you see that makes you say that?

LEARN

About the Artist

Kara Walker is an African American artist who creates drawings, prints, sculptures, paintings, installations, and films to explore themes of race, identity, sexuality, history, and fantasy. She is best known for her work in black cut paper silhouettes, which employs stereotypes—of both black and white people—in varying positions of **power** through disturbing, sexually explicit, and violent circumstances. Based on both historic and imagined stories, some imagery illustrates dominant white supremacy, while other imagery subverts the narrative and suggests that the **power** lies with the oppressed. Walker challenges viewers to contemplate the feelings that arise when viewing her artwork and confront the possibilities of their own racial biases.

About the Artwork

The Means to an End...A Shadow Drama in Five Acts from 1995 is one of Kara Walker's earliest printed silhouette narratives. This artwork shows an imagined nineteenth-century romance. Walker's cast of characters in *The Means to an End* are stereotypes of plantation life—masters and mistress and their slaves—as described in novels like *Gone with the Wind* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The story is carried out in five distinctive scenes entitled "The Beginning," "The Hunt," "The Chase," "The Plunge," and "The End." When read left to right, one might interpret the boy suckled by the black woman in "The Beginning" becoming the portly white man holding a black slave girl by the neck like a doll in "The End." However, there may be many different interpretations because Walker gives viewers the task of identifying the characters and considering what is going on in the narrative. Walker has also outlined the story:

"[*The Means to an End* presents] a panoramic view of an **antebellum** swampland wherein mythic and stereotypic characters, Negro and otherwise, respond to outrageous demands with benign passivity. Illicit sex and violence are suggested as the means by which freedom is attained. The master/slave narrative is expanded and inverted to include authoritarian control over children, the landscape and the self."¹

DISCUSS

¹ Quoted in Kim Wickham, "I undo you, Master"; Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?, Howardena Pindell, ed. (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2009)

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1. Kara Walker frequently works with silhouettes, which she calls “a medium of avoidance,” in that they prevent the viewer from looking at the subjects directly. Does Walker’s use of silhouettes make the content “easier” to digest?
2. Consider your initial reaction to *The Means to an End*. Now that you have learned a little more about Kara Walker’s practice take another look at the artwork. Has your emotional response changed?
3. Kara Walker’s use of stereotypes is controversial. Some critics believe her artwork perpetuates stereotypes while others believe her work challenges them. What do you believe is the impact of Walker’s artwork with regard to her use of stereotypes?
4. Consider the **power** dynamics in this narrative. Who holds the most **power**? Who holds the least **power**? What exchanges of **power** can you see in the narrative? What do you see that makes you say that?

CONNECT IDEAS

Examine Stereotypes—To help students consider relevance, ask them to write about a time when they or someone they know challenged a stereotype. Ask them to answer the following questions: What was the stereotype? How was it challenged? What was the impact of the challenge? Does this experience relate to the work of Kara Walker? If so, how?

Examine Voice—To examine perspectives, ask them to compile a list of resources around a specific social issue in their community and then ask them to evaluate their resources. Work with students to come up with a list of criteria for evaluating a resource. This could include factors like evaluating biases, considering whose voices are left out, and validity of their resources. Once the criteria are established, ask the students to evaluate a set number of resources.

GO FURTHER

Resources about Kara Walker:

Kara Walker’s website: <http://www.karawalkerstudio.com/>

Art 21, “Extended Play,” Kara Walker: Starting Out, episode 207 (2014), 5 minutes
<https://youtu.be/MhByMffG9IA>

Resources about Antebellum South and Stereotypes:

Review list of resources on The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia Website:
<https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/education/materials/ResourceGuide.pdf>

Jennifer Schuessler, “The Long Battle Over ‘Gone with the Wind,’” New York Times (June 14, 2020),
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/14/movies/gone-with-the-wind-battle.html>

STANDARDS

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Wisconsin Standards for English Language Arts

SL.8.2 Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation.

Wisconsin Standards for Social Studies

SS.Hist4.a.h Analyze how the historical context (situation) influences a primary or secondary source.

Wisconsin Standards for Art and Design

A.A.R.18.h: Interpret: Explain the intent, meanings, and impacts of different medial works of art and design, considering complex factors of context and perspective